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*Learning
to Speak
American*

A Londoner by birth, Colette Dartford went to university in Bath and made it her home. A scholarship to undertake a doctorate led to a career in health and social research, before she moved to California's Napa Valley. Here she studied Viticulture and Enology and wrote her debut novel.



Learning to Speak American

Colette Dartford

twenty7



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*For my husband, Trevor, and our children Charlotte,
Matthew and Nicholas.*



Marriage is a very secret place.

Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince*



Prologue

The first time you feel the earth shudder and shake, you instinctively reach for something solid to grab on to, but everything is moving and you hold your breath in case this isn't just another tremor, but the quake that's long overdue – the one you tell yourself will never happen.

Americans talk about disaster preparedness, an expression Lola had never heard before she visited California. She was sceptical, firmly of the belief that disaster would strike in the time and place of its own choosing, and preparedness was a myth people took comfort in, one that offered the illusion of control.

She admired them, though, all those Americans busily preparing for disaster. England was brought to a standstill by a bit of snow or a heavier than usual downpour. She was often asked if she missed it. It was difficult to explain that she had willingly relinquished her world of mud and manners. She had relinquished much more too, but what choice did she have?

One

Lola remembered how only Darcy had enjoyed that foray into the Mendips, bounding along rutted paths, scamp-ering through swampy fields, rolling joyously in cowpats. She should have told him off – bad boy Darcy, bad dog – but she was grateful to have him there, a welcome buffer between her and Duncan.

It had been almost a year since Clarissa's accident and Darcy would still lie outside her bedroom door and whimper, unable to understand why she wasn't there. Lola didn't understand either.

As Duncan had consulted an Ordnance Survey map, Lola felt it best not to mention that she and Clarissa used to hack over the myriad of bridleways that criss-crossed the Mendip hills, rendering the map somewhat redundant. If she had mentioned it, Duncan would have got that dark, brooding look she had become all too familiar with, fol-lowed by a punitive silence – the price she paid for saying their daughter's name out loud. But as they picked their way along the muddy tracks, memories of those precious times had flooded back; one so vivid Lola couldn't hold it inside.

'Polo spooked along here,' she blurted, pointing to a bend in the bridleway. 'A pair of terriers appeared out of nowhere, barking and getting under his hooves, then he took off.' Grief stabbed at her chest. So painful to talk



about her little girl, but more painful not to. She swallowed hard. 'Clarissa didn't have time to gather up her reins, but she managed to grab a handful of mane and cling on until I could get past and pull him up.'

Lola relived the scene in her head, eyes closed, face tilted to the milky sky. Clarissa had let out a shrill cry when Polo bolted. Lola listened hard, trying to hear something, anything that might pull her further back into that moment, but the only sound was the wild October wind cavorting among the trees.

When she opened her eyes Duncan was gone. She called his name but he didn't answer. Darcy headed along the track at a jog and Lola followed. She spotted Duncan ahead, his back to her. He ignored her when she reached him.

'I didn't mean to upset you,' she said. 'It just reminded me ...' Her voice trailed off when he quickened his pace. Darcy dropped a stick at his feet, tail wagging, but Duncan ignored him too. Lola resigned herself to the inevitable silence, but Duncan stopped abruptly and turned.

'I don't need to be reminded we had a daughter,' he said. 'Nor do I need to be reminded why we lost her - '

Was that what he had taken from her recollection? That she had saved Clarissa from danger and he hadn't? He turned his back to her again. She wanted to touch him but he looked rigid, unyielding. A string of riders appeared, galloping towards them. Duncan and Lola retreated to the edge of the path and when the riders had thundered past Duncan muttered something about rain and that they should probably head home.

* * * * *



How bizarre that memory should intrude here, now, in a smart San Francisco hotel room, a world away from the windswept Mendips. But how much had really changed? Any mention of Clarissa was still taboo and Duncan's strategy was still to distract her, keep her busy, not give her time to think. Moping he called it. She called it missing Clarissa.

Duncan didn't say why he chose San Francisco for their anniversary and Lola didn't ask. She feigned delight, all the time thinking how exhausting it would be to have a whole two weeks of his undivided attention. At home they had mastered the art of avoidance – Duncan ensconced in his study, Lola busy with the horses – but such enforced proximity would quickly deplete their arsenal of small talk.

The hotel room was a shrine to French antiques. While Duncan dealt with the luggage, Lola wandered over to the tall arched windows. A glassy cyan ocean glistened beneath a blood orange sun. Swirls of pink and peach washed through the dusk sky. Parallel to the water a long, wide street pulsed with traffic and pedestrians. Lola stared unblinking, mesmerised by the unfamiliar scene. She was used to sky that teetered between various shades of grey and narrow muddy lanes that convoluted through the English countryside, as if to go anywhere directly was to miss the point of the journey. The contrast surprised her, sparked a flicker of interest she hadn't expected.

'Do you like it?' asked Duncan.

'I do,' said Lola, and not just because that was what he wanted to hear.

Nothing shone a spotlight on unhappiness like the pressure of a happy occasion, but she knew how much trouble he had gone to and that it wasn't just about their anniversary. He was trying to make recompense for Clarissa, as if such a thing were possible. Lola didn't believe it was possible to get over the loss of a child, but Duncan was determined they should move on with their lives, put it all behind them. He never said as much – that would have meant talking about Clarissa – but he offered all sorts of diversions, his way of saying, see, life goes on, without actually having to say it. He planned weekend trips that Lola would cancel, or offered a litany of hobbies in which she had no interest: tennis, bridge, a little golf perhaps.

'I've planned a pretty full itinerary,' he said, unpacking his suitcase.

'Of course you have,' said Lola quietly.

He disappeared into the bathroom saying something about an exhibition that Lola didn't quite catch. She looked at her own suitcase but couldn't summon up the enthusiasm to unpack. Instead, she went back to the window and pressed her forehead against the cool glass. They had been married twenty years. Clarissa had been dead for two. Lola wondered quite what they had to celebrate.

Duncan was brisk and full of purpose the following morning, already showered and dressed before Lola had finished her first cup of tea. His shirt – cornflower blue with a faint white stripe – had sharp creases, as though



just removed from its packaging. Only the very top button was undone.

‘New shirt?’ asked Lola.

He adjusted the starched collar and nodded. She noticed he was wearing cufflinks: square, gold and shiny. Distinguished – it described him perfectly. No hint of the paunch that afflicted most men in middle age, or the ‘scourge of alopecia’, as he called it. Duncan was mystified by the fashion among young men to shave their head, as if baldness was something to aspire to. His own hair was thick and dark but for liberal glints of gunmetal grey. Lola saw the way women looked at him and remembered that she used to look at him that way too.

‘Come on,’ he cajoled. ‘Why don’t you get up?’

‘I didn’t sleep very well,’ she said. ‘Jetlag I suppose.’

He sat on the end of the bed and offered an indulgent smile.

‘It’s a beautiful day,’ he said. ‘A walk will do you good. You’ll feel much better when you’re up and about and doing something.’

Lola wasn’t convinced, but she stifled a yawn and asked what he had in mind.

‘There’s an exhibition at MOMA I thought you might enjoy,’ he said, on the move again. He fetched a colourful flyer from the desk and handed it to her. ‘Matisse as Sculptor.’

His pleased-with-himself smile reminded her how hard he was trying and the least she could do was play along.

‘Sounds great,’ she said, draining her cup and pouring another tea.

* * * * *



The sun was warm and a cool breeze fluttered off the ocean. Lola looked at the ferries, the trams, the giant double-decker bridge, and thought how foreign it all seemed. The vibrancy of the city, its barefaced vitality, flooded her fragile senses, reminding her how insular her life had become. She tried to compare it to London, but San Francisco felt different – younger and more rebellious. And besides, Lola couldn't remember the last time she had visited London – nowadays she rarely ventured beyond the Somerset village they moved to six months after they were married, let alone made the hundred-mile journey to the capital. Duncan encouraged her to meet him there, tempting her with museums, galleries, the theatre – all the things she once loved. Maybe next week, she would say.

Yet he'd got her to San Francisco, and it did seem to seep through the veil of sadness that shrouded her from the world. It unsettled her, though, this reminder that there was so much in life that she used to take pleasure in.

Their timing could not have been worse. They arrived at the museum just as a party of schoolgirls filed in, and suddenly all Lola could see was her daughter. Their blazers were like the one Clarissa used to wear, navy blue with a white crest on the right breast pocket. A couple of the girls had the same long glossy hair. Lola willed them to turn around so she could see their faces. Even now, part of her couldn't quite believe she would never see her child again. The girls' excited chatter echoed in the huge marble hall, and Lola watched how they moved, laughed,



spoke, longing to see some mannerism or gesture that reminded her of Clarissa – something physical to flesh out her memories, give them shape and form, right there in front of her eyes. One of the glossy-haired girls turned and looked straight at her. She was nothing like Clarissa.

‘Darling?’ said Duncan.

He was holding two exhibition guides that she hadn’t noticed him buy.

‘Yes?’

‘Where would you like to start? I thought we might go straight to the Matisse?’

Lola couldn’t have cared less. She longed to say, look at what we’ve lost, but she saw the set of his mouth, the tightness in his jaw, and realised Duncan was thinking about Clarissa too. Lola took one of the guides.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Let’s start with the Matisse.’

She let Duncan take the lead, even though art was her field, not his. He asked what she thought, what she knew about Matisse, why he took up sculpting so late in his career, but her monosyllabic responses must have worn him down because he said that if she wasn’t interested they could leave. She wanted to say yes, but that would have spoiled the whole day, and what then? They’d go back to the hotel, be polite to each other while avoiding eye contact and any mention of the one subject Lola wanted to talk about. No. She racked her brains to remember what she knew about Matisse, what fragments of knowledge she could piece together to reward Duncan for having thought of the exhibition in the first place.



‘He sculpted throughout his career,’ she said, ‘but his sculptures were overshadowed by his paintings. It’s his painting people recognise.’

Duncan looked at her, his head tilted slightly to one side. ‘Really? I didn’t know that.’

‘Yes. He often sculpted and painted the same figures, like this one,’ she said, pointing to Large Seated Nude.

‘Is it me,’ asked Duncan, studying the sculpture, ‘or is it ugly?’

‘He liked to challenge idealised notions of gender, represent women as thin and muscular at the same time, blend elements of masculine and feminine.’

Duncan nodded. ‘Impressive,’ he said.

‘You like it?’

‘Not particularly. I meant you – your knowledge of Matisse.’

Lola smiled, said she’d forgotten most of it.

‘Maybe you should take a course, brush up on your art history.’

‘Maybe,’ said Lola, although she knew she wouldn’t.

It was later, back at the hotel, when Duncan phoned room service and ordered a bottle of champagne, that Lola was on her guard. What better opportunity to resurrect their dormant sex-life than in a five-star hotel on their wedding anniversary? It wasn’t that she didn’t want him, more that they had lost the rhythm of being a couple – intimacy nurtured through small, everyday gestures of love and affection. Their intimacy had been so violently disrupted that it

had never recovered. Lola no longer undressed in front of him. They didn't talk about that either.

'I'm going to have a bath,' she said, shutting the bathroom door behind her.

When Duncan knocked ten minutes later, she quickly arranged the foamy bubbles so that only her head and shoulders were visible.

'Yes?' she said.

He came in holding two flutes of champagne, perched on the side of the bath tub and handed her one of the flutes. She rarely drank champagne anymore, but instantly recalled the sweet sherbet taste, the way the bubbles danced on her tongue.

'It's Schramsberg,' said Duncan, holding up his glass.

'Pardon?'

'The champagne – it's Schramsberg, produced in the Napa Valley. Official wine of the White House. We could do a tour of the caves if you like.'

'Could we?'

There it was again – that pleased-with-himself look. 'I didn't think you'd want to spend too long in the city so I found a hotel right in the heart of wine country.'

'Clever you,' said Lola, although she now realised she was coming to enjoy the novelty of the city.

He grazed her shoulder with his hand and offered to wash her back.

'Already done,' she said too brightly.

She willed him to leave but he sat there in his thick white robe, sweat beading on his face and neck. It was

easier at home – so many rooms that avoiding each other hardly seemed like avoiding each other at all. Here there was nowhere to hide.

‘I won’t be long,’ said Lola when the silence became unbearable. ‘Why don’t you see what’s on TV...?’

He never watched television, but got the message and left. She closed her eyes and slid under the water.

Duncan hired a sleek red convertible for the drive to the Napa Valley and insisted on having the roof down, even in the chilly morning air. Lola tilted her face to the sun and breathed deeply, detecting a faint tang of salt. She could see him out of the corner of her eye, watching her, monitoring her mood. It felt strange to be sitting next to him in an open-top car – not like them at all. Over breakfast he had mentioned something about pushing her out of her comfort zone, an expression Lola thought was very un-Duncan-like, one she’d expect him to dismiss as psychobabble.

‘You worry about me too much,’ she said.

He kept his eyes on the road.

‘It’s a while since you’ve been more than ten miles outside of Piliton,’ he said. ‘I don’t want you to feel’ – he seemed to struggle for the right word – ‘overwhelmed.’

Lola was surprised. Had Duncan just alluded to the fragility he carefully tiptoed around without ever mentioning by name?

‘I don’t,’ she said. ‘Actually, I’ve rather enjoyed the strangeness of it – the fact that it’s so different to home.’

The tightness in his jaw relaxed.



'I'm doing my best,' she said.

He patted her leg.

'I know you are.'

Duncan's uncanny ability to find his way around foreign cities had always impressed Lola. It reminded her of a time before Clarissa was born, when she sometimes accompanied him on business trips. He travelled to alien, exotic places and she was flattered he wanted her with him. She assumed men used these occasions for extra-marital sex, a sort of adultery amnesty, so far from home that it didn't count. During the day she'd busy herself sightseeing and at night Duncan would ravish her, aroused by some hotel-room fantasy she willingly fulfilled.

'Look,' Duncan said, jolting her back to the present. 'The Golden Gate Bridge.'

Lola pushed her sunglasses onto her head, wanting to see the bridge in all its glory, illuminated by the dazzling yellow sun. The way it spanned the ocean, disappearing into what remained of the Pacific fog, endowed it with an almost mystical quality. Its colour seemed to change from one moment to the next – reddish orange, then brown, then more of a brick red. The sailing boats bobbing below looked like toys. Everything sparkled: the bridge, the white sails, the infinite expanse of water. She was gripped with the same feeling she'd had when she looked out of the tall arched window – that momentary sense of awe.

When Duncan had announced they were going to California, Lola thought of vast arid landscapes and endless sandy beaches, yet just forty minutes out of San Francisco, they were in lush, verdant wine country. She



liked how the breeze whipped through her hair, the way the air smelled sweet and clean. Duncan fiddled with the radio and found a station called Vine. He sang along to the Eagles like he didn't have a care in the world. Lola sat back and tried to imagine what that would be like.

Hotel Auberge clung to a hillside above the Silverado Trail that ran between Yountville and St Helena. It mimicked the style of a Tuscan villa, with terracotta walls and tall shuttered windows. Duncan pulled up outside and two young men in polo shirts and Bermuda shorts opened the car doors for them.

Honeysuckle, jasmine and sage: as the bellboy led them through the luxuriant gardens, Lola marvelled at how intense even familiar scents became with the kiss of warm air.

'Here we are.'

The bellboy stopped outside a whitewashed cabin framed with vivid pink bougainvillea.

'This is a cottage?' said Lola.

'Uh-huh,' he said. 'You have cottages in Britain, right?'

Lola thought how 'Britain' was something only a foreigner would say in that context.

Inside it was cool and surprisingly spacious. A huge bed stood in the centre of the room, an oak armoire and dressing table to one side, a chaise longue and coffee table to the other.

'The bathroom is through here,' said the bellboy, opening a door at the far end of the room. 'Is there anything else I can help you with?'



‘No, thank you,’ said Duncan, pressing a ten-dollar bill into his hand.

‘Have a great day.’

‘Such an effusive expression,’ said Lola when the bellboy had left.

‘It’s their way of being polite.’

‘I suppose.’

‘Welcome to America,’ he said.

Lola wasn’t sure if it was because she had resolved to try harder, or if it was the intoxicating effect of the wines, but over dinner that evening she relaxed, found herself enjoying Duncan’s company, even flirting a little. She wore a black silk dress and high heels, her hair arranged in an elegant chignon. Duncan kept refilling her glass and when she asked if he was trying to get her drunk, he said *absolutely*. She wanted to reward him for not giving up on her. The odds were against them – that’s what it warned in one of the bereavement counsellor’s booklets, although not in so many words. The loss of a child, an only child, was more than most couples could bear. But their marriage had survived – if that was what this was. Lola wasn’t sure anymore, but she was a little drunk and they hadn’t made love in such a long time. He must have read her mind because he asked for the bill as the waitress cleared their dinner plates.

They made their way back through the garden, the high-pitched frenzy of a thousand crickets ringing in their ears, and when Duncan opened the door to the cottage and reached for the light switch, Lola put her hand over his.



‘Leave it,’ she said softly, removing the clip from her hair.

In the thin shard of moonlight that sliced through the shutters, he looked so grateful that Lola ached with regret for all the times she had rebuffed him, turned away when he had reached for her in the night. She cupped his face in her hands and tried to banish thoughts of Clarissa. Duncan unzipped her dress and let it fall to the floor. As she stood there in a puddle of black silk, she struggled to remember what it felt like before they were damaged, and wondered if it would ever feel like that again. She closed her eyes and willed herself back to those hot, passionate nights in far-flung hotels, when she yielded to his fantasies and thrilled him with her own. He moved her hair aside and kissed the soft, warm skin on her neck. Shivers of pleasure radiated from his touch, rousing some sensual memory, long forgotten. She undressed him quickly, fearful the memory would vanish into the darkness, and when he whispered – what’s the hurry? – she didn’t answer. Instead, she lay down on the bed and opened herself to him, knowing that if they lost this too, there might be nothing of their marriage left to save.

When Lola woke in the unfamiliar room, it took a few moments to remember where she was. Her head hurt and her mouth was parched. She needed water but there was none on the bedside table. Then she remembered: anniversary, wine, sex. She covered her face with her hands. What had seemed so natural last night felt faintly embarrassing now. They had got out of the habit of having sex, of being intimate. Duncan opened his eyes and stretched.



‘Do we have any water?’ she asked.

He got out of bed and fetched a bottle of Pellegrino and two tumblers from the coffee table. It seemed strange watching him walk across the room naked. At home he wore pyjamas in bed and as soon as he got up, he put on a dressing gown and slippers. He filled one of the tumblers and handed it to Lola.

‘How are you feeling?’ he asked.

‘Hung over,’ she said.

Duncan poured some water for himself and got back into bed. When she had finished drinking he took the tumbler and pulled her into an embrace. His body felt warm and strong – familiar, yet unfamiliar at the same time. He ran his fingers along the length of her spine, kissing her neck and shoulder. Lola closed her eyes and tried to relax, but the pressure in her head and the sour taste in her mouth were too much.

‘I need the bathroom,’ she said, freeing herself from his long limbs. ‘Do we have any aspirin?’

‘In my toilet bag.’

Lola could hear the disappointment in his voice but sex was the last thing she wanted. After five minutes in a hot shower, the pain in her head subsided. Duncan came in as she was drying herself, lifted the toilet seat and peed. She unhooked a robe from the bathroom door and as she was putting it on, he suggested she come back to bed.

‘I’m hungry,’ she said, though she wasn’t at all.

‘I’ll order room service,’ he said.

A romantic breakfast in bed would make it more difficult to fend off his advances.



‘Let’s wander over to the restaurant,’ she said.

He turned to face her.

‘Last night was wonderful,’ he said.

Lola unhooked the other robe and handed it to him. She knew his nakedness shouldn’t bother her, but it implied an intimacy she didn’t feel. He took the robe but didn’t put it on.

‘Did you hear what I said?’ he asked.

She nodded. He put down the robe, opened Lola’s and slid his hands around her waist. She rested her forehead on his shoulder and tried to find the right words. His skin was smooth and smelled of her.

‘It was wonderful,’ she said. ‘But be patient with me, give me time.’

He said nothing at first, just held her. She worried that she’d spoiled things – said too much, or not enough.

‘Does this mean I have to get you drunk every time we have sex?’ he asked.

‘Not every time,’ she said and he laughed.

Wine tasting was top of Duncan’s agenda, but Lola couldn’t face alcohol and suggested they go for a walk around town instead, get to know the place a bit. She thought he might be disappointed but he seemed pleased that she was taking the initiative, not just going along with whatever he wanted because she didn’t care one way or another.

‘Good idea,’ he said, picking up the car keys and handing them to her. ‘Why don’t you drive?’

Her heart quickened at the thought of it; driving on the right, on unfamiliar roads with unfamiliar rules. They had



played out variations of this scenario many times since Clarissa died. Lola wanted to be left alone, surprised that he expected anything of her when simply getting through the day took all her strength. Yet he set her tasks and tests to prove she was fine – they both were fine.

‘Come on, darling,’ he said, opening the driver’s door. ‘It’s easy.’

It would take more effort to protest than to drive a few miles, so even though her head still felt fuzzy, she got in, adjusted the seat and turned on the ignition. And he was right – it was easy.

‘Brilliant,’ he said as she negotiated a crossroads and turned onto St Helena’s tree-lined Main Street. ‘I knew you could do it.’

When she reversed smoothly into a parking space and positioned the convertible in perfect parallel to the kerb, Duncan beamed with satisfaction.

‘That’s my girl,’ he said and Lola had to look away, remembering how he used to say exactly the same thing to Clarissa.

As they strolled along Main Street, Duncan took her hand. Focus on the positive – that was his philosophy. He would be thinking about the rare closeness of last night’s lovemaking, not her unwillingness to repeat it this morning. He seemed relaxed, almost content. She wondered if he faked it like she did. It was hard to tell with Duncan.

‘I’m glad you suggested this,’ he said. ‘It’s a glorious afternoon.’

‘Have you noticed how everyone here smiles at you?’ asked Lola.



‘Can you imagine in London if everyone you walked past offered a cheery smile? We’d think them insane; hardly dare to make eye contact. I must say, I find it rather odd, all this unfettered friendliness.’

‘Maybe it’s the sunshine.’

‘Or the wine.’

Their easy rapport made it seem as though they had stepped back in time, reconnected with an earlier version of themselves. It was Duncan’s idea to stop by the estate agents. In the window were photographs of everything from hundred-acre estates to small wooden houses squeezed onto tiny scraps of land.

‘See anything you like?’

A young, fair-haired man stood behind them – styrofoam cup in one hand, mobile phone in the other. The logo on his T-shirt looked like a fish and his faded jeans had the beginnings of a tear over the knee. His smile revealed dazzlingly white teeth, straight and perfectly spaced. Perhaps it was the artist in Lola, but a face like his, defined by predictably symmetrical features, seemed to lack character. Imperfections and irregularities were what made faces interesting.

‘Sorry,’ he said as Duncan spun around. ‘Didn’t mean to startle you.’ He slipped the phone into his pocket and held out his hand. ‘Cain McCann. I work here.’

His air of casual confidence, the ease with which he inhabited the world, struck Lola as very American. Duncan wore his confidence on the inside, strong but private. This man’s confidence was of a different vintage and calibre, displayed for all to see. Duncan shook his hand.

‘Duncan Drummond. This is my wife, Lola.’

‘Great to meet you,’ said McCann. ‘Where are you guys from?’

‘England,’ said Duncan. ‘We’re staying at the Auberge.’

‘Good choice,’ said McCann. He took a sip from the styrofoam cup. ‘You thinking of investing in some property? A vacation home, maybe?’

All they had done was look in the window. To Lola he seemed pushy, although Duncan didn’t appear to mind.

‘It’s all rather expensive,’ he said.

‘Yeah,’ said McCann, ‘St Helena is pretty pricey. Still, if you want to come in out of the heat, I’ll see what I can tempt you with.’ He opened the door and waited.

Lola stayed put, reluctant to be subjected to the inevitable sales pitch, but Duncan gave her one of his encouraging smiles and led the way.

The air-conditioner hummed while a pair of ceiling fans whirled frenetically. Lola’s eyes took a moment to adjust to the relative lack of brightness. Next to McCann, Duncan looked very formal – his dress code made no concessions to the heat. He wouldn’t dream of wearing a T-shirt anywhere but the gym. Weekends he swapped expensive Savile Row suits for pale corduroy trousers and casual shirts. He didn’t even own a pair of jeans. She knew she was being stuffy but McCann looked like he was going to a rock concert, not to work.

‘Here’s my card,’ he said, handing them one each.

‘That’s odd,’ said Lola, reading the card. “‘Realtor” isn’t a word we use in England.’

‘Really?’ said McCann.

‘We say “estate agent”.’

‘Thanks for the English lesson,’ he said, treating her to another full-frontal smile. It was impossible not to smile back but just as Lola began to warm to his eager exuberance, he turned away and addressed himself to Duncan.

‘So, if you were thinking of investing in a vacation property, what kind of budget would we be talking about?’

This was not how Lola wanted to spend her time. She was usually more tolerant but the dull pain of her hangover still lingered and she craved coffee and carbs. It wasn’t as if they had any intention of buying a property – vacation or otherwise. She was about to make light of the idea when Duncan spoke.

‘Four hundred thousand,’ he said, casually. ‘Dollars.’

Lola stared at him, eyebrows raised. What was going on here? Why was Duncan humouring him? If he noticed her consternation, he didn’t let on. Perhaps he was missing work and wanted a distraction. McCann put his hands in his pockets and shook his head.

‘I don’t have anything in that price range.’

‘Nothing at all?’ said Duncan.

‘Don’t think so,’ said McCann.

He sat down at one of the desks and peered at a computer screen.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Only thing is a little fixer-upper at the bottom of Spring Mountain. Been empty for a couple of years. Before that it was rented.’

‘How much is it?’ asked Duncan.



McCann hit the keyboard with a decisive click.

‘They’re asking four-fifty but it’s been listed for a while so they’ll probably take an offer.’

A printer at the far end of the office sprang into life.

‘Great location,’ said McCann, picking up the details. ‘Just a mile from town.’

He handed a set to Duncan and then, as an afterthought, printed another set for Lola. As he leaned over her she noticed a slight bump on the bridge of his nose and the faintest hint of a scar. It blurred the bland perfection of his face.

‘It needs remodelling,’ he said, ‘but for that price, you really can’t go wrong.’

Lola looked at the picture – a square wooden structure on four wooden stilts – and immediately thought of a treehouse. She had one as a child – a precarious lopsided thing her father built before he absconded with a woman half his age. When Lola wanted to escape her mother’s lugubrious presence, or the many reminders of her father’s absence, she retreated to the quiet solitude of her treehouse.

‘It looks interesting,’ she said, studying the picture. ‘Unusual.’

Now it was Duncan who raised his eyebrows.

‘It’s a beautiful spot,’ said McCann. ‘We could take a drive over there if you want.’

Despite her pique at having been railroaded into it, Lola was curious to see this odd little house. The setting looked gorgeous, and he did say it was close to town. They could have a quick look around and then find somewhere to eat.



At the very least it would give them an interesting topic of conversation over lunch.

She turned to Duncan. 'Why not?'

It was the sweet, comforting smell of warm wood that first struck her. The house, made entirely of timber, stood nestled among a cordon of tall, spindly pines and shorter, thicker firs. There appeared to be just a single room – a fireplace at one end, the shell of a kitchen at the other – with a ceiling that sloped upwards to a height of maybe twenty feet. Fiery June sunshine bombarded the filthy windows, imbuing the air with a soft amber glow. A mesh of silvery cobwebs fanned out from every crevice. Dust sat thick and languid, disturbed only by resident vermin as they scurried about their business.

'Is this it?' asked Duncan.

'There are two bedrooms at the back,' said McCann. He pointed to an opening – a doorframe, but no door. 'And a small bathroom.'

Lola touched Duncan's arm, signalling that she wanted to explore. He appeared surprised but followed anyway. McCann said he had to make a phone call, that he'd be right outside if they needed him. Duncan pulled a pristine white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped a film of sweat from his brow.

'No wonder the particulars only showed a picture of the outside,' he said, looking around. 'You don't get much for your money.'

Lola peered into the tiny bathroom that led off the tiny bedroom and decided not to venture further.



‘How much is it in sterling?’ she asked.

Duncan thought for a moment.

‘Around three hundred thousand,’ he said. ‘Why? You don’t actually like it do you?’

It made no sense at all, but she did. Something about the neglected house defied her grief-soaked indifference. It was as though those few momentary flashes of pleasure – the view from the window, the taste of champagne, the magnificent Golden Gate – had gathered momentum and released something inside of her, allowed it to break free.

She took Duncan’s arm and led him onto the rickety wooden deck. A canopy of leaves offered shade from the sun and a soft breeze carried the scent of cut grass and rosemary. She looked out at the trees and vineyards, birds she’d never seen before, butterflies as big as her hand.

‘You seem enthralled,’ he said.

‘I am,’ she said, ‘but don’t ask me to explain why.’

How could she explain the ludicrous notion that bringing this house back to life might somehow bring her back to life?

