

**THE
THREE
LIVES OF
CATE KAY**

KATE FAGAN

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FOREWORD

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About a year ago, a FedEx package landed on the porch of my home in Charleston, South Carolina. I don't get much personal mail, a consequence of multiple name changes, I guess.

A saga, actually—my name. I've had too many. I was born Anne Marie Callahan, but growing up, my best friend called me Annie. A few years later, I legally changed it to Cass Ford. Then, I published under the pseudonym Cate Kay. I wish it was simpler. Trust me, I do. Creating a new life (or lives) takes a devastating amount of energy, of imagination. And I've missed hearing my real name.

So, this FedEx box was an anomaly in my world. I glanced at the return address: Mason, Cowell & Collins, the law firm of Sidney Collins. Not only was Sidney the architect of my literary empire—manager of all things Cate Kay—she was also my ex-girlfriend.

I carefully opened the box. Inside was a stack of blue binders and sitting atop was a handwritten note from Sidney. She explained that by sending over all this paperwork, she was relinquishing control of my Cate Kay business dealings and righting past wrongs. (One of them, anyway.) What she couldn't have known was that this package, and her letter, set in motion a series of events that would forever alter the trajectory of my life.

She signed it: *I'll think of you—fondly. xo, Sidney.*

I was glad her tone was conciliatory. Sidney is not someone I want as an enemy. Or, really, as a friend. No relationship at all was my preference. We hadn't spoken in seven years—not since the long-ago night

when I'd frantically taken a red-eye from Los Angeles to the apartment the two of us shared in Harlem.

But let's not get started down that path; let's stick with the binders.

Before I closed the last one, I caught sight of a second handwritten note on crisp stationery. The letterhead belonged to my literary agent, Melody Huber. The note was addressed to me, dated four years prior. I read Melody's words with great curiosity. She gently invited me to come out of hiding. Her idea: a memoir. She'd suggested this previously, no doubt, but the message never reached me. The success was mine, she wrote, even if the name was not.

I looked at her words. A memoir? I liked the thought of it—of freeing myself. But I knew it couldn't happen. A book would require me to confront my past, which I was committed to not doing. Maybe someday I would feel differently, but not anytime soon.

Then, a week later, everything changed. And Melody's words had stayed with me:

You could tell everyone the full story, every little detail.

My mind kept catching on that last clause: *every little detail*. I remembered so many. They flooded my mind, a kaleidoscope—of sunbeams, of brown hair tossed, us blowing into our hands for warmth. Maybe Melody was right? Maybe it was time. I called her office and for the first time ever, heard the voice of the woman who had plucked my manuscript from the slush pile all those years ago.

I told Melody on that first phone call that I couldn't be the only one to tell this story. I'd lived inside it for far too long. Better to throw open the windows and tell it from every angle, for better or worse. Within these pages, you will read about what happened from my perspective, as well as from those whose stories collided with my own.

And that is how we got here, to this book you now hold in your hands. My memoir, but more than that—it is a monument. Carved from a mass of bad decisions and selfishness and, it pains me to admit, cruelty. And yet, I want you to love me anyway. No use pretending otherwise. I'm done hiding who I am. My mind's long been

divided on the question of my goodness—and now here you are, the deciding vote.

I ask only that you read with an open heart.

Annie Callahan
aka Cass Ford
aka Cate Kay

CHAPTER 1

ANNE MARIE CALLAHAN

1991

Bolton Landing

My earliest memory is wearing my favorite shirt for an entire month of summer without my mom noticing. I was going into fourth grade and my mom figured since I was now in the public school system, she could leave me alone if needed. There was even a socially acceptable term for it—a latchkey kid.

We lived in an apartment building that was once a motel. The kitchen consisted of a toaster oven and microwave, and Mom worked cleaning rooms at the Chateau, this fancy resort on the shore of Lake George. This was upstate New York, very upstate, with a complicated mix of blue-collar locals and vacationing urban elite. My mom and I, as you've probably guessed, were the former.

My mom had lots of formers. Former jobs, former friends, former boyfriends, a former husband, who was also my dad but had never been anything of the kind. Apparently, he'd wanted to make her an honest woman (eye roll), but then a few months after I was born decided he didn't want honesty *that bad*.

The shirt, my *Tom and Jerry* shirt, was white with a cartoon graphic on the front. I loved it. It fit so perfectly that I forgot I was wearing it, which was all I wanted from clothing—for it to disappear. When I wore other shirts, I was always tugging and rearranging, but not this one. Plus, I was wearing it the day this story started—the day I caught the sickness of wanting to eat the world.

It was a summer day, so hot, humid. I was bored, and movement combated the languor of those endless afternoons, so I flipped the kickstand on my bike and pedaled to town, which was overrun with vacationers, as I knew it would be. Even as a kid I could spot city money. It was the way they held their car keys, like they were a sexy prop, and how they tenderly touched the edges of their sunglasses. I'd sit on the bench outside the ice cream shop and watch.

That afternoon, the sky was mostly a crisp blue with an occasional fluffy white cloud. Like I imagine wallpaper of the sky would look. I was sitting on my bench when I looked up into an aqua sea. I visualized myself piercing through the blue, then through the ozone into outer space, then I imagined piercing outer space into—what? The thought triggered a moment of pure derealization—that's what I might call it now—and my body filled with this odd sensation of *the universe is all there is; there's nothing outside the universe*. This wasn't a feeling of atheism; it wasn't about heaven; the closest descriptor is uncanny, if uncanny was on steroids.

I sat on the bench, unmoving, until the feeling disappeared, which didn't take long. It's not a feeling you can hold on to, nor one you can forget. When I rode home that afternoon, it felt like I'd swallowed a black hole and it demanded filling, somehow.

My mom came home late that night. I was in my creaky twin bed beneath the window, wide awake. I'd been listening intently for her while watching the raindrops on the glass; the beads of liquid kept merging before I was prepared to lose them.

I heard shoes on gravel, always the first sound of my mom's return. Then, a few seconds later, her key in the door, a slow turn because she thought I was already asleep—that is, if she was thinking about me at all, which she probably wasn't. As she was hanging her bag, I said, *hi mom*. I wanted her to know I was still awake. Maybe she'd consider feeling badly that I'd been alone for so long in the dark, desperately needing a hug.

"Oh, hi, honey," she said sweetly, which is how I knew she'd stopped

for many glasses of white wine at the bar on her walk home. Her keys hit the counter, then she came to my bed and kneeled, wrapping her arms around me. I melted, forgetting for a moment the untethering of the day, swimming happily in her warmth. She was beautiful. Light brown hair and a long neck, high cheekbones, her sly smile. People said we looked alike, which thrilled and terrified me; I watched how men looked at her—like they were hungry.

When she hugged me, I forgot everything else and briefly lived in an alternate universe: safety, love, time—so much time together. But most of all, I enjoyed the feeling that I mattered to her, that she'd choose me before anything else.

Abruptly, she pulled back, but kept her hands on my shoulders. She narrowed her eyes, sniffed. "How many days in a row have you been wearing this shirt?" She began aggressively and clumsily tugging the shirt over my head. The warm moment I'd been living inside imploded.

Most of my childhood memories are hazy—the consistency of dreams. Except this one. This one stuns me with its vividness: the colors of my *Tom and Jerry* shirt; the wallpaper sky before the universe rewired my brain; the presence, and sudden withdrawing, of my mom's love. In the many years since, I've thought of this memory as a blueprint that might help explain the life I constructed afterward.

"Goddamnit, Anne Marie," my mom growled. I can still hear the slight slurring as she pulled off my favorite shirt. The fabric left my brown hair frizzy with static.

I never wore the shirt again.

Anne Marie. She always said it like a scold, and I could never hear it as anything else. Not once did it sound like a warm breeze, or an open door—always, it was clipped and fierce as if warning me against another wrong step. I don't know how the name sounds to others who share it; hopefully they wear it well. On me it was a penance, and growing up, I was always thinking of how to rid myself of it.

The first opportunity came later that summer when I noticed a flyer for a free theater camp run by the high school. I told myself it was a sign from the universe. And I was right. That's where I met my best friend,

Amanda, which taught me to always be on the lookout for signs, both tangible and metaphorical.

By high school, I had spent happy months as Scarlett (*Gone with the Wind*), as Rosalind (*As You Like It*), as Blanche (*A Streetcar Named Desire*), but my first gentle step toward a different life came when Amanda started calling me Annie.

CHAPTER 2

ANNIE

1991

Bolton Landing

What you need to know about me and Amanda is that no friendship like ours had ever existed. We basically redefined the medium, elevated it to an art form. Seriously, that's how we felt. We were like all young people in that way, in full belief that we were revolutionizing the human experience. Those older models, all failures; let us show you how real living is done!

I'll set the stage: 1991. Summer in upstate New York. Small-town theater camp, opening morning. I was standing in line for registration. The girl in front of me was wearing jelly sandals. I complimented them. She made eye contact and said, "Thank you for noticing," which awed me—the self-possession of it. We were nine years old.

Amanda Kent, ladies and gentlemen.

Turns out, Amanda's home life was only slightly better than mine. Her mom had died giving birth to her little sister, Kerri, and her dad spent all his waking hours beneath the hoods of cars, running a repair shop in the next town over. Amanda and her dad, they got along fine, but he was more like an uncle than a dad, and so she was especially close with Kerri, who was four years younger. The two were different in almost every way: Kerri had light hair and loved playing with dolls; Amanda was essentially the person Van Morrison is singing about in "Brown Eyed Girl."

One other thing to know about Amanda: She loved clothes. When we were young, she'd want me to come over and play dress-up. Her dad

had kept all her mom's old things in a box in the hallway closet—clothes and makeup and other stuff grown-up women cared about, like pantyhose, which seemed to me like a form of medieval torture. Dress-up wasn't really my thing. But I'd bring a book and sit cross-legged on the carpet at the foot of Amanda's bed. She never minded my indifference; she really just wanted an audience.

She would disappear into the hallway bathroom and I'd read a few pages. Then she'd present herself in the doorway, do a quick spin and a catwalk, strutting in and out of the room. Nothing subtle in her performance. Clothes made sense on her, which one afternoon she explained was the entire point of fashion.

It was seventh grade, I think. I had just reacted to one of her combinations. She'd taken these fake pearls that had seemed so First Lady-ish at Goodwill and paired them with a cheap black leather jacket. The high-low of it was really working.

"That just looks right on you," is what I said.

"Good." She flopped onto the bed. "I was reading the latest issue of *Cosmo* and there was this part about how to understand your style and the advice was basically like 'make your outside match how you feel on the inside' and that makes so much sense to me."

Matching your outside to your insides seemed like no small feat, so I said, "Isn't that, like, asking a lot of clothes?"

Amanda was still flat on the bed; she made a small *huh?* sound. I closed my eyes and tried examining my insides, but could only feel my brain, its whirlpool of thoughts. What type of clothes matched that?

I tried again: "I mean, does anyone even know how they feel on the inside?"

A second later, a pillow came crashing into my head.

"Come on, let's go to Goodwill," she said. "We'll try to match *your* insides to your outside."

She was off the bed already, grabbing for my hand, and her hand was never something I turned down.

After wandering the thrift store for a few minutes, something caught Amanda's eye, and she beelined to the front counter. Behind the cashier were these bags mounted to the wall. Mostly purses. And purses, if you hadn't already guessed, didn't interest me. But then Amanda was pointing at this canvas tote bag with the words "THE STRAND NYC: 18 MILES OF BOOKS" printed on the front.

"Can we see that one?" she said.

"We get a bunch every summer," the woman said, handing it over. "People from the city bring them up—use 'em to lug stuff up here, then we see 'em in here before they go back."

"Oh yes, this is so you," Amanda was saying, holding it up to my shoulder.

"Why's it me?"

"You're all quick-witted and *rawr*"—here she snarled like a big cat—"like a New Yorker . . . plus you love books!" She shrugged and added, "Makes perfect sense."

But when she went to hand it to me, I stepped back. "Nah, it's not quite right," I said, even though it was right. She was absolutely right. But I didn't have any money right then—not even the dollar the bag cost.

She looked at me for a moment and said, "Well, okay, I'll buy it." She knew every layer of what had just happened, of why I'd said no. She knew, in that split second, that if she said "Is it about money?" that my next two thoughts would be "I wish my mom remembered my allowance," followed closely by "Why doesn't she love me more?" And that was not a healthy thought train.

Amanda had four quarters in her pocket. She fished out the coins and dropped them into the woman's cupped hand.

On the way out, I walked ahead, bowing my head and digging my hands into my pockets. Amanda caught up and draped her arm around my shoulders. She held the bag out to me, like, *obviously I got this for you*, but I told her it was okay, that she should keep it. She squinted, trying again to read my fine print.

"Okay, Annie-baby," she said after a moment, slinging the bag over

her other shoulder. “But know that every time I use it, I’m gonna think of you.”

She used that Strand bag so much. Even though the bag was totally Amanda’s, I always thought of it as mine. So years later, when I found it in the back of my car, it almost felt right for me to have it.

I have it still.

CHAPTER 3

ANNIE

1995

Bolton Landing

Amanda was seventy-three days older than me. She would hit milestones first, report back from the front lines. I was a professional overthinker, so it was a relief to have her beta-test life, work out the kinks before I arrived. For example, I might have thought turning thirteen was a big deal. We were so excited for that second syllable!

“You don’t feel different at all?” I asked. We were in her garage looking for a nerf football (don’t ask). She paused, closed her eyes. An internal scan was being performed. A few seconds later, eyes still closed, she said, “No, not at all. Feels like twelve years old plus a day.”

I grabbed her shoulders and groaned, “We’re going to be kids forever!”

“For-ev-er,” she said like a robot.

Even then we were impatient for the freedoms of adulthood. Then finally, finally, Amanda’s sixteenth birthday arrived. We scheduled her driver’s test for that same day—no time to waste. It was early spring, the first warm day, and the testing location was down the street from her dad’s garage, so he drove us over, kissed her on the forehead and wished her luck, then walked back to work. Once he was gone, she turned to me and made her eyes big, jingled the keys like *it’s happening*.

I said, “Oh my god Amanda, nail this thing, okay?”

“Hand-eye coordination, spatial relationships—c’mon, it’s a done deal,” she said. She was a confident person. But like all confident people, it was only about 87 percent authentic. Doubt just lived on the

outskirts of town instead of in the center, like it does for everyone else.

“Amanda Kent?” called a man, clipboard in hand, walking toward us. I mouthed *Good luck* and jogged across the street to wait, impatiently. I hopped onto the low-slung cobblestone wall in front of the Methodist church, my feet skimming the ground. In my pocket were watermelon Jolly Ranchers—the only flavor worth eating—and I popped one in my mouth. I loved using the sticky candy as cement between my upper and lower molars. Sometimes it really felt like my teeth were glued together.

I was still doing this an hour later when Amanda, behind the wheel of her dad’s truck, reappeared up the road with the test supervisor in the passenger seat. That faded blue truck. I’d always loved the sight of it, a dopamine release—Amanda, close.

I watched as she came more into focus, then finally I could see her clearly through the windshield. She grinned and waved, and mentally I was telling her to *Please stop*; what if he flunked her now for carelessness?

But he didn’t. She parked the car, shook the man’s hand—this felt *very* adult—and strode across the street, perched next to me on the wall. She tossed the keys a few inches in the air, caught them. She was really loving this moment. A performance, but also not, which was the best kind.

“Let’s go to Tommy’s party tonight,” she said, eyebrows raised. Amanda knew that Tommy—aka Mr. High School Quarterback—was into her, but she said it was my imagination. I wasn’t a fan.

Going to a party was not exactly what I wanted to do with our new freedom, but Amanda’s excitement was contagious. I touched my pocket, felt the bulky outline of the mixtape I’d made as a congratulations present. I’d titled it “Merry Go Freedom.” I’d even made cover art from construction paper. My plan for the night had been us going for a drive, listening through together. I had wanted to watch her reaction to each song. But I guess we could do that tomorrow.

“I’m in,” I said, dropping off the wall and crossing the street. “Chauffeur me.”

She jogged to catch up, called out, “Get ready at my place?” I didn’t answer. The question was rhetorical: her closet was way better.

We spent most of the party on the deck at Tommy's house, in and out of groups, laughing and talking. Amanda was drinking; I was taking imaginary sips from an empty red Solo cup, really practicing my stagecraft with each movement. At the end of the night, while watching Amanda take shot number I don't know what, I suddenly realized we didn't have a ride home, that she was our driver. I was mad at myself; logistics were usually my specialty. I walked into the kitchen and pulled her into the hallway.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi." She hugged me. "It's a good day."

"It has definitely been a good day," I said. "But we have a problem."

"Rut-ro," she said, frowning. On the scale of one to wasted, she appeared to be about a seven. Right then, Tommy walked past, grabbing my arm and pulling me away, spinning me back into the kitchen where suddenly I was facing a group of classmates. "Truth or dare?" one of them asked, and since I liked an audience, I was instantly invested. "Dare," I said, moving with the crowd back to the deck. I was out there for a few minutes—the dare was embarrassingly lame—before I remembered Amanda and leaned back inside to catch her eye. She was gone.

I was chill about it at first. But when she wasn't in the first-floor bathroom or the living room, a sense of urgency arrived. I darted upstairs, opening each closed door and finding empty, dark rooms, until there was only one left at the end of the hall. I pushed through, stumbling into a bathroom, and there was Amanda, sitting with her back against the tub. She looked at me, shrugged, then leaned over and vomited into the toilet.

I was relieved, actually. I'd expected to find her with Tommy.

"Sorry," she said, spitting into the bowl. "Not very attractive."

I knelt, collected her hair into a ponytail.

"That last shot Tommy gave me," she slurred. "Not a good idea."

"Let's get out of here," I said. "Can you walk?"

She nodded. I gripped her hand as we walked down the stairs and

out to the car. I helped her into the passenger seat, then reached across and pulled on her seat belt.

I climbed behind the wheel and grabbed it with both hands, steadied myself. “Okay, yeah, I can do this,” I said aloud, looking over at Amanda: her eyes were closed, her head against the doorframe. Maybe she was more of an eight or nine on the wasted scale.

I’d hidden the mixtape in the console for the drive home, and now I retrieved it, popping the cassette into the deck and cranking the volume.

Tommy lived on the opposite side of the lake, so it was a long ride home. I happily discovered that driving wasn’t that difficult. Her dad’s truck was an automatic, thankfully. I stayed between the lines and went the speed limit and braked fully for every stop sign. The night was unusually bright, with yellow moonlight bouncing off the lake, and I felt like I’d springboarded into adulthood.

And with adult feelings too, courtesy of my mixtape. For the third song, which is obviously where the best track on a mixtape goes, I’d chosen the newest from Sarah McLachlan. The song churned up everything I felt about Amanda. An ethereal blend of desire and devotion, of joy and melancholy. A nearly lethal cocktail.

When the opening chords began, I reached for the tape deck, almost hit fast-forward—to save me from myself. But I didn’t. Instead, I turned up the volume even higher, let the music own me. Let it build and build and build, a symphony of waves crashing inside me, as our goddess Sarah reached the verse that ended with letting yourself believe.

The crazy thing was, I wasn’t sure if the song was me speaking to Amanda, or the other way around. Or maybe some combination of both. When the song ended, it felt like the truck was still radiating with its afterglow. It was in this moment that Amanda, face still pressed against the window, mumbled something.

My eyes darted over. “What was that?” I asked. But she just shook her head and burrowed deeper into the door. I reached over and let my fingers rest on her knuckles, left them there for a full count of one, then quickly brought my hand back to the wheel.

For the next seventy-two days, we borrowed that blue truck when-

ever we could. Then, on the night of my sixteenth birthday, tipsy and without a present, my mom offered up the keys to the 1991 red Honda Civic that my older cousin had rebuilt and left parked at our apartment complex. He'd taken the train down to the city after high school and hadn't come back, not for the car or anything else.

We nicknamed our new wheels "Brando" because it had seen better days. Fresh off the lot, it must have been a sexy little thing, but its luster had faded: chipped paint, dented bumper, worn leather. And not an original flaw, but certainly our favorite: a cracked rearview mirror, as if the gods were tired of Amanda seeing her own beauty. Or the cars behind her.

It happened junior year, one brutally cold morning. We dashed out to the car during free period for a quick spin, huddling inside and blowing on our hands. Brando was covered in the thinnest dusting of snow, which I enjoyed—made me feel like we were in a cave.

Amanda loved driving, so she was behind the wheel, and she tried the engine, but it didn't turn over. A few second later, she tried again and the car roared to life—she immediately cranked the heat. I was reaching for the vents, ready for their warm air. Then I heard her shriek and my head whipped to the left: she was gripping the rearview mirror, her body lifted slightly to see herself more clearly in the shattered reflection.

"What—the—fuck," she said, drawing out each word.

I gave her an *um, please explain* look and in response, she slowly turned the mirror toward me, pointing at the crack. A little yelp escaped my lips. A cracked mirror! It felt dramatic and purposeful, like in a movie when someone breaks into a house but takes nothing except a single piece of art.

"Well, the gods have spoken," I said.

"Did someone do this?" She was squinting and looking around, even though the windows were covered with snow.

"Yeah, it was probably Vanessa," I said. "You know how jealous she is of you and how skilled she is at intimate yet profound gestures . . ." I shot her one of my favorite looks—one raised eyebrow, a mock glower—before continuing, "Amanda, *someone* didn't do this, *something* did—the cold."

“Annie-baby,” she said, her tone pseudo-serious, “you need to stop reading so many books. All that knowledge is making you too smart for me.”

“Never.” I stretched the word out for a couple extra beats because I wanted to bathe in her compliment. I’d had this idea I was special, destined for big things, and yet a voice in the back of my mind would every so often terrorize me, sending a thought burning through my psyche: *It’s all a lie; you’re nobody and you’ll always be nobody.* Amanda’s compliments helped smother those wildfires.

“Just the cold is what you’re saying—for sure?”

“Just the cold,” I said. “Although, I’m really in love with the idea of someone breaking into Brando and doing no other damage than smashing the rearview mirror to deliver the ultimate mindfuck.”

She grinned. “Kinda genius really.”

“I’d want to be friends with them,” I said.

“But not, like, too good of friends?” Amanda frowned.

“Oh, no, no, no, just casual friends—like maybe every other week for pizza kind of friends?” I liked this repartee of ours, especially when it blended with an acknowledgment of the depth of our relationship. I didn’t need other friends like I needed her.

“Or even every third week?”

“Monthly, let’s say.” I winked at her, hoping the wink was cool and not cheesy, and it must have been because her hand left the mirror and rested on my cheek for a moment. The warmth of it was nice, and we looked at each other for a few seconds before she broke away and said, “Less than two years, then . . .”

“The future.” I gestured as if imagining the words on a marquee, blocking them out: *The Future, starring Anne Marie Callahan and Amanda Kent.* We’d talked about it all the time, nonstop, our plan to drive Brando to Los Angeles after graduation. The pitch, in our minds, was unique and unbeatable: We’d be a package deal, Amanda playing the brunette who turns heads but still possesses fantastic comedic timing, me the quirky sidekick who has acting chops and secretly steals all the scenes.

I hadn’t mentioned to Amanda that the big black hole inside me

ached for more, and that my brain was constantly spinning ideas for satisfying it. Not once had I told her about my disloyal thoughts: that maybe I would need more than best-friend comedies. That maybe I would need a prestigious solo career, then maybe I would write and produce, then direct, then whatever achievement level came after that, no doubt; an endless pursuit of the golden key that would unlock the highest version of life and make me feel whole.

Listening to my brain was exhausting. Only now do I question my brain's wisdom, wonder if it's actually working in my best interest. But back then? A thought was reality. And how do you tell your best friend that your brain imagines outgrowing them—that it's not even a choice; it's a necessity.