



NATIONAL BESTSELLER

# THE HEIRESS

A NOVEL

# RACHEL HAWKINS

*NEW YORK TIMES*  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
*THE VILLA*

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For Vera Etheridge Blake East Hobbs Haynes

It would probably shock the average American to learn just how little we know about those who go missing in the wilder parts of this great nation of ours. A tangled knot of jurisdictions and separate government agencies means that there is no singular place to collect that data, no easily searched resource that tells us just how many of our fellow citizens vanish into the thick forests of the Appalachians, the cold, stony reaches of the Rocky Mountains, the dense mists of the Pacific Northwest. And when someone is swallowed up by these elemental places, our brains struggle with the sheer vastness of both the land itself and the overwhelming myriad of possibilities. Did they vanish on purpose, seeking some kind of freedom from our plugged-in, switched-on existence? Was it an accident? If so, what kind? After all, there are so many things that can kill you once you've left well-traveled paths. Something as simple as a broken shoelace can lead to a stumble which becomes a fall, hands scrabbling over slippery rock. Wild animals are not the lovable cartoons we grew up with, but genuine threats. Did the missing person meet up with one, finding themselves plunged into the primal nightmare of becoming a food source?

And of course, we can never discount that most dangerous of animals, our fellow man. Lord Byron wrote, "There is a pleasure in the pathless woods / There is a rapture on the lonely shore / There is society where none intrudes / By the deep Sea, and music in its roar." But we know all too well that sometimes, society does indeed intrude, and we picture the lonely hiker, their excitement at seeing another human slowly curdling into terror as they realize that this is not a friend, not a fellow seeker of peace and tranquility.

This is why these stories have such a hold on us. So many questions, *too* many possible answers, and the reminder that the woods may be "dark and deep," but what can happen to you inside them is often far from lovely.

—"Without a Trace," by Bill Naracott, *Outside*, May 2017

**LUMBER BARON'S BABY GIRL  
VANISHES, SEARCH ON FOOT,  
BY AIR UNDER WAY**

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Tavistock, North Carolina

On Sunday, September 12, an afternoon constitutional in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina took a tragic turn when the three-year-old daughter of Mr. Mason McTavish of Tavistock, North Carolina, seemingly vanished into thin air. The family, consisting of Mr. McTavish, his wife, Mrs. Anna McTavish (née Miss Anna Ashby, formerly of Wichita, Kansas, daughter of the late banker Mr. George Ashby and his wife, Mrs. Amelia [Thorpe] Ashby), and their young daughter, Miss Ruby Anne McTavish, were accompanied by the family's nanny with the intention of having a picnic in the mountains surrounding the McTavish home, Ashby House.

The child was discovered missing at approximately 2:30 P.M., and after a brief search by the family, the sheriff's office was alerted. A thorough search is now under way, involving authorities from multiple jurisdictions as well as civilian volunteers, several of whom have offered to fly their personal aircrafts over the site where the child was last seen as efforts on the ground have been hampered by torrential rainfall overnight.

At this time, the Tavistock County Sheriff's Department says they have "no reason to suspect criminal activity" involved with the child's disappearance, but Mr. McTavish is among the wealthiest men in the state of North Carolina, and, as such, kidnapping has not been conclusively ruled out.

*The Atlanta Constitution,*  
Monday Morning, September 13, 1943

***Changeling (change-ling): Noun***

**Definition: 1) A child put in place of another child. In folklore, various magical beings (witches, fairies, trolls) are often responsible for the switch.**

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***Internet commons entry for “changeling,” accessed October 4, 2023***

## CHAPTER ONE

### Jules

There should be some kind of warning when your life is about to change forever.

I don't need a siren or bloodred skies or anything, but I still think there should be just the littlest bit of ... I don't know, a *frisson*. A feeling under your skin and inside your bones when something fundamental shifts, when the ground underneath your feet grows suddenly unstable.

And you should *definitely* not be wearing a fucking bonnet when it happens.

But that's exactly what I'm wearing the September evening I come home and Camden drops the bomb that's the beginning and the ending of everything.

Not just a bonnet, I should add, but also a black dress and white apron that are supposed to say "pioneer woman," but instead just make me look Amish, plus a pair of stiff leather boots that rub my ankles raw and pinch my toes. It's all part of my costume at the living history museum where I work in Golden, Colorado.

You know the place.

I mean, even if you don't *specifically* know Homestead Park, you know the *kind* of place. Beautifully constructed re-creations of old farmhouses, barns, general stores. Docile farm animals in pastures, the mountains rising around us, with only the whooshing of cars on the nearby highway and the black rectangles of cell phones lifted to capture anything even *vaguely* Instagrammable as signs that you haven't somehow time-traveled to the nineteenth century.

Manifest Destiny Disneyland.

That's where I work Tuesday through Saturday, playing the part of "Mrs. Hiram Burch," a farmer's wife who tells school groups and tourists about the hardships on the Western Frontier, how people lived Back Then, all of that.

All in all, it's not the worst job, and it's certainly one of the few that actually lets me use the few semesters of theater classes I took nearly a decade ago, but it isn't without its drawbacks.

"Do you have any idea," I call to my husband as I enter the front door of our little house, a house we'll leave in just a few days and never see again,



“how hard it is to talk about churning butter without saying the words ‘cream’ or ‘pole’?”

There’s no response, but I know he’s here. I saw his car in the driveway, and this house is so small it would be impossible for him not to hear me. “Three entire junior highs at the park today. Like, nine thousand prepubescent boys, and there I am, trying to figure out how to do my job as an ‘interpreter of the past’ without getting sexually harassed. Real banner day for Mrs. Burch!”

Still no answer.

Frowning, I hang up my keys on the little hook by the door and move farther down the hallway.

There’s nowhere to hide in this house. It’s more or less a box. Front door opens onto long hallway. Directly to the left? Living room. Across from that? A small closet where we’ve managed to store most of our winter gear. Just past the closet is the kitchen, and if you keep going down the hall, you’ll find a tiny bathroom and, finally, our bedroom.

I’m beginning to wonder if Cam is sick and laid up in bed, but as I pass the kitchen, I spot him sitting at the small wooden table we picked up from a flea market last year.

His back is to the door, but even without seeing his face, I know something has happened. Cam never hangs out in the kitchen, and never like this, sitting stiff in his seat, his elbows on the table, his hands clenched in front of him.

That’s when I realize it’s Wednesday, the day Camden usually tutors at the junior college until seven. It’s only just past five thirty now, and there’s real worry in my voice when I lay my hand on his shoulder and say, “Cam?”

Camden turns, his hand automatically coming up to cover mine, and while there’s still a trio of wrinkles over the bridge of his nose, and the knuckles on the hand still on the table are white, he smiles. It’s quick and distracted, but it’s something.

His gaze moves over me.

“If I’d known Goody Proctor was haunting this house, I would’ve tried to rent something else,” he says, and I tweak his earlobe.

“I didn’t feel like changing at the park,” I reply, moving past him to the refrigerator where I take a can of Diet Coke. “And I *assumed* I would be

free from mockery in my own home. I take enough shit from the eighth graders, you know.”

Another half-assed smile, then his eyes drift to his phone. It’s nearly on the other side of the table, far enough away that he’d have to get out of his seat and really reach to retrieve it.

I sit across from him, the phone just inches from my soda when I set it down, and I study the man I married in a California courtroom nearly a decade ago.

You need to know that I’m not one of those people who constantly puts up gushing Facebook posts about my husband. You’ve seen those, I know you have. Probably talked shit about them to your friends.

Molly from high school, her arm around some dude named Rushton, lips smushed against his cheek, a long caption about how happy she is to be “doing life” with “this guy.”

That’s never been me.

For one, Cam doesn’t even have social media, and for another, there’s always been something about him—about *us*—that feels private.

Special, even.

It’s been that way from the moment we met.

You don’t expect to meet the love of your life at 25 Cent Wing Night at a college bar. Or hell, maybe you’re more optimistic than I am, and so you go to every “BOGO Beer Wednesday” and “No Cover Charge For 36C and Up This Weekend!” special that’s advertised assuming you’re going to meet the One.

Me, I just really wanted some cheap wings. I’d moved to California from Florida after three semesters of community college for the usual reason pretty girls leave small towns and head west—to be a star. Thing was, the only person I knew out there was an acquaintance from high school, Emma, and since she’d lived in San Bernardino, I’d landed there first.

Bloom where you’re planted, people like to say, but they ignore the fact that *planted* is sometimes just a nice way of saying *stuck*, and I’d definitely fallen into that category.

So I was juggling two jobs back then, waiting tables at one of those nightmare chain places that makes you wear a lot of buttons on your black apron while also spending a few afternoons every week watching a couple of kids who lived in my apartment complex. I didn’t charge their mom

much, given that she was working just as hard as I was. Sometimes when I watched her come in with greasy sacks of fast food, already cold from her long drive over from the next town, I wished I were able to say, “Hey, it’s fine, you don’t need to pay me.”

But that wasn’t my life.

So I took her twenty bucks and tried to make it last, and that was why I was at Senor Pollo’s on a Thursday night when I was just twenty-one, the same night that Camden was tending bar.

I’d ordered a water—couldn’t afford wings *and* a beer, even when the wings were cheap—but from the way my gaze had followed a couple of pints of Stella he pulled for another table, he must’ve known what I really wanted.

A few seconds later, a frosty and perfectly poured glass was sitting in front of me, and he’d flashed me that little smile I would come to know so well, the one that could almost be a smirk on another guy. “On the house,” he’d said quietly. I’d noticed then, as he’d looked over at me, that his eyes were two different colors.

One was gray-blue, the other a clear golden brown that made me think of high-end bourbon. It’s a genetic thing, heterochromia, and because Camden was adopted, he has no idea if he got it from his mother or his father. Sometimes I wonder if any children we might have will inherit it, too, will look at me with that same patchwork gaze that always seems to see everything.

That first night, I noticed more than his eyes, of course. He was tall, a little too thin back then, brown hair longer and shaggier than he wears it now, and I liked the way he moved behind the bar, liked how his hands looked when they held a glass or opened a bottle.

He was cute, yes, but it was more than that. There had been something about him that was so calm, so still. So sure of himself, even though he was just barely twenty-two and, as I’d later learn, going through his own shit.

We kissed later that night beside my shitty car. He spent the next night in my even shittier apartment.

And that had been that.

I don’t know why I’m telling you this part now. I mean, it probably doesn’t even seem all that romantic to you. Cheap college bar, my heart won forever by a free beer and a cute smile, sex on a mattress I’d gotten from Goodwill and suspected someone had died on.

But it *was* romantic. More than that, it was *real*.

And I guess I just want you to know that, before you hear the rest of it.

I'm getting ahead of myself, though.

For now, we're here, in our little rental in Golden, Colorado, a place we've lived for the past five years, where Camden teaches ninth- and eleventh-grade English at an all-boys prep school and I churn butter on a make-believe farm. We're happy with each other, if not exactly with the lives we're leading, and later, I'll realize it's because we knew eventually this moment would come.

That we were waiting for this.

For a cool September evening, a random Wednesday that shouldn't have been anything special at all, when Camden nods at his phone and says, "It's my family. They want me to come home."

## **HEIRESS, PHILANTHROPIST, ONETIME KIDNAP VICTIM, RUBY MCTAVISH CALLAHAN WOODWARD MILLER KENMORE DIES AT 73**

One of North Carolina's most famous (some would say infamous) women has passed away peacefully at her legendary mansion in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Ashby House.

Ruby McTavish was born on June 1, 1940, the oldest child of lumber magnate Mason McTavish and his first wife, Anna Ashby McTavish, in the town of Tavistock, North Carolina, a once-sleepy hamlet transformed by the power of the McTavish fortune.

That fortune came at a cost, however. In 1943, when she was barely three years old, young Ruby McTavish vanished on a family picnic in the mountains surrounding Ashby House. The disappearance held the nation in its grip for nearly a year with the McTavishes offering what was, at the time, the highest reward ever for any information leading to her safe return.

Authorities had assumed the child had succumbed to exposure in the thick forests of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and were stunned when the private detective hired by Mason McTavish found the child alive and well, living in Spanish Fort, Alabama, with a family by the name of Darnell, eight months after she first disappeared. The return of "Baby Ruby" was a balm to a country still locked in the Second World War, and the joy at seeing a family reunited overshadowed the grubby and sordid end of her alleged kidnapper, Jimmy Darnell, who was killed while attempting to escape the local jail before his trial could begin.

While the kidnapping had a happy ending, it would not be Ruby's last brush with notoriety. Married four times, Ruby seemed singularly unlucky in love, losing her first husband, Duke Callahan, to a shooting on their Paris honeymoon, her second to an electrical accident at Ashby House, the third to a lingering illness, and the last, Roddy Kenmore, to a boating mishap.

It was this last husband that gave her a nickname people in North Carolina barely dared to whisper: "Mrs. Kill-more."

However, no charges were ever brought against Ruby McTavish, and those closest to her insist it was not in her nature to hurt anyone.

"If you ask me, she just had bad taste in men," one confidante said. "Duke was reckless, Hugh was stupid, Andrew had always had health issues, and Roddy was a [expletive] basket case. I see where it looks bad, but I promise you, that woman was a saint."

Saint or not, Ruby McTavish—who reverted to her maiden name after the death of her last husband—did devote a large part of her life to charitable works, most involving disadvantaged youth. It was through this work that she met and eventually adopted her only child, a young

boy she named Camden, who, with her death, becomes sole heir to a fortune rumored to be in the high eight figures.

In addition to Camden (20), Mrs. McTavish is survived by a sister, Nelle (69), a nephew, Howell (49), a great-nephew, Ben (23), and a great-niece, Elizabeth (17).

A cause of death has not been released.

—*The Asheville Citizen-Times*, April 2, 2013

**TO: CAMcTavish@goldenboysprep.edu**  
**FROM: BHMctavish@AshbyLTD.org**  
**SUBJECT: [FWD] Ruby's will/house issues**

**Cam,**

**By now, I guess you've heard about Dad. Nathan Collins said he'd get in touch with you and let you know, so I assume he did that. Nana Nelle thought it was "tacky" to let your lawyer tell you a family member died, but I reminded her that you'd made it pretty clear you didn't want to talk to any of us.**

**Honestly, I don't blame you, especially after the last email Dad sent to you (hope you don't mind me attaching that message, by the way, but I wanted you to be sure I wasn't bullshitting you about knowing what he said). If it's any consolation, you weren't the only person to get an email like that. His drinking had been bad for the past twenty years, ever since Mom left, really, but the last six months of his life were particularly rough. Probably sounds shitty to say, but me and Libby both felt like we'd already lost him by the time he wrapped his car around that tree last month.**

**Anyway, it doesn't look like you replied (and, hey, I can't judge since I stopped responding to similar texts and voicemails from him), and for all I know, you won't reply to this one, either, but I had to try.**

**I'm not going to give you the same old guilt trip bullshit Dad tried. You were always a straight shooter, so I will be, too. With Dad gone and you in Colorado, I feel a responsibility for not just Nana Nelle and Libby, but for Ashby House itself. Dad wasn't lying about the repair work that's needed, but it's more than that. Maybe it was everything with Ruby, all the husbands, the rumors. Maybe it was because Dad was admittedly a dick to a lot of the locals. Maybe we've all just been up on this mountain for too damn long. I don't know, man. But I do know that the McTavish name used to mean something—used to make shit happen—and I want it to again. And none of that can happen until we untangle the mess Ruby left us with that damn will.**

**I'll understand if you don't answer this, but like I said, I had to try. I know we haven't ever been close, and I hate that Nana Nelle and Ruby spent so much time pitting us against each other, but we're not teenagers anymore, Cam. Come home, back to Ashby, and let's get this shit squared away once and for all.**

**Sincerely,**

**Ben**

**TO: CAMcTavish@goldenboysprep.edu**  
**FROM: FightBlueDevils1969@AshbyLTD.org**  
**SUBJECT: Ruby's will/house issues**

**Camden,**

**I hope this email finds you well, and that contacting you via your workplace is not out of line. Unfortunately, you've made yourself hard to get in contact with any other way (although I assume that is on purpose).**

**As you know, it's in my nature to be blunt, so I will put this as plainly as possible: while I understand your reasons for putting time and distance between us, and I regret the words spoken in anger that caused you to make that decision, I feel that now, after ten years, it is time to attempt some kind of family reconciliation.**

**I could tell you that my mother has not been well (which is true), or that it's occurred to me that thanks to the acrimonious nature of my divorce from the mother of my children, you are the only family they have besides me or their grandmother (also true).**

**I suspect that neither of these facts will sway you. However, despite our differences, I know that you loved Ruby and shared her deep affection for Ashby House. If family cannot bring you home, maybe the house can. There is flood damage to the east wing, plus I'm told that several of the windows will need to be replaced, along with sections of the roof, the steps to the back veranda, and Lord only knows what else.**

**Thanks to Ruby's will, accessing the funds to do these vital repairs involves a jungle of red tape and more phone calls to that dipshit lawyer of yours than I'd prefer to make.**

**You may have washed your hands of us, but you still have responsibilities here, Camden. Responsibilities that Ruby left for you and would expect you to fulfill. And if you can't do that, you can at least come down here and sort out a better fucking solution than making my almost eighty-year-old mother call Nathan fucking Collins twelve times a day just to get money that *her* father made.**

**So come home. Oversee the work yourself so that you know we're not scamming you out of money you've never even fucking *touch*ed. And let's fix this. Not just the house, but all of it. Because it's been ten years of bullshit at this point, Cam. I told you when you left it wasn't that simple, and now here we are.**

**Ruby is probably laughing at us down there in hell. Mother thinks she killed herself just to fuck us all over, to leave everything this goddamn mess, but I wonder, sometimes, Cam, I really do. Maybe we were too quick to cremate her and find out if she really took those pills herself. Thinking about it a lot here lately for some reason.**

**Do you ever think about it, Camden?**



**You may hate us but you always said you loved this house. You always said you loved Ruby. Now prove it.**

**H.**