

# A SEED OF DOUBT

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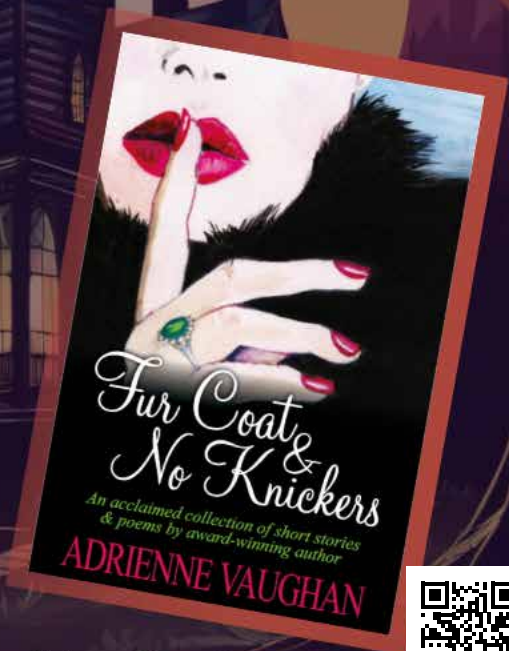


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## SEED OF DOUBT

Thomas could see black spiked turrets poking into the pale sky as the coach passed through the vast gateway, rattling along the leafless tree-lined avenue and on towards the house.

Determined to remain unimpressed he gripped the seat, as the murmuring of his fellow travellers became gasps of delight, mounting to a crescendo of excited babble as the coach swept by the lake, swinging round to take in the full view of the magnificent gothic pile before juddering to a halt on the gravel. The East and West wings draped either side of the main house, sweeping backwards as if to formally present the glittering façade of glass and golden stone that was Moorcroft Hall.

They bustled from the coach, as smiling ‘Welcomers’ in polo-shirts bearing the Moorcroft Crest, ushered them up a mountain of steps and into a reception hall the size of half a football pitch. A fireplace, which could accommodate five full grown adults standing in a row, was ablaze with a forest of logs, the gleaming floor reflecting the galleried landing above. A shimmering marble staircase spilled to the ground, as a gossamer figure sailed daintily earthwards, sunbeams from the stained-glass window bursting in all directions as it sashayed towards them. Those gathered below blinked as one, speechless.

“Welcome, welcome, newest friends only just met,” the sheeny, gossamer-clad figure boomed, breaking the spell as it tip-toed around their defensive semi-circle, touching each in turn, confirming the being with the booming voice was indeed solid matter, possibly human, species or sex yet to be determined.

## SEED OF DOUBT

“I’m Willoughby, your host for what’s going to be a truly memorable weekend,” the now named Willoughby beamed, revealing disconcertingly brilliant teeth. “Reception drinks are being served in the morning room. You no doubt all got to know each other intimately on the bus and those with single rooms might want to double up already, who knows?”

Willoughby laughed appreciatively at his own, apparently huge joke, fox trotting towards an open doorway with silent footsteps.

“Let’s do the formal stuff first and agree our programme over a nice glass of chilled Chablis.” He pronounced Chablis as chabless and referring to the notes on his clipboard tutted as he realised this was not the ‘Soooo Don’t Want to be Single!’ group he thought it was.

Thomas hung back, waiting for the last of them to pass through to the other room and then as quietly as the polished floor would allow, tuned on his heel, pulling the squeaky wheelee suitcase behind him.

“Ahem,” a feigned cough echoed. “This way sir, you’ll be fine once you know what’s what,” Willoughby was standing in the doorway. Thomas half-turned, unsure. “Sir, please, the programme is about to begin.” The twirling figure in floaty layers seemingly had a core of steel.

The room beyond grew silent. He pulled the squeaky wheels back across the floor. “You must be Thomas,” Willoughby shook his hand. Thomas nodded, the hand he held was ice cold.

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Later, sitting on the bed in the small room one of the ‘Welcomers’ had made such a great fuss of showing off, even guiding him round the tiny bathroom – at one point he thought the poor chap was actually going to demonstrate how to flush the loo – Thomas sighed heavily.

He went to the window it was quite high set into the wall. He could just about see out but not much of a view. His room appeared to be in one of the Hall’s many turrets, the turret facing the rear of the house; if he stood on tip-toe he could make out a vegetable patch in a walled garden and craning his neck to the right, the corner of a greenhouse. He thought he saw a man, bent over, dressed in overalls but the light was fading, and he was weary. The day

## SEED OF DOUBT

had grown more grey and his view, considering the grandeur of the house and its landscape, positively gloomy. He kicked the squeaky, wheelee suitcase. Perhaps when they were all in bed, he could call a taxi and go home.

He must have dozed off. There was a tapping noise, a creak and a shaft of light seared the darkness. Panic pounded in his chest, where was he? A lamp snapped on.

“Sorry to disturb but you didn’t come down for supper. Something on a tray, will that suit?” Willoughby was hovering at the foot of the bed. Thomas could taste perspiration on his upper lip. “Just this once mind, you’ll have to join in tomorrow. I know it’s hard but just take that first step, it’ll be worth it, you see.”

Everything on the tray was freezing cold even the soup, yet the ice cream had melted, a swirling splodge of raspberry in a creamy frame, like blood dripped in milk. Thomas felt his stomach lurch and pushed the tray away. He fumbled in his pocket for a sleeping pill, swallowed it down and pulling the eiderdown over his head, stayed like that until dawn.

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As soon as Thomas opened his door the following morning Willoughby appeared, wearing what looked like a translucent tracksuit.

“Ah, there you are, excellent, breakfast and then straight into our first session, Bereavement for Beginners.” He gave that awful grimace he seemed to think was a reassuring smile.

Thomas stifled a sigh and followed the glowing figure downstairs.

Sitting in the corner of the palatial former drawing room for the dreaded first session, Thomas could see across the courtyard to the edge of the walled garden. He recognised the greenhouse he had spotted from his turret window, a man with white hair appeared at the gateway, pushing an ancient wheelbarrow. The man stood up, straightened his back and smiled, a big broad grin straight at Thomas and then trundled off into the distance. Thomas watched him leave with longing.

## SEED OF DOUBT

It felt like a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, with members of the group volunteering to stand up and recount personal experiences. Some had been tearful, choked with emotion, while others had been desperate to pass on their pain. Thomas felt nothing, he just sat there wondering if the woman conducting the session had ever lost so much as an earring, let alone a life partner. He was desperate to escape, so while the others chatted mutely over coffee, he slipped quickly away and out into the crisp March morning.

He drew a long, deep breath of air and gripping his nostrils blew hard as if to dislodge a blockage. Sniffing, he could smell burning, tendrils of smoke drifted a soft musky scent towards him through the gap where the gate to the walled garden stood ajar. Stealthily, he crossed the frosty stone flags, pulling the gate behind him and, leaning against it, closed his eyes. When he opened them, he could see the old gardener through the greenhouse. The man looked up, crinkly eyes twinkled as grubby hands beckoned him in.

“It’s you I saw in there, staring out the window, wishing you were somewhere else,” the man said. Thomas nodded.

“What’s it this time? Teach Yourself Charisma? Write a Best Seller in a Weekend? Or How to find your Perfect Partner?” there was a smile about the man’s mouth.

“Bereavement and Beyond,” Thomas picked up one of the pots, nearly dropping it as the man’s booming laughter ricocheted around the glass.

“Well, that’s a good one! A total riot, got to be one of the best yet, what will they think of next?” No sympathy, no word of condolence. “No wonder you look so desperate. You never know, you might discover your charisma, find your perfect partner and write a best seller about the whole bloody thing,” he chortled throatily to himself, emptying the last of the earth from the pots into a large tray, sifting it through with his fingers.

“My daughter, Denise, booked it, it was her idea, she insisted I came,” Thomas said dolefully.

“A bit of a bossy boots is she?” the other man asked.

“She’s just worried about me, I’ve been a bit weird since her mother died.”

The man was picking tiny lumps gently out of the soil, transferring them into

## SEED OF DOUBT

individual containers, then covering them tenderly with moist, black peat.

“What are you doing?” Thomas asked.

“Giving ‘em a second chance. Sometimes things are best left, quietly in the darkness. If there’s life there, it’ll come back, eventually,” the man rubbed his chin, giving Thomas the once over. “You’re not a gardener?”

“No, my wife looked after that side of things. I work away a lot, not much time for gardening.”

“Gardening doesn’t take time, it’s other things take time away from gardening,” the old man was watching him with shrewd eyes.

A bell clanked across the courtyard. Thomas looked up.

“Better get back to your bereavement buddies, what’s on the agenda this afternoon, embalming for beginners?” the man grinned. Thomas shrugged. “Come back at teatime, I’ve got a flask’ll do you more good.”

“Oh, what’s that then?”

“Blackcurrant vodka.”

Thomas cheered a little, albeit momentarily.

It was easy for Thomas to duck out at four o’clock, Willoughby had given them an ‘unstructured’ hour to help deal with any guilt relating to the dearly departed. The gardener was in the greenhouse, warming himself by a rusty stove. He waved Thomas in and handed him a mug of jewel coloured liquid. Thomas sipped, sweet nectar burned his throat and warmed his chest instantly.

“Swig it back man,” the gardener insisted, “Plenty more where that came from. Good wife, was she?” The gardener asked after a while.

“I thought so,” Thomas took a generous refill. “Until she died anyway.”

The old man signalled for him to continue. Thomas took a deep breath.

“Clearing out her things, I found stuff, letters and photographs, some old,

## SEED OF DOUBT

some not so old but all from people I didn't know."

"You mean people you didn't know about. Men?"

Thomas nodded.

"How many men?"

"Three or four."

"Were they graphic, these letters? Had she been intimate with these men, were they lovers?"

"Not really clear, nothing graphic, more flirting, talking about dinner dates, dancing, going to the movies together, that sort of thing," Thomas was surprised he was just blurting it all out. Something he had not even been able to think about, let alone talk about. Something that had been lodged in his chest, like a lump of granite.

"Didn't mean much then sounds like, just the company of the opposite sex and a bit of flattery more than anything, and you did say yourself, you work away a lot. She was probably just a bit lonely. You'll have lots more letters and pictures of happy family times together, I'd imagine." It was a statement. "What's the problem, do you feel betrayed?"

Thomas felt sure he should be uncomfortable having this highly personal conversation with a stranger, but nevertheless he answered.

"No, that's the problem, I don't feel anything, no grief, no anger, nothing," Thomas said, flatly.

The gardener poked the stove. "Guilt then?"

"For what?" Thomas was shocked. "I've never been unfaithful."

"There's more than one way to stray. A mistress doesn't have to lie abed to take your heart or your soul. Other things can do it just as well, work, business, a hobby. Doesn't take much to leave a woman, even if you're still with her," the gardener poured more drinks.

## SEED OF DOUBT

Saved by the bell. Thomas quickly departed, glad to leave the old man to his twaddly, homespun wisdom.

After supper and before the session ‘Rediscover Laughter’ Thomas found himself alone in the greenhouse. The neat rows of pots stood silently awaiting the reawakening of the seeds inside. He lifted one to gaze at the surface and see if there was yet any sign of life and as he reached across, a fat envelope thudded to the floor.

It was his wife’s collection of memorabilia, snaps and scraps of fanciful romance with other men, letters, photographs, ticket stubs. He had been carrying it around with him since he found it in the old suitcase, at the back of the wardrobe. She had always loved a romantic hero. She liked to go dancing, out for Italian meals, popcorn at the movies ... no real hobbies to speak of, except gardening, she loved to grow flowers, roses were her favourite, corny but true.

Thomas bent to the ground and snatching the bundle up, lifted the lid of the stove and thrust the envelope inside. Grabbing the poker, he pushed the paper against the embers with until it smouldered and burst into flame. Devouring the words and smiling faces of memories that did not belong to him; memories and photos of a woman he had always assumed did.

“Well done, that was just going out I reckon,” the old man was standing behind him. He proffered a mug of the blackcurrant vodka. Thomas who had never been a drinker, knocked it straight back, hoping it would dissolve the granite.

The next morning Willoughby and the ‘Welcomers’ were lined along the steps, shaking hands and saying sincere goodbyes to everyone.

“I hope that helped,” Willoughby looked deep into Thomas’ face.

“Dunno if I’m honest. I liked the old gardener though, nice line in blackcurrant vodka.”

Willoughby arched an eyebrow. “So, it was you then. I wondered who he would choose this time.”



## SEED OF DOUBT

Thomas tilted his head. "Choose?"

"Oh yes, he always picks one we can't help does old Gabriel. Cost effective too, no salary to find for a counsellor from the other side, a spirit guide in more ways than one, that's what we call him." He gave Thomas a brief hug. "I'm so pleased for you."

Thomas sat at the back of the coach, straining to catch a last glimpse of the walled garden as they drove away, he thought he could see him, Gabriel that is, and he was sure he waved.

But maybe not.

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"Did it help, Dad?" Denise was anxious, her father had been so cold, so unfeeling since mum died, he had hardly said a word, she really was at her wits end.

"Nah, I hate all that new age claptrap, you know I do!" Thomas replied, putting the scissors back in the drawer. He had just finished framing an old photograph, one of himself and his wife, taken years ago. She looked pink and shiny, they had been dancing in a competition; they were quite good back in the day. He placed a rose from the garden in a champagne glass beside it. Standing back, pleased with his work.

"Make any friends? Decide on a new hobby?" Denise asked, hopefully.

"Might try gardening," Thomas said, giving the girl in the photograph a brief smile.

*The end*