

April 1946

Hôtel de Bourgogne, Paris VII

There they are, held like flies in the amber of that moment—click goes the camera and on goes life; the minutes, the days, the years, the decades, taking them further and further from that happiness and promise of youth, from the hopes...and from the dreams they dreamed for themselves.

—Nancy Mitford, *The Pursuit of Love*

“*Alors, racontez!*” the Colonel said, and spun her beneath his arm.

Nancy had to duck, of course. The man was frightfully short.

“*Racontez! Racontez!*”

She laughed, thinking of all the times the Colonel made this demand. *Racontez! Tell me!*

“*Allô—allô,*” he’d say across some crackling line. “*Were you asleep?*”

He might be in Paris, or Algiers, or another place he could not name. Weeks or months would pass and then the phone would ring in London and set Nancy Mitford’s world straight again.

“*Alors, racontez! Tell me everything!*”

And she did.

The Colonel found Nancy’s stories comical, outrageous, unlike anything he’d ever known, his delight beginning first and foremost with the six Mitford girls, and their secret society. Nancy also had a brother, but he hardly counted at all.

“*C’est pas vrai!*” the Colonel would cry with each new tale. “*That cannot be true!*”

“It all happened,” Nancy told him. “Every word. What do you expect with a Nazi, a Communist, and several Fascists in one family tree?”

“*C’est incroyable!*”

But her sisters and the Hon Society were the past, and this gilded Parisian hotel room was the present, likewise Nancy’s beloved Colonel, currently reaching into the bucket of champagne. How had she gotten to this place? It was the impossible dream.

“Promise we can stay here forever,” Nancy said.

“Here or somewhere like it,” he answered with a grin.

Nancy’s heart bounced. Heavens, he was ever so ugly with his pockmarked face and receding hairline, the precise opposite of her strapping husband, a man so wholesome he might’ve leapt from the pages of a seedsman catalogue. But Nancy loved her Colonel with every part of herself, in particular the female, which represented another chief difference between the two men.

“You know, my friends are desperate to take a French lover,” Nancy said, and she tossed her gloves onto the bed. “All thanks to a fictional character from a book. Everyone is positively in love with Fabrice!”

“*Bien sûr,* as in real life,” the Colonel said as he popped the cork.

The champagne bubbled up the bottle’s neck and dribbled onto his stubby hands.

“You’re such a wolf!” Nancy said. She heaved open the shutters and scanned the square below. “At last! A hotel with a view.”

Their room overlooked the Palais Bourbon, home to the *Assemblée nationale*, the two-hundred-year seat of the French government, minus the interlude during which it was occupied by the Luftwaffe. Mere months ago, German propaganda had hung from the building: *DEUTSCHLAND SIEGT AN ALLEN FRONTEN*. Germany is victorious on all fronts. But the banners were gone now, and France had been freed. Nancy was in Paris, just as she’d planned.

“This is heaven!” Nancy said. She peered over her shoulder and coquettishly kicked up a heel. “A luncheon party tomorrow? What do you think?”

“Okay, *ma chérie, quoi que tu en dises,*” the Colonel said as she sauntered toward him.

“Whatever I want?” Nancy said. “I’ve been dying to hear those words! What about snails, chicken, and Port Salut? No more eating from tins for you. On that note, darling, you mustn’t worry

about your job prospects. I know you'll miss governing France but, goodness, we'll have so much more free time!"

Nancy was proud of the work the Colonel had done as General de Gaulle's *chef du cabinet*, but his resignation made life far more convenient. No longer would she have to wait around, or brook his maddeningly specific requests. *I've got a heavy political day. LET ME SEE—can you come at two minutes to six?*

"It's really one of the best things that could've happened to us," Nancy said. "Oh, darling, life will be pure bliss!"

Nancy leaned forward and planted a kiss on the Colonel's nose.

"*On trinque?*" he said, and lifted a glass.

Nancy raised hers to meet it.

"*Santé!*" he cheered.

Nancy rolled her eyes. "The French are so dull with their toasts. Who cares about my health? It's wretched, most of the time. Cheers to novels, I'd say! Cheers to readers the world over!"

"*À la femme auteur Nancy Mitford!*" The Colonel clinked her glass. "*Vive la littérature!*"

Thanksgiving Night

Arlington Virginia

Katie wakes up, disoriented. She doesn't know where she is, other than in the back of a car. Her phone is missing. She can't find her purse. There is a white crust on her jeans.

Cautiously, Katie wiggles into a seated position. They are on the George Washington Parkway going fifty, at least. If she's being abducted, Katie is neither nimble nor fit enough to launch herself out of the car. Her gaze darts toward the front seat, and the panic dissolves when she spots her nieces' long and glorious hair.

"Hello, friends," she says.

"Welcome back," Danielle answers. She is the older of the two sisters, by sixteen months, and the driver of the car. "Did you have a nice nap?"

"See?" says Dani's little sister, Clementine. "I told you we didn't need to have her stomach pumped."

"Aren't you a bit young to know about stomach pumping?" Katie says. At fifteen, Clem is pretty, long-lashed and freckle-nosed, but Katie still sees the snaggletoothed, Muppet-voiced kid.

"Anyway, I didn't drink that much," she adds, as her stomach roils in disagreement and the night's events flash like photographs through her mind.

Thanksgiving dinner. Three tables. The forty-some people invited to feast. Katie's mother, her stepbrothers, the cavalcade of uncles and aunts. There are strangers, too. Neighbors, maybe, or distant relatives of her stepfather, Charles.

"You didn't drink that much?" Clem says, her voice high and alarmed. "What do you consider 'a lot'?"

"It was a lot," Katie admits. She's supposed to be a role model. Well, so much for that. "Listen, girls," she says, "nothing good comes from binging alcohol. You'll just end up sick, and embarrassed, and spending way too many hours obsessing over what you did."

"Okay, thanks. Good tip."

"The regret is *not* worth the brief window of fun," Katie says.

"There was a window?" asks Dani.

"We must have missed the part where you were having fun," Clem says.

Katie catches them exchanging smirks.

"Alcohol's a depressant," Clem says. "You shouldn't drink when you're sad."

“I’m not sad!” Katie insists, though she has to wonder if this is true. “More tired, than anything. But you’re right, about it being a depressant.”

They motor along in silence, past dark office buildings and the Arlington Cemetery. Katie squeezes her eyes shut and attempts to replay how it all went to hell. Downing two flutes of Veuve Clicquot, straight from the jump, was probably the first wrong turn.

Katie tries to remember. She sees everyone taking their seats. Katie places herself between her grandmother and Jill (Jillian?), her stepbrother’s new girlfriend. An uncle poses a question. An aunt. Hackles rise. Jill or Jillian repeats a query Katie’s already sidestepped two or three times. Words are exchanged.

“Shit,” Katie mutters. “Did I yell at Chuck’s new girlfriend?”
“You did,” Dani confirms.

“It was more of a bark,” Clem says. “You also told Gam-Gam to ‘eff off.’ Though you did not say ‘eff.’”

“Oh, God,” Katie groans. Her heart drops into her gut. Funny that a person can be thirty-nine and still get in trouble with their mom. “Hey, mind slowing down? You seem to be going a tad fast.”

“Actually, we’re going the speed limit,” Dani says, and Katie can practically hear the roll of her eyes.

“Don’t stress,” Clem says. “Everyone understands that you’re going through some crap. Plus, people always mouth off during holidays. That’s what happens.”

Dani nods vigorously. “It’s the best reason to see extended family, T-B-H,” she says.

“Yeah. And Gam-Gam didn’t even seem all that upset.”

“I’m sure she didn’t *seem* that way, no,” Katie says.

“Everyone was way more freaked out about the crying,” adds Clem.

“I cried?” Katie touches her puffy, salty eyes. “There were tears?”

“Wow, you *are* drunker than you seem.”

Clem smacks her sister’s arm and, in a hiss, tells her to be nice.

“It was just a surprise,” Clem says, and glances over her shoulder. “I mean, Gam-Gam always thinks you use your, quote, unquote, *creative license* to make things seem more dramatic than they really are.”

“Your grandmother only says that when the story paints her in an unflattering light.”

“But you don’t seem that dramatic,” Clem continues. “Far as we can tell, you’re happy, like, ninety percent of the time.”

“Bubbly,” Dani offers.

Katie narrows her eyes. “*Bubbly*. What a horrible word. It’s just a way to tell someone they’re trivial, unimportant.”

“Paranoid,” Dani sings.

“You two have never been called ‘bubbly,’ am I right?” Katie says. “And do you know why?”

“Because we’re shy?” Dani guesses.

“We have anxiety?” Clem tries.

“Why does all of Gen Z think they have anxiety?”

“Our formative years got a little messed up,” Dani says. “As you might recall, I didn’t see anyone other than Clem and my parents for almost a year.”

“You guys also destroyed the environment,” Clem says. “And the economy. Now we’re supposed to fix it. Some might find that anxiety-inducing. God, I can’t wait until normal people are old enough to vote.”

“Yeah,” Dani agrees. “Imagine being born in the 1900s.”

“Fine,” Katie says. “You might have anxiety—on some level—but the reason you’ve never been called bubbly is because you’re both five foot nine.”

“Um, okay,” Dani says, and her eyes flick toward her sister.

“I’m actually five-ten,” says Clem.

Katie sighs and swallows, hard. The whooshing landscape makes her sick and she sinks farther into her seat. With each passing minute, and each passing mile, the night becomes clearer, the knot of regret heavier inside. They've seen her now—each and every one of them. Yes, Katie told her mom to “fuck off,” but she's also done something far worse. Katie Cabot told the truth.

Earlier That Night...

McLean, Virginia

“At last! You've arrived!” her mother says. “Better late than never.”

Family and friends have gathered for Thanksgiving at Little Falls Farm, Katie's mom and stepfather's wearying estate.

“It's so good to see you, darling! You look tired, though. Too thin.”

Little Falls Farm isn't little. It's also not a farm but a Palladian brick monstrosity whose only “fall” is part of the zero-edge pool. On the plus side, it overlooks the Potomac, in the toniest part of the already tony McLean, and sits doors from Jackie Kennedy's childhood home.

“That woman was a saint,” says Judy Cabot-Swift whenever it comes up.

Judy and Charles's guests are spread across three tables in the so-called public room, a former ballroom now outfitted with lacquered reddish-brown furniture and blue monkey wallpaper made by Hermès. Everyone is happy to be part of a large group, and the alcohol flows liberally.

Upon arriving, Katie flits from person to person, stopping no longer than the ninety seconds it takes to say hello. She is lively, and buoyant, and using every inch of her middling charm. No one asks about Armie because Katie prepared her mother weeks ago.

“He's going to visit his grandmother,” Katie warned.

“WHAT!?” Judy said, eyes wide with hurt. “Doesn't he want to spend Thanksgiving with family?”

“He does and that's why he's going to Puerto Rico.”

Judy accepted the news, eventually, but the lie solved only one problem and Katie can't exactly dispatch her career to a US territory. About this, she should've come up with something, and now the questions are flying at her, the very ones she'd known to expect.

“When's your next book coming out?” someone asks.

Katie smiles meekly, lifts her shoulders, and pours herself more champagne.

“What are you working on?”

Another shrug. More *Veuve Clicquot*. Suddenly, Katie's missing Armie in more ways than one. He's a good barrier, always quick to redirect.

“We can't wait to read what's next!”

When cocktail hour ends and dinner is served, Katie seats herself between her grandmother and her stepbrother's new girlfriend, whose name, she thinks, might be Jill. Nanny Carol is hunched over her phone, too concerned with fantasy football to worry about Katie's career prospects.

“You must have something coming out soon! It's been so long!”

Like a batter with pitches she doesn't like, Katie fouls off questions, left and right. She's skilled at this by now. After all, she's a *bestselling* author—or so her book jackets proclaim—who's not had a book out in three years.

“Come on, Katie! Spill the news!”

This, she understands, is done out of love, and the mistaken belief that “novelist” is more interesting than other jobs. No one asks her brother-in-law about being a patent attorney, that's for damned sure.

“You should do a sequel to *A Paris Affair*!”

“Oh, yes!” someone else agrees. “*A Paris Affair* is one of my all-time favorites! My book club is reading it. Again.”

By the time someone presents the platter of turkey, Katie's polished off the champagne Charles left on the table.

"I'm sorry," says Chuck's lady friend. "Did you say you're a writer?"

"I've written a few things, yes," Katie mumbles. "I love your earrings. Are they real turquoise?"

Charles sidles up, just in time, a freshly opened bottle of wine in each hand. After he describes the white as "shy in aroma," and the red as earthy, or beefy, or some such, Katie gestures toward the Pinot Gris and asks for a heavy pour.

"I think they're real," Jill(ian) says, touching her earrings. "I'm an aspiring writer myself."

Great, Katie thinks, though it's possible she's said this out loud.

Katie angles herself toward Nanny Carol. "Rodgers doing all right by you today, NC?" she asks, though she doesn't really want to discuss fantasy football, especially not with her grandmother, who's been nothing but a hassle since joining her league. Incessant smack talk has turned Nanny Carol into the least popular member of the league, made worse by her first place standing and team name. No one appreciates seeing "Pussies" mocking them from atop the leaderboard, and Katie is constantly reminding them the woman is ninety-five years old. She lost her husband twenty years ago, and her only son—Katie's father—fifteen years before that. All she's left with is her daughter-in-law's family and the strangers in a fantasy football group text.

"Rodgers is *not* doing right by me," Nanny Carol gripes, jabbing at her phone. "He's not doing a G-D thing."

"You're such a screenager," Clem jokes.

"Yeah, Nanny Carol, put away the phone," Dani says.

"If I lose to Sacks in the City this week," she goes on, "then y'all can cut the lights and pull up the hearse. It'll be *goodbye, sweet world!* Over and out."

"Nanny Carol!"

"Glad to know you're not taking it too seriously," Katie says.

"I'm sorry," says Jill(ian). "I'm not trying to be a pest, but I have *so* many questions! Is there some reason you don't want to talk to me?"

Katie closes her eyes, awash in regret. What does this new girlfriend need with some failed writer giving her a hard time? The poor thing has enough problems if she's dating Chuck Swift.

"I'm sorry," Katie says. She straightens her back and throws on a smile. "I'm distracted tonight. Long week. You're Jillian, right? Or is it Jill?"

"Gillian with a hard *G*. Like *go*."

"Nice to meet you. Would you like bread?" Katie drops a sourdough roll onto Gillian's plate.

"I apologize if you thought I was interrupting," Gillian says, "but I'd love to pick your brain. You're a novelist?"

Katie bobs her head. "That's what they say."

"What do you write, specifically?"

"Oh, fiction. This and that. Does anyone need more wine? I'll find Charles!"

"He left six bottles on the table," Katie's sister, Britt, says.

Gillian asks what *kind* of fiction. Katie wipes her brow and pushes up her sleeves.

"Historical?" Gillian presses. "Contemporary? Domestic suspense? I'm a huge reader! All genres, really. I just enjoy a good story."

"She writes historical *and* contemporary fiction," Britt pipes in, and Katie cuts her with a glare. "What? It's true."

"Katharine, what is going on with you?" says a voice.

Half the table jumps. It's the inestimable Judy Cabot-Swift, appearing out of nowhere in her one-size-too-small zebra-print dress. "Believe me, Gillian," she says. "It's *not* just you. Katharine likes to be difficult these days, so I'll tell you myself. My daughter has written *three* novels, one of which was a *New York Times* bestseller."

Gillian's eyes swell. "That's incredible! Congratulations!"

Katie murmurs a thanks and takes several gulps of wine. She pours more and braces for what will come next.

“Three books,” Gillian says, and nods approvingly. “Anything I’ve heard of?”

Katie slams both hands on the table. “There it is!” she says, hot with rage, despite having heard this question a thousand times, at least. “Listen, Gillian with a hard *G*, I just learned your name. How the hell would I know what books you’ve read?” For the slimmest of moments, Katie feels a lightness from having spoken the words she’s repeated so many times in her head.

“For Pete’s sake, Katharine,” Judy says with a huff. “Gillian, I’m sure you’ve heard of Katie’s first book. *A Paris Affair*. It’s very famous.”

“I’m sorry,” Gillian says with a small wince. “It’s not ringing any bells, but I’ve had quite a bit of wine!”

“You’re not the only one,” Dani stage-whispers to Clem.

Gillian reaches for her phone. “Maybe if I saw the cover. I’ll look right now! Katie... what’s your last name?” she says, and slides her thumb across the screen.

“Cabot,” Judy says. “*Katharine Cabot*. Katharine with two A’s, like Katharine Graham.”

Gillian glances up. “Do you mean Hepburn?”

“Honey,” Judy says. “You live in Washington and you don’t know who Katharine Graham is? You’re not that young.”

“Mom!” Britt yelps. “Jesus, what is wrong with everyone?”

“I’m sorry.” Judy shakes her head and flails around her hands. “I forget that the *Post* hasn’t been an integral part of everyone’s lives. Katharine Graham was its publisher and chairwoman. She presided over it during Watergate. My late husband, Dan, insisted we name Katie after her.” At mention of her son, Nanny Carol lifts her head. “He was a reporter at the *Post* during Graham’s heyday,” Judy continues. “Part of it, anyhow. Her heyday was pretty long. Longer than his life, in any case.”

“Oh. Neat.” Gillian looks down at her phone, face flushed. “Here it is! I found it! Four stars. That’s pretty good.”

Katie snorts. If Gillian has a drop of intellectual curiosity, she’s filtering for one-star reviews.

Absolutely hated the protagonist.

Pretty sure English is not the author’s first language.

This is not high literature.

The funny thing is Katie doesn’t necessarily disagree.

“I’m downloading it right now!” Gillian sings. “I’ll crack it open the *minute* I get home.”

“You will love it,” Judy says, and arches over the table. “But I must warn you...”

Katie stiffens, watching as the candlelight beats against her mother’s skin, highlighting in unflattering detail the sixty-nine years she’s lived.

“The book starts slowly. *Very* slowly. Everyone agrees.”

“Really, Judy?” Katie says. “Do they? Everyone?”

“Ha!” Gillian chirps. “Who’s to judge what’s slow? Most of my favorite novels start that way! I don’t need the proverbial gun in the first act. I prefer easing into books!”

For a second, Katie softens. God bless the poor girl; she’s working like the devil tonight. “You’re doing a great job,” Katie says, and gently squeezes Gillian’s hand. “Good on you. You’ll need that relentless cheer if you’re going to make it work with Chuck.”

“Hey!” Chuck says, followed by Britt, speaking of people who are working hard that night.

“You haven’t told us?” shouts a voice from two tables away. “When is your fourth book coming out?”

Katie’s eyes skip around the room and she sees that, for the first time in the history of Thanksgivings, they’re all part of the same conversation.

“You must have something in the works,” a cousin says, “and it must be big, since you’re so tight-lipped about it.”

“That’s truly not the case.”

“Give us the scoop!”

Voices bubble, frothing to the surface in a collection of *what* and *where* and *when*. Tears prickle Katie's eyes. Someone says that his dentist has a compelling background, and she should write about him. Judy makes another mention of the book's "slow start" and Katie hops to her feet.

"Please, Mom!" she cries. "Stop! Just stop asking about my damned books! I didn't have one out this year, as everyone's rightly pointed out, and it's already too late for next year, and probably the year after that. I've tried a dozen things, and they've all failed. I think I'm done with this novel-writing experiment."

Though the admission is bleak, Katie has no compulsion to take it back, and why should she? It's the truth.

"Write a sequel to *A Paris Affair*," Judy says, predictably.

"Thank you, Mother, for that innovative idea," Katie says. "It's a miracle no one's thought of it before."

In fact, Katie would *love* to write a sequel. It'd solve ten problems, but that skill belongs to a type of writer that Katie is not.

"What will you do for money?" someone wants to know.

"Go back to my day job, I guess," Katie says.

"Grant writing?" Britt says. "That's so...dull."

"I liked it, and my goal was always to work my way up at a large not-for-profit. We're in the right city for it. I just got sidetracked by other things."

"Other things," Judy grouses. "Like your *real* dream. You loved your old job, and it paid well, yet you willingly gave it up because writing is your destiny. Honestly, Katie! What would your father think?"

"I have no idea because I last saw him when I was four." Katie exhales. "I do need to figure out some way to make money, unless you want me moving in here."

"You're always welcome!" Charles trills.

"No. She's not," Judy says. "This is hogwash. You *need* to be a writer, and Armie is perfectly capable of supporting you both. I doubt he'd even let you send out a résumé, much less buy a pair of nylons."

"Let me?"

"Nylons?" says Britt.

"I'm not sure what Armie has to do with this," Katie says as her nose tightens, and a hiccup builds in her throat. "This is my problem, not his."

"Darling, now that you're engaged, you have to agree on major life decisions. You're in this together, and for the rest of your lives. I know you like to play the lone wolf—"

"Do I?"

"Listen to your old mother. I've had two very successful marriages. I understand relationships." Without warning, Judy produces a phone, seemingly out of thin air. "That's it," she says. "I'm calling Armie. He's the only person who can talk sense into you."

Judy puts the phone to her ear and Katie lunges up onto the table. As she stretches toward her mom, something clatters. Two people scream.

"Watch out!" a guest yells.

"Oh my God!"

"The candles!"

Katie freezes, one knee in the mashed potatoes. Though she's saved herself, and the food, from a flaming candelabra, Katie's not getting away clean, not after toppling gravy across the gold-hued tablecloth. Meanwhile, the guests gawk, unblinking. They'll be telling this story for years.

"Sorry," Katie says, and slumps back into her chair. She deftly scoops the potatoes with a napkin, as if picking up dog poop.

"I'm calling Armie," Judy threatens again. "I'm calling him right now."

"You can't," Katie whispers. "We broke up."

She holds her breath, expecting a sad and respectful hush to fall across the room. Instead everyone looks at each other blankly, waiting for someone to speak. Finally, Britt tosses her hands into the sky.

“Uggggghhhh,” she moans. “Not again. Don’t worry, people, it’ll be better by tomorrow. Can we eat now? What are we going to do about the potatoes?”

“It’s different this time,” Katie says. “The engagement is off. Armie moved out.”

“He’ll be back.”

“I bought out his portion of the house.”

This gets Britt’s attention. “With *what*?” she says.

“You’re wearing your ring,” Judy notes.

Katie glances down. “You’re right. All part of the costume, apparently. Ha!”

“This is hardly something to laugh about,” Judy says.

“It’s *fine*, Mom. All very amicable. We still talk.”

“You’ll be back together by Christmas,” Britt says. “Anyone care to make a wager?”

Nanny Carol’s hand flies into the air.

“He has a new girlfriend,” Katie says. “I think they’re living together. She seems very nice!”

“They’re living together?” Britt says. “Jesus, when did this so-called breakup happen?”

“Six months ago.”

“My, my.” Judy makes a sour lemon face. “That was fast.”

“Don’t get any ideas, Mom. She just moved here from Chicago, and they didn’t even meet until after the fact. For the record, I think it’s great. Everyone needs to get on with their lives.”

“Good God, Katharine,” Judy clucks. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t *do* anything,” Katie says as tears trickle down her cheeks. “And neither did he. Sometimes things just run their course.”

“Damned long course,” Britt says.

“You must’ve done something,” Judy insists. “Armie is the nicest guy in the world! Don’t get mad at *me*, sweetheart. You have to admit that you can be dramatic and Armie’s always so levelheaded. I can only assume you had some sort of fit, and he was good and fed up.”

“That’s it.” Katie stands again, and tosses her napkin onto the chair. “I’m leaving. I can’t do this right now. Thanks, Judy, you really know how to make a gal feel swell.”

“Just speaking my truth.”

“Always,” Katie seethes, winded by how quickly she’s switched from sadness to burning red heat. “Perhaps a touch less truth-speaking in the future. What do you think?”

“Here we go.” Judy rolls her eyes. “Histrionics.”

“With all due respect, Mother, I’d appreciate it if you’d...”

“Be quiet? I’m sorry, I can’t.”

“Fine. If you can’t be quiet, maybe you should go ahead and *fuck off*.”