

THE
CLOISTERS

KATY HAYS

A NOVEL

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THE
CLOISTERS

A NOVEL

Katy Hays

ATRIA BOOKS

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FOR ANDREW HAYS
(AND THE CHEESE)

The first day of human life already establishes the last.

—Seneca, *Oedipus*

PROLOGUE

Death always visited me in August. A slow and delicious month we turned into something swift and brutal. The change, quick as a card trick.

I should have seen it coming. The way the body would be laid out on the library floor, the way the gardens would be torn apart by the search. The way our jealousy, greed, and ambition were waiting to devour us all, like a snake eating its own tail. The ouroboros. And even though I know the dark truths we hid from one another that summer, some part of me still longs for The Cloisters, for the person I was before.

I used to think it might have gone either way. That I might have said no to the job or to Leo. That I might never have gone to Long Lake that summer night. That the coroner, even, might have decided against an autopsy. But those choices were never mine to make. I know that now.

I think a lot about luck these days. *Luck*. Probably from the Middle High German *glück*, meaning fortune or happy accident. Dante called Fortune the *ministra di Dio*, or the minister of God. Fortune, just an old-fashioned word for fate. The ancient Greeks and Romans did everything in the service of Fate. They built temples in its honor and bound their lives to its caprices. They consulted sibyls and prophets. They scried the entrails of animals and studied omens. Even Julius Caesar is said to have crossed the Rubicon only after casting a pair of dice. *Iacta alea est*—the die is cast. The entire fate of the Roman Empire depended on that throw. At least Caesar was lucky once.

What if our whole life—how we live and die—has already been decided for us? Would you want to know, if a roll of the dice or a deal of the cards could tell you the outcome? Can life be that thin, that disturbing? What if we are all just Caesar? Waiting on our lucky throw, refusing to see what waits for us in the ides of March.

It was easy, at first, to miss the omens that haunted The Cloisters that summer. The gardens always spilling over with wildflowers and herbs, terra-cotta pots planted with lavender, and the pink lady apple tree, blooming sweet and white. The air so hot, our skin stayed damp and flushed. An inescapable future that found us, not the other way around. An

unlucky throw. One that I could have foreseen, if only I—like the Greeks and Romans—had known what to look for.

CHAPTER ONE

I would arrive in New York at the beginning of June. At a time when the heat was building—gathering in the asphalt, reflecting off the glass—until it reached a peak that wouldn't release long into September. I was going east, unlike so many of the students from my class at Whitman College who were headed west, toward Seattle and San Francisco, sometimes Hong Kong.

The truth was, I wasn't going east to the place I had originally hoped, which was Cambridge or New Haven, or even Williamstown. But when the emails came from department chairs saying *they were very sorry... a competitive applicant pool... best of luck in your future endeavors*, I was grateful that one application had yielded a positive result: the Summer Associates Program at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A favor, I knew, to my emeritus advisor, Richard Lingraf, who had once been something of an Ivy League luminary before the East Coast weather—or was it a questionable happening at his alma mater?—had chased him west.

They called it an “associates” program, but it was an internship with a meager stipend. It didn't matter to me; I would have worked two jobs and paid them to be there. It was, after all, the Met. The kind of prestigious imprimatur someone like me—a hick from an unknown school—needed.

Well, Whitman wasn't entirely unknown. But because I had grown up in Walla Walla, the dusty, single-story town in southeastern Washington where Whitman was located, I rarely encountered anyone from out of the state who knew of its existence. My whole childhood had been the college, an experience that had slowly dulled much of its magic. Where other students arrived on campus excited to start their adult lives anew, I was afforded no such clean slate. This was because both of my parents worked for Whitman. My mother, in dining services, where she planned menus and theme nights for the first-year students who lived in the residence halls: Basque, Ethiopian, asado. If I had lived on campus, she might have planned my meals too, but the financial waiver Whitman granted employees only extended to tuition, and so, I lived at home.

My father, however, had been a linguist—although not one on faculty. An autodidact who borrowed books from Whitman’s Penrose Library, he taught me the difference between the six Latin cases and how to parse rural Italian dialects, all in between his facilities shifts at the college. That is, before he was buried next to my grandparents the summer before my senior year, behind the Lutheran church at the edge of town, the victim of a hit-and-run. He never told me where his love of languages had come from, just that he was grateful I shared it.

“Your dad would be so proud, Ann,” Paula said.

It was the end of my shift at the restaurant where I worked, and where Paula, the hostess, had hired me almost a decade earlier, at the age of fifteen. The space was deep and narrow, with a tarnished tin ceiling, and we had left the front door open, hoping the fresh air would thin out the remaining dinner smells. Every now and then a car would crawl down the wide street outside, its headlights cutting the darkness.

“Thanks, Paula.” I counted out my tips on the counter, trying my best to ignore the arcing red welts that were blooming on my forearm. The dinner rush—busier than usual due to Whitman’s graduation—had forced me to stack plates, hot from the salamander, directly onto my arm. The walk from the kitchen to the dining room was just long enough that the ceramic burned with every trip.

“You know, you can always come back,” said John, the bartender, who released the tap handle and passed me a shifter. We were only allowed one beer per shift, but the rule was rarely followed.

I pressed out my last dollar bill and folded the money into my back pocket. “I know.”

But I didn’t want to come back. My father, so inexplicably and suddenly gone, haunted every block of sidewalk that framed downtown, even the browning patch of grass in front of the restaurant. The escapes I had relied on—books and research—no longer took me far enough away.

“Even if it’s fall and we don’t need the staff,” John continued, “we’ll still hire you.”

I tried to tamp down the panic I felt at the prospect of being back in Walla Walla come fall, when I heard Paula say behind me, “We’re closed.”

I looked over my shoulder to the front door, where a gaggle of girls had gathered, some reading the menu in the vestibule, others having pushed through the screen door, causing the CLOSED sign to slap against the wood.

“But you’re still serving,” said one, pointing at my beer.

“Sorry. Closed,” said John.

“Oh, come on,” said another. Their faces were pinked with the warm flush of alcohol, but I could already see the way the night would end, with black smudges below their eyes and random bruises on their legs. Four years at Whitman, and I’d never had a night like that—just shifters and burned skin.

Paula corralled them with her outstretched arms, pushing them back through the front door; I turned my attention back to John.

“Do you know them?” he asked, casually wiping down the wood bar.

I shook my head. It was hard to make friends in college when you were the only student not living in a dorm. Whitman wasn’t like a state school where such things were common; it was a small liberal arts college, a small, *expensive* liberal arts college, where everyone lived on campus, or at least started their freshman year that way.

“Town is getting busy. You looking forward to graduation?” He looked at me expectantly, but I met his question with a shrug. I didn’t want to talk about Whitman or graduation. I just wanted to take my money home and safely tuck it in with the other tips I had saved. All year, I’d been working five nights a week, even picking up day shifts when my schedule allowed. If I wasn’t at the library, I was at work. I knew that the exhaustion wouldn’t help me outrun my father’s memory, or the rejections, but it did blunt the sharp reality of it.

My mother never said anything about my schedule, or how I only came home to sleep, but then, she was too preoccupied with her own grief and disappointments to confront mine.

“Tuesday is my last day,” I said, pushing myself away from the bar and tipping back what little was left in my glass before leaning over the counter and placing it in the dish rack. “Only two more shifts to go.”

Paula came up behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist, and as eager as I was for it to be Tuesday, I let myself soften into her, leaning my head against hers.

“You know he’s out there, right? He can see this happening for you.”

I didn’t believe her; I didn’t believe anyone who told me there was a magic to it all, a logic, but I forced myself to nod anyway. I had already learned that no one wanted to hear what loss was really like.



Two days later I wore a blue polyester robe and accepted my diploma. My mother was there to take a photograph and attend the Art History department party, held on a wet patch of lawn in front of the semi-Gothic

Memorial Building, the oldest on Whitman's campus. I was always acutely aware of how young the building, completed in 1899, was in comparison to those at Harvard or Yale. The Claquato Church, a modest Methodist clapboard structure built in 1857, was the oldest building I had ever seen in person. Maybe that was why I found it so easy to be seduced by the past—it had eluded me in my youth. Eastern Washington was mostly wheatfields and feed stores, silver silos that never showed their age.

In fact, during my four years at Whitman, I had been the department's only Early Renaissance student. Tucked safely away from the exploits of major artists like Michelangelo and Leonardo, I preferred to study bit characters and forgotten painters who had names like Bembo or Cossa, nicknames like "messy Tom," or "the squinter." I studied duchies and courts, never empires. Courts were, after all, delightfully petty and fascinated by the most outlandish things—astrology, amulets, codes—things I, myself, found it impossible to believe in. But these fascinations also meant I was often alone: in the library, or in an independent study with Professor Lingraf, who lumbered into our meetings at least twenty minutes late, if he remembered them at all.

Despite the impracticality of it all, the overlooked edges of the Renaissance had grabbed me with their gilt and pageantry, their belief in magic, their performances of power. That my own world lacked those things made it an easy choice. I had been warned, however, when I began to think about graduate school, that very few departments would be interested in my work. It was too fringe, too small, not ambitious enough or broad enough. Whitman encouraged its students to reexamine the discipline, become ecocritical, explore the multisensory qualities of human vision. There were times I wondered if the things I studied, the overlooked objects no one wanted, had in fact chosen me, because I often felt powerless to abandon them.

In the shade, my mother moved her arms in circles, her silver bracelets jangling as she spoke to another parent. I looked around the party for Lingraf's shock of white hair, but it was clear he had declined to attend. Although we had worked together for the better part of four years, he rarely made appearances at departmental functions or spoke about his own research. No one knew what he was working on these days, or when he would finally stop showing up on campus. In some ways, working with Lingraf had been a liability. When other students and even faculty heard he was advising me, they often asked if I was *sure* that was right; he so rarely took on students. But it was. Lingraf had signed off on my thesis, my major completion forms, my letters of recommendation—all of it.

This, despite the fact he refused to be part of the Whitman community, preferring instead to work in his office, door closed to distractions, always shuffling his papers into a drawer when anyone arrived.

As I finished scanning the party, Micah Yallsen, a fellow graduating senior, came up alongside me.

“Ann,” he said, “I heard you were going to be in New York this summer.”

Micah had grown up splitting his time between Kuala Lumpur, Honolulu, and Seattle. The kind of grueling travel schedule that necessitated a private plane, or at the bare minimum first-class accommodations.

“Where are you living?”

“I found a sublet in Morningside Heights.”

He speared a wan cube of cheddar off the paper plate in his hand. Whitman never wasted money on catering, and I was sure my mother’s department had prepared the grazing trays in-house.

“It’s only for three months,” I added.

“And after?” he chewed.

“I don’t know yet,” I said.

“I wish I were taking a gap year,” he said, spinning the toothpick in his mouth contemplatively.

Micah had been accepted into MIT’s History, Theory and Criticism PhD program, one of the most prestigious in the country. But I imagined his gap year would have looked very different from my own.

“I would have been happy to go straight through,” I pointed out.

“It’s just so hard to find a place to study Early Ren these days,” he said. “Our discipline has shifted. It’s for the better, of course.”

I nodded. It was easier than protesting. After all, it was a familiar refrain.

“But even so. We need people to continue the work of past generations. And it’s good to be interested in something—be *passionate* about something.” He speared another cube of cheese. “But you should also think about trends.”

I was the sort of person for whom trends had always been intractable. By the time I caught them, they were already wiggling their way out of my grasp. What had appealed to me about academia was that it seemed like a place where I could be blissfully free of trends, where one settled into a subject and never left. Lingraf had only ever published books on the artists of Ravenna; he’d never even had to go as far afield as Venice.

“These things matter now,” Micah was saying. “Especially since there’s not much new to be done in the fifteenth century, is there? That’s pretty well covered ground at this point. No new discoveries. Unless someone tries to reattribute a Masaccio or something.” He laughed and took that as his cue to slip into another, more beneficial conversation. His advice doled; his obligation filled. *Here, Ann, let me tell you why those rejections came.* As if I didn’t already know.



“Do you need help?” My mother leaned against the doorjamb of my bedroom, where I was pulling handfuls of books from my bookcase and stacking them on the floor.

“I’m fine,” I said. But she came into my room anyway, peering into the boxes I had packed and pulling open the drawers of my aging dresser.

“Not much left,” she said, so softly that I almost didn’t hear her. “Are you sure you don’t want to leave a few things here?”

If I had ever felt guilty about leaving her alone in Walla Walla, my own self-preservation had pushed those feelings aside. Even when my father was alive, I had considered my stay in this bedroom temporary. I wanted to see the places he brought home in books from the Penrose Library—the campaniles of Italy, the windswept coastline of Morocco, the twinkling skyscrapers of Manhattan. Places I could only afford to travel to on the page.

The day he died, my father spoke ten languages and could read at least five defunct dialects. Language was his way of venturing beyond the four walls of our home, beyond his own childhood. I regretted that he wasn’t here to see me do the thing he had always wanted most. But my mother was afraid of travel—of planes, of places she didn’t know, of herself—and so, my father usually chose to stay with her, close to home. I couldn’t help but wonder if he had known, if he had known that he would die young, whether he wouldn’t have tried harder to see a few more things.

“I wanted to be sure you could rent the room if you needed to.” I finished filling a box with books, and the sound of the tape gun startled us both.

“I don’t want anyone else living here.”

“Someday you might,” I said gently.

“No. Why would you bring that up? Where would you stay then, if I rented your room? How could I see you if you didn’t come here, come back?”

“You could always come visit,” I ventured.

“I can’t. You know I can’t.”

I wanted to argue with her, to look at her and tell her that she could. She *could* get on a plane, and I would be there, waiting for her at the end, but I knew it wasn’t worth it. She would never come visit me in New York, and I couldn’t stay. If I did, I knew how easy it would be to get caught in the cobwebs, just as she had done.

“I’m still not sure why you want to go in the first place. A big city like that. You’ll be much better looked after here. Where people know you. Know us.”

It was a conversation I knew well, but I didn’t want to spend my last night in the house this way—the way we had spent so many nights after my father died.

“It’s going to be fine, Mom,” I said, not saying aloud the thing I said to myself. *It has to be.*

She picked up a book that lay on the corner of the bed and thumbed through its pages. My bedroom had just enough space for one bookcase and a dresser, the bed wedged against the wall. “I never realized you had so many of these,” she said.

The books took up more space than my clothes. They always had.

“Hazard of the trade,” I said, relieved she had changed the subject.

“Okay,” she said, putting the book down. “I guess you have to finish.”

And I did, squeezing my books into the boxes that would be mailed and zipping my duffel closed. I reached under my bed, feeling around for the cardboard box where I kept my tips. I felt the weight of the money in my lap.

Tomorrow, I would be in New York.

CHAPTER TWO

I'm afraid we can't accommodate you at the Met this summer," Michelle de Forte said.

We were sitting in her office, a name tag with my department and *Ann Stilwell* still affixed to my shirt.

"As you know, you were assigned to work with Karl Gerber." She spoke in a flat, clipped way that had no discernible origin, yet could only have been cultivated in the best schools. "He is preparing for an upcoming exhibition on Giotto, but he had an opportunity in Bergamo and had to leave unexpectedly."

I tried to imagine a job in which one could be summoned to Bergamo on a moment's notice, and then again, to imagine the kind of employer who would allow me to go. On both counts I came up blank.

"It may take him several weeks to finish the work that needs to be done. All that is to say, I'm very sorry, but we no longer have a place for you."

Michelle de Forte, director of Human Resources at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, had taken me aside as soon as I arrived for orientation that morning, leading me away from the room full of carafes of hot coffee and sugared pastries, and into her office, where I sat in a plastic Eames chair. My backpack, still on my lap. She looked at me across the desk, her eyes lifted above the blue Lucite glasses that had slipped low on her nose. Her finger, narrow and birdlike, tapped out a constant metronome.

If she expected me to say something, I didn't know what it was. I was, it seemed, a careless oversight in their summer planning. An administrative inconvenience.

"You can see that we are in an unfortunate position, Ann."

I went to swallow, but my throat was dry. It was all I could do to blink and try not to think of my sublet, of the unopened boxes of books, of the other associates who would be allowed to stay.

"At this point, all our other departmental positions are filled. We don't need doubling up in Ancient, and frankly, you aren't qualified to work in our busier fields."

She wasn't unkind, just blunt. Matter-of-fact. Adding up her needs against my, now sadly, inadequate presence. The glass walls of her office revealed a trickle of arriving staff members, some with one pant leg rolled up, bike helmets still on, others with battered leather satchels and bright red lips—almost all carrying cups of coffee. I had spent the morning reviewing the few items my closet contained before deciding on something I thought was sensible and professional: a cotton button-up and a gray skirt with tennis shoes. My name tag could have read FLYOVER COUNTRY.

In my head, I calculated the loss of the Met stipend against my tips. I estimated I had enough money to stay in New York through the middle of July, and there was always a chance I could find other work, any work, really. There was no need to share the news with my mother. Now that I had arrived, it would take more than a dismissal from Michelle de Forte to make me leave. The words *I understand* were forming on my lips, my hands readying to push myself out of the chair, when a knock came from the window behind me.

A man cupped his hands against the glass and peered in at us. His eyes met mine before he pushed his way through the door, stooping to ensure his head didn't hit the top of the frame.

"Patrick, if you don't mind waiting. I just need to take care of this."

I was the *this*.

Undeterred, Patrick folded himself into the chair next to me. I stole a glance at his profile: a tan face, attractive creases around the eyes and mouth, a beard sprinkled with gray. He was older, but not old, late forties, early fifties. Good-looking, but not obviously so. He extended a hand in my direction, which I shook. It was dry and calloused, pleasant.

"Patrick Roland," he said, before even looking in Michelle's direction, "curator at The Cloisters."

"Ann Stilwell, Renaissance department summer associate."

"Ah. Very good." Patrick wore a thin, wry smile. "What kind of Renaissance?"

"Ferrara. Sometimes Milan."

"Anything in particular?"

"Most recently celestial vaults," I said, thinking of my work with Lingraf. "Renaissance astrology."

"The unlikely Renaissance, then."

The way he looked at me sideways, with half his face but all his attention, made me forget, if only for a moment, that we were sharing the room with someone intent on firing me.

“It takes some bravery to work in a field where the archive is still a necessity,” he said. “Where things are rarely translated. Impressive.”

“Patrick—” Michelle tried again.

“Michelle.” Patrick brought his hands together and faced her fully. “I have bad news.” He leaned forward and passed his phone across the desk. “Michael has quit. No notice. He took a job with a tech company’s arts and culture division. Apparently, he’s already on his way to California. He sent me the email last week, but I didn’t see it until this morning.”

Michelle read what I could only assume was Michael’s resignation letter on Patrick’s phone, occasionally flicking up and down.

“We were already understaffed before this. As you know, we haven’t been able to find a suitable associate curator, and Michael had stepped into that role. Although he was by no means qualified. That left Rachel doing double duty on everything, and I’m worried we’re putting too much on her. We have some extra hands in Education that can help, but it’s simply not enough.”

Michelle passed the phone back to Patrick and settled a stack of papers on her desk.

“I was hoping Karl could come help us for a few weeks until we can get someone,” he said.

Throughout the exchange I had sat quietly, hoping that if I didn’t move, Michelle might forget I was there, forget that she told me to go.

“Karl has gone to Bergamo for the summer, Patrick,” Michelle said. “I’m sorry. We don’t have anyone to spare. The Cloisters will have to make its own provisions. We’ve been quite generous giving you the budget to pay Rachel through the year already. Now if you don’t mind—” She gestured toward me.

Patrick leaned back in his chair and gave me an appraising look.

“Can you send me her?” he asked, hooking a thumb in my direction.

“I cannot,” Michelle said. “Ann was about to leave us for the summer.”

Patrick leaned over the arm of his chair, his torso now so close that I could feel his body heat. It was a beat before I realized I had been holding my breath.

“Do you want to come work for me?” he said. “It wouldn’t be here. It would be at The Cloisters. It’s north, along the highway. Where are you living? Would it be an inconvenience?”

“Morningside Heights,” I said.

“Good. You’re right on the A train and can take it the whole way. Probably less walking than crossing the park, anyway.”

“Patrick,” Michelle broke in, “we don’t have the budget to send you Ann. Rachel is already taking your summer associate budget.”

He held up a finger and pulled out his phone, scrolling through the contacts until he found the number he needed. On the other end, someone picked up.

“Hello. Yes. *Herr Gerber*. Look, it’s important. May I have your associate—” He looked at me expectantly and snapped his fingers.

“Ann Stilwell,” I said.

“May I have Ann Stilwell for the summer? Who is she? I think she was meant to be your summer associate, Karl, but you left.” He looked to me for confirmation, and I nodded. They switched to German for a few minutes until Patrick laughed and handed the phone to Michelle.

Mostly, she listened. But every few minutes she would say things like, “Only if you’re sure” and “You’ll lose the budget money.” At the end, she was simply nodding and making agreeable sounds. “Okay... Mmhmm... All right.” She handed the phone back to Patrick, who laughed loudly and repeated the word *ciao* two or three times with a wonderful trill.

“Okay.” He rose from the chair and tapped me on the shoulder. “Come with me, Ann Stilwell.”

“Patrick,” Michelle protested, “the girl hasn’t even agreed!”

He looked at me, a single eyebrow raised.

“Yes, of course,” I said, the words tumbling out of me.

“Good,” he said, brushing at a stray wrinkle in his shirt. “Now, let’s get this over with and get you out of here.”



While Michelle had been busy explaining to me why I couldn’t stay, the room had filled with summer associates who could. The program had a reputation for selecting only a handful of graduating seniors from the best schools and working swiftly and silently behind the scenes to ensure their future successes. When my acceptance arrived, I had assumed it was a mistake, but by the end of that summer I would learn there were few mistakes in life.

The full-time staff had been pressed into attendance, and even though they did not wear name tags, I recognized a few of them: the young associate curator of Islamic art who had come directly from Penn, the curator of ancient Roman art who was a fixture on the ancient civilizations series produced by PBS. Everyone beautiful and sharp and inaccessible in

person. The weight of my backpack hung more awkwardly against my hips when I realized I was the only attendee who still carried one.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” said Patrick. “Get some coffee”—he pointed at the carafes—“then we’ll head up to The Cloisters.” He scanned the room, tall enough to easily note everyone in attendance. “Rachel isn’t here yet. But I’m sure you know a few of the other associates, right?”

I was about to explain that I didn’t when Patrick walked off, throwing an arm around the shoulders of an older man in a worn tweed jacket. I could feel a prickle of sweat working its way down my side; I clamped an arm against my body to arrest its progress.

This was why I had arrived early, of course. So that I wouldn’t need to break into a conversation. When you were the first to arrive, people had no choice but to talk to you. By the time a group gathered, I would have been happily ensconced in a circle of similar early arrivals. Instead, I hooked my thumbs into my backpack straps and looked around the room, trying to pretend I was looking for a friend. Although it was a welcome breakfast, it was not, I realized, a meet and greet. Looking at the circles of associates, the familiar way they spoke to each other, it was clear they had already had opportunities to get to know one another in various ways over the last four years—symposia and lectures that led to dinner parties and boozy late-night musings. I inched myself closer to a group so I could at least hear their conversation.

“I grew up in LA,” one girl was saying, “and it’s not what people think. Everyone assumes it’s all celebrities and juice cleanses and woo. But we have a real arts scene. It’s thriving.”

People in the circle were nodding.

“In fact, last summer, I worked for Gagosian in Beverly Hills and we had both Jenny Saville and Richard Prince give artist talks. But it’s not just big galleries,” she continued, sipping from a hand-blown glass tumbler.

I used the pause to edge my shoulder into the circle and was grateful when the girl to my left took a step back.

“We have experimental spaces and community arts projects too. A friend even runs a food and contemporary art collaborative called Active Cultures.”

Now, I could make out the girl’s name tag: Stephanie Pearce, Contemporary Painting.

“When I was in Marfa last summer—” began another member of the circle. But the sentence died on their lips as Stephanie Pearce turned her attention to the entrance, where Patrick was in close conference with a girl whose hair was such a pale shade of blond, it could only be real. Across