

# Revenge of the Crafty Corpse

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## ONE

“If that damn woman doesn’t shut up, I’m going to strangle her!”

My mother-in-law had been settled into the Sunnyside of Westfield Assisted Living and Rehabilitation Center for all of ten minutes before she began carping about the accommodations. Uppermost on her list of complaints was her roommate, a woman we’d so far only heard, due to the mauve and burgundy floral print curtain separating their beds and a one-sided phone conversation detailing the latest episode of some cable soap opera—in a syrupy sweet southern accent quite at odds with her blunt vocabulary. At least, I hoped she was summarizing a soap opera. I’d hate to think, given the X-rated play-by-play, that she was gossiping about actual people.

“Shh. Lower your voice, Lucille. They can hear you in Hoboken.”

“Don’t you shush me! And I don’t care if that prattling twit or anyone else hears me. This is unacceptable. I want a private room.” She tightened her hand into a fist and pounded it against the arm of her wheelchair, but given her weakened state, the punctuating gesture left negligible impact.

“Medicare won’t cover a private room,” I told her, forcing my voice to remain calm as I unpacked her suitcase.

Three weeks ago Lucille had suffered a minor stroke. Subsequent tests revealed a brain tumor, which may or may not have accounted for some of her more bizarre behavior over the last few months. With my mother-in-law, it was hard to tell.

Lucille had weathered the stroke and surgery remarkably well for an eighty-year-old. The tumor proved benign. After a brief hospital stay, she was now ready for some minor rehab to help her regain her strength and coordination. Hence, today’s resettlement.

“If my son were alive, he’d never let you dump me in this hell hole.”

She should only know that her son had tried to kill her to get his hands on her life’s savings—which he then proceeded to gamble away, leaving me to clean up the mess after he conveniently dropped dead at a roulette table in Las Vegas. Trusting wife that I was at the time, I thought Karl was at a sales meeting in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Given his knack for pulling off such a duplicitous life, Karl should have been a CIA operative instead of an auto parts salesman. At least then our sons and I would be receiving a fat government pension. As it was, Dead Louse of a Spouse left me in stratospheric debt and at the mercy of both an army of bill collectors and Ricardo the loan shark. Not to mention his mother and Manifesto, her French bulldog, AKA Mephisto the Demon Dog to the rest of the family.

Ricardo now resides in a federal facility. However, barring some philanthropic leprechaun gifting me with his pot of gold, I’m stuck with the bill collectors, Lucille, and Mephisto. The bill collectors treat me better. And yet I continue to refuse to divulge to Lucille the truth about her precious Karl, no matter how much she goads me.

My name is Anastasia Pollack, and I’m a glutton for punishment. Welcome to my dysfunctional world. I hope the universe is taking note because as far as I’m concerned, I definitely qualify for sainthood at this point.

“Hell hole?” I glanced around Lucille’s half of the generous, well-appointed room, equipped with abundant creature comforts, including her own flat screen TV, a leather recliner with heat and massage, and wi-fi. “Hardly.”

“You’re not the one stuck here. If you possessed an ounce of consideration, you’d allow me to remain at home and drive me to rehab every day,” she said. “But I know the truth. This is all part of your grand scheme to get rid of me permanently.”

I wish. Sunnyside was more exclusive country club than a hell hole, right down to its exclusive country club-like fees. I placed the last of her circa nineteen seventies polyester pantsuits in the dresser, slammed the drawer shut, and spun around to confront her.

“How exactly am I supposed to shuttle you back and forth to rehab *and* go to work? Are you suggesting I quit my job? Alex, Nick, you, and I can live out of my eight-year-old Hyundai and Dumpster dive for our meals just so Lucille Pollack, the diehard communist, doesn’t have to share a room with a talkative stranger for a month? Very politically correct of you, Comrade Lucille.”

“How dare you mock me!”

I needed to get out of there and back to work before I did some strangling of my own. And it wouldn’t be the faceless voice currently detailing her skepticism over the supposed sexploits of one Mabel Shapiro, whom, according to Lucille’s roommate, couldn’t satisfy a man twenty years ago, let alone now.

“I told you, Lucille, between Medicare and your supplemental insurance, you’re only covered for a month’s stay. After that, whether you’re ready to come home or not, you’re back living under my roof.”

“This is all your fault!” she continued.

“My fault? Just what about your situation is my fault? Did *I* force you to jaywalk across Queens Boulevard? Did *I* drive the SUV that mowed you down? Did *I* make you keep your life’s savings in shoeboxes under your bed instead of in a bank? Did *I* torch your apartment building, leaving you homeless and penniless? How is any of that *my* fault, Lucille? I’m the one who opened my home to you when you had nowhere else to go.”

“Charging me exorbitant rent! You’re no better than a slumlord.”

“You’re paying exactly what you paid each month on your apartment in Queens. Not a penny more. And for that you’re receiving a place to live *and* all you and your dog can eat. Besides, I only asked you for room and board *after* your son left me broke and up to my eyeballs in debt, but I suppose that’s my fault, too?”

She glared straight ahead, refusing to make eye contact with me, her lips pinched into a straight line, her post-surgery shaved head making her look even more like Mephisto than usual.

Of course, she blamed me. She’s been blaming me for everything since the day Karl introduced us. Hell, she probably even blamed me for her stroke and the brain tumor. So much for hoping the removal of that tumor would improve her personality. “If you don’t like the arrangements, you’re free to make your own at any time.”

Which, unfortunately, she wouldn’t because Lucille had it far better at *Casa Pollack* than anywhere else she could afford. And she knew it.

“What are you gawking at?” she demanded.

I glanced over my shoulder and followed her laser glare to the middle of the room where I found myself staring at Laura Ashley. Or what Laura Ashley might have looked

like had she lived into her nineties, complete with pink tinged white pin curls, poorly applied makeup caked into the crevices of deep wrinkles, and transplanted from Wales, UK to Westfield, NJ.

I hadn't seen so many ruffles and such an over-abundance of Cluny lace since my cousin Susannah Sudberry's English garden-themed wedding back in 1992. The most god-awful lace-edged, pouf-sleeved floral print bridesmaid's dress ever created still resides in my attic. However, I might have to hand over that designation to Lucille's roommate's outfit. At least my bridesmaid's gown didn't have the addition of a coordinating yo-yo trimmed cardigan sweater.

At some point the soap opera play-by-play had ended. How long Lucille's roomie had been eavesdropping on us was anyone's guess, but before Lucille could hurl another barb, I crossed the room and held my hand out to the woman. "Mrs. Wegner? I'm Anastasia Pollack." I knew her name from the nameplate tacked to the wall outside the room. Lucille's name had already been added beneath that of Lyndella Wegner.

She took my hand in a surprisingly firm grip for such a petite and elderly woman. "Pleased to meet you, sugar. And call me Lyndella. Mrs. Wegner was my mother-in-law, bless her hard-hearted soul."

Looks like I'd found another loser in the mother-in-law lottery. I nodded in Lucille's direction. "And this is my mother-in-law Lucille Pollack, your roommate for the next month."

Lyndella nodded toward Lucille. "Not too happy to be here, are you, sugar?"

A part of me (the nasty part I kept tamped down as much as possible) wanted to tell her that *happy* wasn't in the commie curmudgeon's lexicon, but she'd learn that for herself soon enough. Instead, I said, "I'm afraid Lucille has been through quite a bit the last several months."

She directed another question to Lucille. "So what's your story, sugar?"

I stifled a giggle. Lyndella Wegner's strong accent seemed right at home juxtaposed against her Laura Ashley-meets-Blanche Dubois demeanor but totally at odds with twenty-first century Westfield.

"Mind your own business," muttered Lucille. "And I'm not your *sugar*."

Lyndella ignored the rudeness. Or maybe she hadn't heard Lucille. Modern hearing aids are so tiny, I couldn't tell if Lyndella wore any underneath her pink pin curls. She glanced at her watch and said, "I'm afraid we'll have to postpone our get-to-know-each-other chat until later, girls. It's time for my needlework class, and I can't be late. Those other women, bless their Yankee hearts, would be lost without my expert guidance." Then she ducked behind the curtain divider.

Lyndella reappeared a moment later. In one hand she held a ball of pink crochet cotton. She cradled a length of finely crocheted extra wide pink lace and a crochet hook in her other hand.

"That's exquisite work," I said.

"Of course, it is, sugar."

I held out my hand. "May I?" She placed the delicate lace across my fingers. I examined the stitching closer. "Did you also crochet the lace on your dress?"

She executed a flat-footed pirouette to show off her workmanship. "I make all my own clothes. Always have. And they're of a far better quality than anything you'll find in any department store."

And how modest of her to say so. I had to admit, though, the dress fit her like couture, and her attention to detail rivaled anything strutting down New York's Fashion Week catwalks.

Lyndella flipped up the hem of her skirt and held it out for me to inspect. "See here, sugar. French seams. I dare say, you won't find any of those hanging on a rack at Macy's or Lord & Taylor."

"Probably not," I agreed, although I failed to see the need to French seam poplin when pinking shears worked just as well and took much less time and effort. However, I kept that judgment to myself.

"I'll tell you a little secret, sugar. Handwork keeps both the mind and body sharp." She tapped her temple with an index finger. "Mark my words, you young people will regret your store-bought ways when you get older, but it will be too late. You'll wind up doddering old fools, sipping Ensure and drooling into your mashed bananas."

I certainly hoped not, but I had no desire to engage in a debate of my generation's future with this woman.

"Believe it or not," she continued, "I'm ninety-eight years young."

"What's not to believe?" asked Lucille.

Lyndella heard that comment loud and clear. She shot Lucille a glare of contempt. "For your information, I still have all my teeth *and* all my faculties. People tell me I don't look or act a day over seventy. I credit that to my creative talents. Among other things."

I couldn't resist. "What other things?"

"Sex and whiskey, sugar. As much of both as I can get."

I should have exercised better restraint.

How often did Lyndella hit the whiskey, and when had she last looked in the mirror? The roadmap of deep wrinkles lining her face made her look every one of her ninety-eight years, if not more.

As for the sex, were ninety-eight-year-olds even capable of having sex? Wouldn't everything have shriveled up and dried out decades ago?

But what did I know? My own mother still claimed to have an active sex life at sixty-five with no signs of stopping anytime soon. As for me, let's just say it had been a while. A long while.

However, whether Lyndella Wegner was actually getting any action or merely thought she was getting some, who cared? Every woman should be that alive at her age. It certainly beat the alternative.

As I studied the delicate lacework, an article for a future magazine issue began to germinate in my brain. "Mrs. Wegner, I'm the crafts editor at *American Woman* magazine. I'd love to do a profile on you and perhaps some of the other women in your needlework class."

"Well, bless your heart, sugar! You mean I'd have my name and picture in a magazine?"

"Yes."

"I'd be famous?"

"In a manner of speaking. Our circulation is upward of three hundred thousand."

"Three hundred thousand?" She placed her hand on my arm. "Trust me, sugar, you don't need anyone else. My work is far superior to that of anyone else around here and far more creative."

“I thought I’d showcase a variety of crafts.”

“When it comes to handcrafts, you name it, and I’ve done it. Tell me, sugar, how many people do you know who can create museum quality paintings using dryer lint?”

*Dryer lint?* “Not a single one.”

“Well, now you do. My re-creation of Michelangelo’s *David* in lint will blow away your little Yankee mind.” She winked, then added, “In more ways than one.”

I’ll bet it would. “May I see it?”

“Later, sugar. I have my class now.” Her face took on an almost wicked grin. “Wait till Mabel Shapiro hears this. Bless her frigid Yankee heart, that woman will positively shit in her Depends!”

*Soap opera Mabel “can’t please a man” Shapiro?*

From behind me I heard a loud *harrumph*.

“Must go,” said Lyndella, removing her crocheted lace from my hands. “We’ll talk later.”

“Insufferable!” said Lucille after the door closed behind Lyndella. “How do you expect me to live with that woman for a day, let alone a month?”

“You’ll just have to make the best of it. You’ve had plenty of practice living with someone you don’t like.”

“Thanks to you.”

An old argument. When Lucille first came to live with us, Nick was forced to doubled-up with Alex in order to give Lucille a room. Whenever my mother arrived for a visit, she and Lucille became reluctant roomies. Lucille and Mama got along as well as Mephisto and Mama’s corpulent Persian kitty Catherine the Great got along. In other words, they fought like cats and dogs.

I suppose that’s to be expected when a blazing Bolshevik is forced to shack up with a self-proclaimed descendant of Russian royalty. Given that Mama makes a habit of extended stays whenever she’s between husbands, Lord only knows how they’ve kept from murdering each other to this point, not to mention how I’ve managed to maintain my sanity.

“Would it kill you to be civil?” I asked Lucille.

“These places are nothing but dumping grounds run by mercy killers.”

“Give it a rest, Lucille. Sunnyside has an excellent reputation. No one is going to murder you in your sleep.”

“And if you’re wrong? It will be no skin off your teeth, but I’ll be dead. I demand you take me home at once!”

“That’s not going to happen. Not until you’re permanently out of that wheelchair and capable of managing entirely on your own. You can barely brush your teeth right now, let alone dress yourself. You’re just going to have to tough it out.”

“I’ll sign myself out.”

“And go where?”

“To one of my sisters.”

The *sisters* in question—no blood relations—were the dozen other members of the Daughters of the October Revolution, all like-minded, octogenarian communists who followed my mother-in-law, their Fearless Leader, like lemmings. However, had any of them wanted Lucille on a permanent basis, I would have gladly provided a means of transportation to deliver her. Lucille’s *sisters* might love their Fearless Leader, but much

to my dismay, none had come forward to offer Lucille a home after she lost hers. So much for the communal spirit of communism.

“I’ll stay only if you bring Manifesto here,” said Lucille.

Who but my mother-in-law would name a pet after a communist treatise? As previously mentioned, the rest of us had dubbed him Mephisto the Devil Dog. Lucille cared more about that dog than she did her own grandsons, whom she never referred to by name. They were always *those boys*.

And no, I didn’t name them after dead Russian czars out of spite. The boys were named for my grandfathers—Alexander Periwinkle and Nicholas Sudberry. “Sunnyside won’t allow you to have Mephisto here,” I said.

And yes, I said *that* intentionally. So sue me. I’m not perfect. And I’d reached my limit.

“Manifesto! His name is Manifesto!” She pounded the arm of the wheelchair, again not producing the impact she intended. “And you’re lying. I hear dogs barking.”

“Their owners are permanent residents, capable of caring for their pets. You’re here for rehab and not even capable of caring for yourself at this point, let alone a dog.”

“I’ll manage.”

“I’ll ask if I can bring him for a visit, but he won’t be allowed to stay.”

Lucille folded her arms over her sagging boobs and jutted out her chin. “We’ll see about that.”

Yes, we would. I didn’t bother to respond, though. Why bother? Besides, we were interrupted by a knock, followed by the door opening.

“Mrs. Pollack?” Shirley Hallstead, Sunnyside’s director, stepped into the room and nodded hello to me. I’d met her previously when I scoped out the facility for Lucille and made arrangements for her month-long stay. “All settled in?” she asked Lucille.

“I’m not staying.”

Shirley turned to me. “What’s going on?”

“She’s staying,” I said.

“I see.” She turned back to Lucille. “Your reaction is normal, but we here at Sunnyside will do everything within our means to make you as comfortable as possible and facilitate a speedy recovery.”

She sounded as though she were parroting from the *Assisted Living Director’s Manual, Chapter One: Dealing With Problematic New Arrivals*. However, even though her words conveyed kindness, Shirley Hallstead’s body language suggested otherwise. From her not-a-hair-out-of-place jet black waves to her double-breasted cherry-red power suit, down to her four-inch designer stilettos, the fifty-something Shirley Hallstead reminded me more of a cutthroat executive than a benevolent assisted living center director.

I do believe Lucille may have met her match.

“Let’s get some light in here,” said Shirley. She stepped around Lucille’s bed and yanked the curtain divider back to the wall.

“Lovely,” said Lucille, her tone thick with sarcasm. Not from the sunshine now spilling across to her side of the room but from what the drawn back curtain revealed.

*Holy crafts overload!*

No denying Lyndella Wegner’s love of the handmade. Every square inch of vertical space held crafts, some framed, some taped or pinned to the walls—needlework, string

art, quilling, scherenschnitte, stenciling, calligraphy, quilted and appliquéd wall hangings. An enormous ivy plant hung from a macraméd plant holder in the far corner of the room. Stained glass sun-catchers dangled in front of the windows. Fabric yo-yo dresser scarves covered a bureau and nightstand. On them stood an assortment of painted ceramic and polymer clay figurines, mosaic and decoupage covered boxes, and a variety of soft-sculptured dolls in various sizes. An intricately patterned appliquéd quilt was draped over Lyndella's bed, a crocheted afghan, folded at the foot. A latch hook rug covered part of the floor.

However, the *pièces de résistance* were the lint reproductions hanging on the wall above her headboard. "She wasn't kidding about doing it all." I stepped closer to inspect a three-foot tall, two-dimensional rendition of *David*. Sure enough, Lyndella had recreated Michelangelo's masterpiece, down to every anatomical detail, completely in dryer lint and minus any censoring of a certain body part. "I don't know whether I'm impressed or horrified."

Thank goodness Lucille couldn't see these from the vantage point of her wheelchair. I'd never hear the end of it.

"Picasso had his Blue Period," said Shirley. "And Lyndella has her *Blue* Period." She indicated the polymer figurines. I took a closer look. Many were reproductions of ancient fertility gods, complete with oversized members.

"I think she creates these just to drive me crazy," said Shirley. "And this lint kick of hers? Heaven knows where she came up with that, but she insisted the laundry save every scrap of dryer lint for her. She spent weeks sorting and bagging colors, then months working on those—" She paused for a moment to clear her throat. "Pictures. Thankfully, she became bored with lint after awhile and moved on to *smaller* pursuits."

I examined the rest of the lint paintings, half a dozen in all and each replicas of some of the most graphically anatomical and erotic art of the ancient world, including a series of paintings from the bathhouses of Pompeii.

"As you can see, Lyndella doesn't do anything in moderation," continued Shirley. "She's our very own X-rated Martha Stewart."

"With a personality to match," muttered Lucille.

My mother-in-law knew who Martha Stewart was? Lucille considered television too lowbrow a form of entertainment for someone of her intellect. Did she secretly indulge a daytime TV addiction when no one else was home? Maybe I should ask Zack to set up a granny cam to catch the hypocrite in action, considering how she mocked what I did for a living.

Shelving that idea to explore later, I pulled out my camera and started capturing Lyndella's handiwork.

Shirley stepped between the camera lens and a quilted wall hanging I'd focused on. "What are you doing?"

I quickly explained my idea of a feature article for *American Woman*.

"Absolutely not," she said.

"Don't worry. I won't use any of the racier pieces."

"You won't use any of them. Period. I don't want my facility looking like Kitsch Central. You'll irreparably harm my reputation."

*Her* facility? *Her* reputation? If Lyndella and some of the other residents agreed to an interview, I didn't see where Shirley Hallstead had any veto power. I was about to tell

her so when the door swung open.

An extremely thin girl in her late teens shuffled into the room. She kept her head down, watching her feet as she methodically placed one in front of the other, as if making a concerted effort to keep from tripping herself. Her Minnie Mouse print scrubs hung over a nearly skeletal frame that screamed anorexia.

“About time you got here,” said Shirley.

The girl mumbled a nearly inaudible apology, something to do with a Mrs. Grafton and a missing shoe, but she stopped mid-excuse when Shirley grabbed her by one thin arm and spun her around to face Lucille.

“This is Reggie Koltzner. She’s one of our aides and will be taking you on a tour of the facility.”

“I don’t need a tour,” said Lucille. “I told you I’m not staying.”

“Your doctors say otherwise.” Shirley again addressed Reggie, ignoring Lucille’s very loud harrumph of protest. “When you’re done with the tour, take her to physical therapy. She’s got a ten o’clock appointment with Alvarez. Don’t be late.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Reggie pulled on the wheelchair handles, but Lucille didn’t budge.

Shirley shook her head and sighed loudly. “The break, Reggie?”

Reggie bent and fumbled with the break release, then wheeled a very pissed Lucille from the room.

“Damn vo-techs,” said Shirley. “Can you believe this is what they’re turning out? Our tax dollars at work.”

If she expected a nod of agreement from me, she wasn’t getting one. I’d suffered my share of bullies over the years, first as a child and later in the workplace. Reggie Koltzner had my sympathies. “Maybe she needs a mentor,” I suggested.

“A mentor? The last thing I need is tying up one of my nurses to hand-hold an incompetent aide. That girl’s already on probation after the stunt she pulled last week. One more strike and she’s out of here.”

“Stunt?”

Shirley waved my question away. “Sorry. Patient confidentiality. But nothing you need to worry about as far as your mother-in-law is concerned.”

Her assurance aside, I wondered about the wisdom of leaving Lucille in Reggie’s obviously less-than-competent hands but reasoned Shirley wouldn’t risk Lucille’s well-being. She’d be crazy to set herself up for a lawsuit. Whatever the *stunt*, I doubted it had anything to do with patient safety.

I took my leave of Shirley Hallstead with the excuse of having to get to work. We walked out of Lucille’s room together; Shirley turned left toward her office, and I headed right for the exit. As I passed the front desk, though, I stopped. “Which way to the needlecraft class?” I asked the receptionist.

“Down that hall, through the double doors,” she said, indicating the direction with a wave of her pen. “It’s the second room on your left.”

“Thanks.” Shirley’s objections aside, if I checked out the class for an article, I was on Trimedia’s dime. All in the name of research. I wouldn’t have to give up half a day’s pay for picking up Lucille at the hospital and transporting her to Sunnyside this morning. I’d used up my few personal and sick days for the calendar year way back in February when my not-so-dearly departed husband left Las Vegas in a pine box.

The door was propped open, so I stood in the hall and surveyed the room, a space at

least three times the size of a normal classroom and divided up for different purposes. One corner was dedicated to drawing and painting, another to sculpture and pottery. Four large worktables with chairs filled the center of the room.

At the opposite end of the room two dozen elderly women, ranging in age between early retirement all the way up to ancient, congregated around four more tables and worked on a variety of needlework projects. Three women hunched over whirring sewing machines positioned along the far wall.

I spied Lyndella Wegner holding court amid a group of three other women. Both her mouth and her hands worked at warp speed. I don't think I could crochet that fast if my life depended on it, and I was more than half her age.

"May I help you?" A very pregnant woman with a riot of strawberry blonde curls and a face full of freckles waddled toward me from the side of the room. When she stood about three feet away, she stopped and stared. Her jaw dropped; her eyes grew wide. "Anastasia Periwinkle?"

I stared back, wondering how this woman knew me.

"You don't recognize me, do you?"

I shook my head. "Afraid not."

She spread her arms wide. "It's me. Kara Kennedy."

*Kara Kennedy?* I knew that name. Then it hit me. Kara Kennedy. Oh. My. God.