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THE THREE LIVES OF CATE KAY



KATE FAGAN

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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THE THREE LIVES OF CATE KAY

KATE FAGAN

ATRIA BOOKS

New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

For Kathryn

FOREWORD

February 27, 2014

Charleston, SC

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 *hub?* 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.