

SECRETS OF WINDWOOD



JACK REESE

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BURIED SECRETS

Windwood Plantation

Solomon's Wake, South Carolina

1985

ANDREA LORD AWOKE EARLY THAT morning. The wedding was just hours away, and she was excited. This was the first wedding to be held at Windwood in almost thirty years. As she got out of bed, she tried to be quiet so she wouldn't wake her husband, Calvin, who was across from her, slumped in his favorite leather recliner. He had fallen asleep with his glasses on again.

She tiptoed over to her closet to look at the pale green sequined gown she had decided to wear, and then at Calvin's black tux. Simon was finally getting married. Until

a month ago, no one thought it would ever happen, but a certain Georgia Blake had changed all of that.

Andrea wanted this day to be a happy one for the family, especially because joy had eluded them of late. She pulled out a large photo album from the bottom nightstand drawer, and then sat on her upholstered bed bench as she stared at one of the many baby photos of Simon.

“Would you stop doing that to yourself? You’re gonna get all worked up again,” Calvin closed the recliner and slid into his slippers.

“Do you want me to go downstairs and see if Sutton’s got your breakfast ready?” she said, still looking at the pictures.

“No. I have to go downstairs anyway.” He kissed her on the forehead.

“I’ll be down in a few minutes,” she said to her husband, whose hand was on the doorknob.



Unlike all the previous mornings, and the ones that would follow, Simon would remember this one for the rest of his life. The sky was bluer, the air sweeter, and his life would be perfect the moment he heard *I do*.

His alarm went off at 8:15, and “Walking on Sunshine” by Katrina and the Waves played. He smacked the clock’s Off button, flung the blankets aside, and lay there for a few more moments, staring at the ceiling.

“Are you going to lie there all day, or are you going to get up?” Andrea entered the room with a cup of coffee in her jeweled hand.

“Good morning, Ma!” Simon kissed her smooth cheek, took the coffee and sipped, then sat at the edge of the bed to put on his red-striped tube socks.

Andrea began to pick up his dirty clothes, which were strewn everywhere, and put them in the hamper. She straightened up his dresser, went into his closet to retrieve his tuxedo, and then laid it out beside him.

“You don’t have to do that.” He finished the coffee and left the mug on the floor in front of him.

“I know.” Her lips quivered, and the waterworks started again.

“No more tears. It’s a happy day.” He got up and took the small woman in his arms. “I will always need you, just like I did in first grade when I fell off the monkey bars and chipped my tooth. Just like I did when I was eleven and got the chicken pox, and you stayed with me for days, playing Sorry, Life, and Mouse Trap with me to keep me busy. Who was it that was so sick with the flu, but still managed to make batch upon batch of chocolate chip cookies for my birthday party at school? I don’t care how old I get, I will always need you.”

“I am so proud of you. You’ve grown into such a fine man.” She squeezed his shoulders.

“That’s because I had you and Pop to guide me.”

“You have room for one more?” said an older woman with graying black hair and a stern face, from the open bedroom door.

“Good morning, Nana.” Simon pulled an old red Van Halen T-shirt over his head.

“That Georgia’s a lucky gal.” Rosa Lord beamed as she kissed her grandson’s cheek.

“I’m the lucky one.” He walked between the two women and stepped out the door.

The moment he left, Rosa’s face turned dark, and she fixed an icy glare on her daughter-in-law.

“Now remember our deal. The minute Simon and Georgia say *I do*, you must leave this house at once, or I’ll tell Calvin about the abortion.”

“How could I forget? You’ve reminded me every day for the past fifteen years!” Andrea continued to tidy the room. “I can’t just pack up and leave in one night.” She began to make her son’s bed.

“A deal is a deal. Our arrangement was that I’d keep my mouth shut so the boys could grow up in a nurturing, loving home. Which they have. As of today, Joshua’s enrolled in his second semester at Clemson, and Simon is getting married in a few hours. The hourglass is empty, and you’re out of excuses. I want you out by the time I wake up tomorrow! Are we clear?”

“Why do you hate me so much?” Andrea said, when Rosa was halfway into the hall.

“Because you’re trash,” Rosa spat, through clenched teeth, as she whirled back around. “You aren’t worth the shit on the bottom of my shoe. You’re not good enough for my son, you’re not fit to carry the Lord name, and after tonight, the thorn in my side will finally be removed.”

Rosa stormed away, leaving her daughter-in-law in tears.



Toni Corsini awoke early to take her little Maltese, Trixie, for a walk along the Aurora River like she had done every day for the past three years. Last night's brutal summer storm had left a mess of debris up and down the river line. As Trixie sniffed everything from the sand to the cattails that sprang up along the Aurora, Toni looked out at the river, took a deep breath, and tilted her head back so she could feel the sun on her face while the cool water cascaded over her bare feet.

Trixie began to bark at the river. Then the canine's bark turned into a ferocious growl as she began pawing at something in the water. When Toni tried to get a closer look at the object, Trixie took it between her jaws and ran. Toni chased after her for what seemed like an eternity.

Finally, out of breath, Toni stopped as she remembered the dog biscuits in her pocket. She retrieved the little sandwich bag full of colorful bones and shook it. Trixie released the object, dashed over to her master, sat and begged for a treat.

"That's Mommy's girl." She placed one in Trixie's mouth, and patted the dog on her furry little black head.

Toni dropped a couple more on the ground to keep Trixie busy while she went to inspect the piece of timber.

Upon further scrutiny, she saw the word *MARY* carved into it and realized that the long-sought-after *Mary Agnes*, which had sunk over a hundred fifty years ago, had been unearthed. Soon, every treasure hunter, diver, and hotshot would be down at the site to desecrate the graves of hundreds of souls, remove the Lord family's mythical missing jewels from within the ship's hull, and, upon doing so, discover the family's darkest secret.

However, Toni knew that what lay beneath the waters of the *Aurora* was meant to remain there. It should never be let out for any reason whatsoever. Toni possessed special powers—powers that she sometimes wished she never had—and she would use them to stop evil in its tracks.

The Corsini family began residing in Solomon's Wake soon after it had been founded, back in the 1700s. They were the descendants of an evil, shapeshifting witch named Luna, who had been put on trial for witchcraft and later hanged on the grounds of Windwood. It had taken decades to undo the damage she had inflicted on the family name, but she had eventually been forgotten. The Corsinis had since become the pinnacle of society—the saviors of a town that had been beset by witches, supernatural beings, and other forces of the unknown. The protectors of the town's secrets, sinister desires. And the indentured servants of the House of Lord.



Joshua and the other groomsmen had made lunch reservations at the pricy Corsini House. The two-story brick inn,

which had been built in 1783, was the best place in town to get a home-cooked Italian meal. The guys would relax on the river deck with some adult beverages, and then retire to one of the many fine rooms that the inn offered.

During the Revolution, George Washington had spent the night there. And sometime later, President Reagan had lunched in the very room the groomsmen had reserved for the afternoon.

“To my brother, Simon, and the beautiful Georgia, who I shall treat as a sister ... I wish nothing but happiness and longevity for you both,” Joshua raised his glass and spilled a little champagne on his hand.

Simon stood by his side and patted him on the back.

The room filled with cheers as the men burst out singing “Glory Days,” while stuffing pizza, fries, and onion rings into their mouths. The dark room was filled with cigar and cigarette smoke, and smelled of beer and rum.

Simon leaned down. “Thanks for standing up for me,” he whispered to Joshua, who was sitting at the end of the table, looking relaxed.

“No problem,” Joshua said “But next time, could you go easy on the mousse? Your hair has so many spikes you look like a porcupine.”

“Well, with that mullet of yours, you look like a wedding singer.”

The two men laughed and hugged each other. “Love you, bro.”

“If y’all don’t stop carrying on like a bunch of frat boys,” Toni said, “you’re going to miss the wedding!”

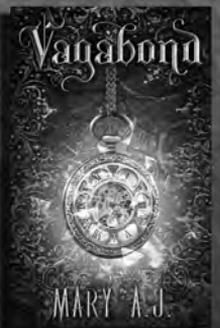
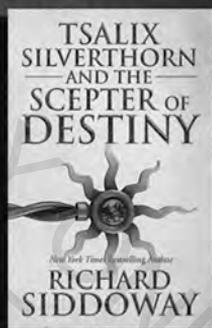
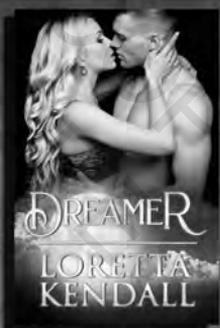
“Don’t be jealous ‘cause I’m not marrying you.” Simon grabbed her and waltzed between the tables and across the open floor.

“Simon Lord! You stop that now, before I tell your mama.” Toni hit him with a green dish towel. “I’m going to close down early and be there as soon as I can.” She chuckled and then fixed his collar. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Tell Rosa I’ll see her there.” She swatted both men on their rear ends before heading back into the kitchen.

“Let’s go get married,” Simon said, as the crowd dispersed.

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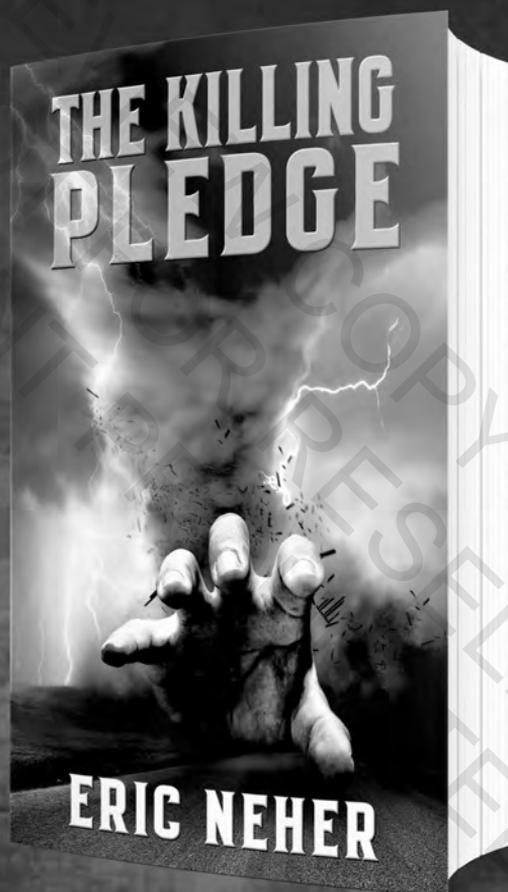
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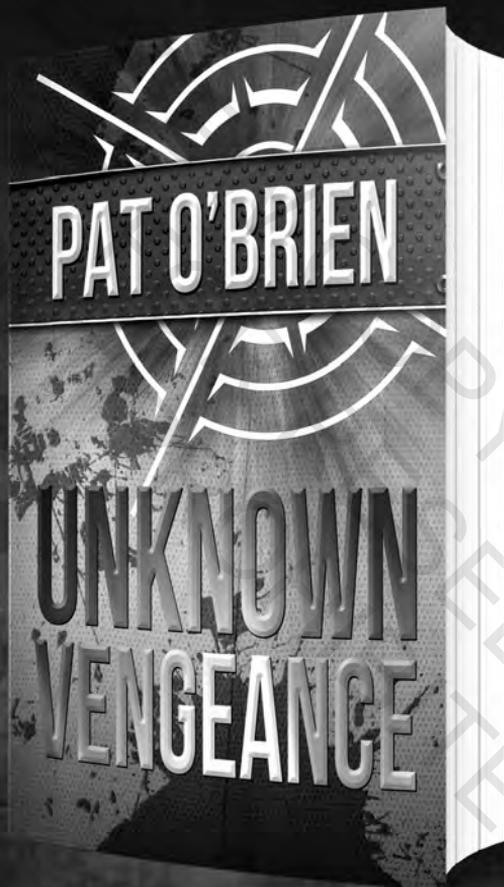
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