



the Hidden Side

A NOVEL

HEIDI CHIAVAROLI

Advance Praise for The Hidden Side

“*The Hidden Side* is a beautiful tale that captures the timeless struggles of the human heart. Exploring both contemporary and historical relationships, Chiavaroli has woven two worlds together seamlessly. With lyrical depth, she has delivered a story that is particularly relatable to parents who are struggling to guide teenagers through today’s tumultuous climate.”

JULIE CANTRELL, *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of *Perennials*

“Heidi Chiavaroli has written another poignant novel that slips between a heart-wrenching present-day story and a tragic one set during the Revolutionary War. *The Hidden Side* explores the raw humanness of characters who are confronted with unimaginable sorrow and the secrets they keep to protect themselves and the people they love. Heidi does a remarkable job demonstrating how God’s love and mercy can break through the darkest shame while honoring the immense pain experienced by hurting victims. I couldn’t put this book down!”

MELANIE DOBSON, award-winning author of *Catching the Wind*, *Chateau of Secrets*, and *Shadows of Ladenbrooke Manor*

“Heidi Chiavaroli excels at bringing the raw emotions of characters to life, in drawing real-life conflict onto the page. *The Hidden Side* is a brilliant portrayal of our country’s worst modern-day nightmare and the struggles of its traumatic birth. Two stories, two timelines woven and

connected through pain and redemption. A stunning novel, not to be missed.”

CATHY GOHLKE, Christy Award–winning author of *Until We Find Home* and *Secrets She Kept*

“Have you ever felt like a broken mess? Or discovered yourself leading a double life, hiding behind masks and secrets—even for a good reason? Welcome to our complicated culture, so hauntingly portrayed by Heidi Chiavaroli in *The Hidden Side*. The weaving of eighteenth-century Patriot spies and twenty-first-century teen struggles works to portray a story that is authentic to reality, yet hints at eventual redemption beyond shattering circumstances. A story reinforcing that while people have always struggled to make hard choices for those they love, God’s presence and mercy is always available. Pick up this book, and you will not put it down.”

LUCINDA SECREST McDOWELL, author of *Ordinary Graces*

“Heidi Chiavaroli deftly weaves present and past together in *The Hidden Side*, giving greater significance to her story’s events than if they stood alone. Her engaging, honest tale unflinchingly faces grief and tragedy, finding redemption even in the darkest moments. Chiavaroli isn’t afraid of hard questions; her writing encourages readers to work out those questions for themselves.”

CHRISTA PARRISH, author of *Still Life* and *Stones for Bread*

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CHAPTER I
NATALIE



SETAUKET, NEW YORK

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When I was fourteen, I hid a pack of Virginia Slims in the top drawer of my dresser. I never smoked them, just kept them there for over a year. I remember glimpsing the package beneath old training bras and lacy underwear I bought at Victoria's Secret with my friends, feeling a sense of accomplishment over their very presence in my room.

Something about seeing them—the thin white package with the brown strip, the gold seal still unbroken—made me feel powerful. As if I had some autonomy outside my parents' overbearing control.

Now, twenty-six years later and about to breach the slender

link of trust that remained between me and my sixteen-year-old son, I lifted my hand to where the partially opened drawer of Chris's desk called to me, beckoning. The laminated wood finish peeled around the edges, revealing smooth, pale plywood beneath. It would be so easy in this empty house. Ten seconds was all it would take.

I could pick a song to play for one of my callers at the radio station in ten seconds. I could fold one of the undershirts my husband, Mike, wore beneath his police uniform. I could shed a tear. Order a coffee. Give a hug. Check a Facebook message. Speak words I could never snatch back.

Gathering a breath, I pulled at the knob of the top drawer. It came open several inches before jamming against an object.

Now committed, I wiggled my finger inside the drawer to free it of the problem—a slim book, from the feel of it. I caught a glimpse of my concentrated face in the reflection of Chris's blank computer screen. Shame tunneled through me as I faced my act of invasion, yet continued at my task.

The book slipped down, allowing the drawer to glide open. I stared at the unexpected item, its hard cover muted with soft shades of blue, green, and brown.

The Velveteen Rabbit.

I slid the children's book from the drawer, the tattered paper jacket catching on the sides. In a whisper of time I was back in this very room—the walls a dusky blue with brightly colored truck-and-airplane decals sticking to them. A Furby stuffed animal in Chris's lap, one tiny hand clutching an over-size ear. Beside him on the carpet, his twin, Maelynn, holding *The Velveteen Rabbit* across her legs. She read loudly to Chris, who'd taken out his hearing aid in preparation for bed. He

peered over her arm at the picture of a bunny on top of a pile of books, thick glasses sliding off the bridge of Chris's small nose.

There was once a velveteen rabbit, and in the beginning he was really splendid.

I sniffed, shoved the book back into the drawer, and closed it. I hadn't realized the story was in the house anymore. Sweet that Chris would keep it as a reminder of his childhood. No doubt I worried over my son for nothing. He was busy with school and work, maybe tired from adjusting to his junior year. So he didn't talk to me like he used to. What teenage boy confided in his mother?

For a long time he lived in the toy cupboard or on the nursery floor, and no one thought very much about him.

He was naturally shy, and being only made of velveteen, some of the more expensive toys quite snubbed him.

I pulled the shade open, allowing bright sunlight to stream into the room onto the postered walls. A collection of vintage prints, boasting Winchesters and Remingtons, amid paintings of wild birds and hunting dogs. I recognized one at the bottom: a picture of a severed snake, symbolizing the colonies at the time of the Revolution. Below the snake were bold letters: *JOIN, or DIE.*

A chill chased my gaze from the walls and back to the window where a flock of geese sounded their calls over the house. Across Brewster Court, the Nielson preschoolers ran through a sprinkler, enjoying the unseasonably warm afternoon.

I turned from the squealing children to draw the covers up over my son's unmade bed, careful to smooth out the wrinkles. The scent of old roasted coffee from his part-time job at Dunkin' Donuts infused the room.

“What is Real?” asked the Rabbit one day.

“When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become Real.”

A pile of books beside Chris’s bed caught my eye. He always kept library books there. The top one read *Nathan Hale: The Life and Death of America’s First Spy*. I flipped through the remaining titles, similar to the first. Except for one—an older book the same Aegean blue as Chris’s eyes, save for a maroon strip across the binding. *The Journal Entries of Mercy Howard*. I turned to the first page, a musty scent rising to meet me.

September 22, 1836

Every year, on this date, when I find the leaves hinting at near death, I remember. It’s been sixty years since my Nathan died—strung up from the gallows at the Royal Artillery Park in New York City. All remember his name. And yet I am the one who loved him. His death spun into motion the most tumultuous time in my life, of which I now take up my pen to write.

I can no longer bear to take this secret to my grave. I wish to unburden my conscience and make my story known.

A horn honked outside the window and I jumped, closing the book. A Chevy Impala backed out of the Nielsons’ driveway. The driver beeped and waved good-bye to the glistening children on the lawn.

I replaced the books how I’d found them. They must have been for a school report. Chris had always been into stories of

espionage, dreaming of working for the CIA. I hadn't heard him talk about that for some time—or any other dreams for that matter. I vowed to ask him about the report later, maybe strike up more than a two-sentence conversation.

I exhaled a shaky breath, looked to the desk I'd just invaded—a desk with nothing more to hide than childhood memories. What had I been looking for anyway? Drugs? Porn? A pack of cigarettes? I should be ashamed of myself.

Talk about spying.

I stared at the berber carpet, where the picture of peace still clung to my mind's eye.

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

I took one more look around Chris's tidy room, now awash in bright sunlight. All was well. Good, even. Mike was right. I worried over nothing.

I opened the door, my world once again right-side up. My baby—my only son—was fine. My family was fine. Everything was fine.

I left the room, the memory of my daughter's five-year-old voice echoing through its walls.

"Once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

The Rabbit sighed. He thought it would be a long time before this magic called Real happened to him. He longed to become Real, to know what it felt like; and yet the idea of growing shabby and losing his eyes and whiskers was rather sad.

He wished that he could become it without these uncomfortable things happening to him.



7:00 P.M.

I plunged my hands into the soapy dishwater and sought the steel-wool pad I knew to be at the bottom. My fingers brushed its coarse edges, and I grabbed it from beneath the pan I'd fried chicken in forty-five minutes earlier. Loose brown bits came undone with my vigorous scrubbing. They swirled around my skin with each stroke.

"Think I should call Becky's?"

Mike came beside me, glass in hand. "I'm sure she lost track of time. Let's give her five more minutes." He took a last swig of water from his glass before placing it on the top rack of the dishwasher. "Um, honey . . . I think it's dead."

I gave the pan one last swipe for good measure before loading it in the washer and wiping my hands on a dishcloth. "Tell me I worry too much about them."

"You worry too much."

I exhaled. "Just this afternoon I was agonizing over Chris . . . you know, how quiet he's been. Did he even speak an entire sentence at supper?"

Mike raised his eyebrows at me.

"I know, I know. Leave him alone. He's growing up, high school can be turmoil, yada, yada, yada." I closed my eyes as my husband drew me into an embrace. His arm muscles tightened around my shoulders, and in them I felt safe, secure. The rough polyester of his uniform pants brushed against my bare knees, and I laid my head on his chest, my cheek against the white cotton of his undershirt. He smelled of spiced deodorant. I buried my nose deeper. "I never even asked about your day. How'd the lockdown go?"

“Like clockwork.”

I lifted my head. “Find anything?”

“Some coke, more pot. No one the kids hang around with.” He ran his fingers along my side, and my body stirred. It had been too long. With my early morning shifts at the radio station, I often fell into bed before Mike had even taken a shower.

He pressed his chin against the top of my head. More than twenty years ago I fell in love with my husband in a crowded SAT prep class, and never looked back. We didn’t get to twenty years the easy way, either, if there was one. We fought for each year, even separating for a few months after our youngest son, Ryan, died, when the twins were ten. I scrunched my eyes shut against Mike’s shirt, fought to push aside the memories surrounding Ryan’s accident. In many ways, they were still too painful—his death, the twins’ harsh awakening to the reality of an unfair world. Mike’s abandonment.

I stuffed down the hurt of that time and instead brought forth the night Mike had finally come home after three months. I might have pushed my husband away forever if not for my best friend, Danielle, urging me to talk to him, hear him out. Sitting on our front porch in worn rockers with chipped paint, the subtle scent of drying rain on pavement and a smudged rainbow in the distant sky, Mike spoke for the first time of his hurt over our son’s death. He begged forgiveness for his absence, told me he’d met a God who offered second chances on his trip north to the mountains, asked me if I would take him back so we could reassemble the shattered pieces of our family, our marriage.

The hope living inside my broken husband had been undeniable, and I clung to it, sought the second chances he spoke of. And we’d lived. Thrived, even, despite the odds.

Yes, we'd been through the fire.

Now, we could certainly handle a couple of cranky teens.

"How about you? How's my Skye?"

I pinched his side for the slight tease. My radio name not only protected my family's privacy, it left me free to be who I had to be on the air. Skye admitted her vulnerabilities, but she wasn't afraid of them. Skye looked to God always, for hope in the midst of darkness. She may doubt, she may falter, but she always had her priorities straight. And she always, always had the right words. If only Skye would translate just a little more to Natalie.

Mike squeezed me once more, then ended our embrace. "You know, for all the worrying you do about Chris being so withdrawn, look who's upstairs in his room studying, and look who missed dinner again, for the second time this week."

"You're right." I grabbed up my phone and tapped out a **Where are you?** to Maelynn, hitting the send arrow. "Maybe you and Chris could spend some time together this weekend?"

Mike shrugged. "If he wants to."

"Mike . . ."

"Nat, I will. We will. I'll take him to the range. Bow season's right around the corner, he'll be perking up in no time."

I kissed his whiskered cheek. "Thank you."

"You know, we can't always fix their problems. They're going to make mistakes, and hopefully learn from them." He shook his head. "Sixteen. By now, I hope we taught them all the important stuff."

"I know," I whispered. He thought I suffocated the twins, that I was overbearing, overprotective, obsessively concerned for their well-being. Well, maybe I was. But there were no do-overs at this mother thing, and I'd already failed once. These

kids—my Maelynn, my Chris—they were my life. Sure, I had Mike. I had the station. I had my friends and my church. But all that would be there in two years when the twins graduated and went off to college. The crushing press of time bore down on us—I wanted to safeguard every moment.

The door opened. Maelynn stood at its threshold, a textbook stuck beneath an arm. Her hair was pulled into an uncharacteristically messy ponytail with a tangled lump at the elastic. The edges of her eyes puffed swollen and red.

“Maelynn, what happened?” I went to my daughter, put my hand to her cheek. She pulled away.

“Where have you been?” Mike’s voice was hard.

I shot him a look. *Easy there, Officer Mike.*

He inhaled deeply, struggling to calm himself, to rein in the urge to let a firm hand fall when our daughter was clearly hurting.

I closed my eyes, breathed around a halfhearted prayer before speaking to my daughter. “Are you okay?”

Her eyes shone, and her bottom lip stuck out. She shook her head. An unpleasant scent wafted from her clothes. A cross between burning leaves and skunk cabbage . . . No. I thought my daughter was bright enough to keep her head above all that.

“What happened?” Mike kept his distance.

“Why don’t you ask your freak-of-nature son?” In a sudden movement, she pushed off the wall and started up the stairs, her chemistry textbook still clutched against her chest.

“Maelynn! Maelynn, get back down here.” Mike’s command was ignored.

“Let her go.” I spoke soft enough for only Mike to hear.

“Let her go? Did you smell that? I’m not doing drug busts

at the school only to have my own daughter come home smelling like weed.”

I looked up the stairs, waiting for the sound of her door to shut, but all I heard were muffled voices. “She’s upset. Let me talk to her.”

Mike’s fists clenched.

What did a good parent do in this situation? I imagined Skye behind the microphone of the radio station, headphones on, listening to a caller emptying her heart out to me and my cohost, Tom, regarding her drug-addicted daughter. It didn’t happen often, but when it did, I made it my goal to offer hope. A hope greater than drugs, a hope greater than high school popularity, a hope greater than this world or ourselves. How did I always seem to find the right words on the air but come up short with my own family? How could I persuade my listeners that all would be okay in the end, but fail again and again to grasp it in my own life? And if I, the dispenser of advice, found these words hollow when I truly needed them, how much good could they have done for my listeners in their own times of trial?

I trudged up the stairs, the rubber soles of my slippers quiet on the hardwood. I strained to hear Maelynn’s strident voice above. As I reached the landing, I crept close to the wall, a snoop for the second time in one day in my own house. It sounded as if she was in Chris’s room.

“I want you to leave me alone. Seriously. Stay out of my life, okay?”

Silence.

“Okay?”

I took three steps closer.

Then, the low voice of my son. He’d hit puberty late, and

I still couldn't get used to the manly voice—one I didn't hear enough. "He's no good for you."

"Who are you to tell me who's good for me? You don't have a say; do you get that, Chris?"

"I'm glad you broke up with him."

News flash. Wow, big news flash. And I couldn't say I wasn't happy. Jake Richbow was an all-American boy—good looks, starting wide receiver of the football team, bright, polite, attended church with his parents often enough . . . and yet something about him made my skin crawl, just below the surface. Like I couldn't trust him. Like Jake Richbow didn't have one authentic bone in his body.

A long sigh from Maelynn. "Look, I love you, okay? I wish you were more . . . I don't know . . . *normal*, but I love you. But you have to get one thing. We shared a womb. That's it, Chris. We don't share this life. I might have stuck up for you today, but don't count on me to do it again."

Maelynn stormed out of Chris's room and toward her own, farther down the hall. I leaned my head against the wall. Things were so much easier when they were five, and my biggest problem was who got to play with the newest Play-Doh container.

I went to Maelynn's room and knocked lightly on the door before poking my head in. She lay on her lavender bedspread, earbuds in place. I could hear the thrum of the bass from where I stood. She tugged one bud out.

"We need to talk."

"Okay."

I gestured to my ears, and she shut off the music and lay the buds by her side.

"I wasn't the one smoking pot."

“Becky was?”

Maelynn shook her head. “One of the other girls. I didn’t smoke the joint, Mom, I swear. And I’m sorry I was late again, but I had *the* worst day ever.”

“Your father and I expect you home in time for supper. Even on bad days.”

“You don’t understand,” she whispered.

“Maelynn . . .” She was right. I didn’t understand. But I wanted to. I wanted to help her. How could I be both guardian and confidante? My parents sure hadn’t done a good job, and it had pushed me away. Right now, I wondered if I did any better.

My eye caught a picture, one of many, on the corkboard above her desk. She and Chris had their twelve-year-old arms flung around one another, the sopping material of their T-shirts clinging to their freshly baptized bodies. They both beamed at the camera. I tried to see behind the smiles now. I wondered if we had put too much pressure on them to commit to something they hadn’t yet fully embraced, if them being baptized was a sort of false assurance that our kids would cling to God for the rest of their lives. I moved my gaze to the picture beside it—Ryan’s last school picture, taken in kindergarten.

I looked away, rubbed my right eye with my palm. I was tired. 2 a.m. came all too soon. “Tell me what happened. Maybe I could help.”

She flopped over, her back toward me. “It’s nothing. I’m fine. Really.”

“I heard you broke up with Jake.”

She shrugged. “He—never mind.”

“You know you can talk to me about anything.”

“I know.” But did she?

Up until a few years ago, I'd envisioned this being a time in her life when we would bond. Go shopping together. Go to the beach. She'd talk with me, ask me for advice.

But the last year we'd grown so far apart I wondered if we'd ever find our way together again.

"Sometimes these things work themselves out. I'm proud of whatever you did to stick up for your brother today."

More silence. I didn't have the energy to pry. I stood. "That said, I think it's best you don't go out this weekend."

She released an exaggerated sigh.

"I love you, honey. We both do. We only want what's best."

"Whatever."

I closed my eyes, gathered myself, and left the room.

At Chris's door, I repeated my soft knock and head poke. He slumped on his bed, slouched against the wall, his thumbs tapping on his phone. He put it down when he saw me.

"Just saying good night." I sat on the bed beside him. "Everything okay?"

He nodded. His hair fell in front of his glasses, and he didn't bother swiping it to the side. "Yeah."

"Your dad was saying he wanted to spend some time with you this weekend. He mentioned the range."

"Kay." I got the distinct impression he wanted me to leave so he could go back to whatever he did on his iPhone.

"Who you texting?" As if I couldn't guess. Chris had few friends.

"Steve."

"Well, better finish up. Don't you have that trig exam tomorrow?"

He nodded.

I breathed deep into the pit of my belly, like they taught me

at that one yoga class I attended. “I heard you and Maelynn arguing.” Or more like Maelynn venting at Chris. “Listen, there’s nothing wrong with standing up for yourself. Don’t let other kids push you around. You have as much of a right to be on this earth—and in that high school—as they do, you know?”

Jesus said turn the other cheek. But did that mean letting others walk over us? Did that mean cowering in a corner until our circumstances improved on their own?

Sometimes, we needed to take a stand.

Chris only shrugged.

I opened my mouth, then closed it. He’d heard this all before. Time for a different tack. I reached for the pile of Nathan Hale books. “For history?”

“Yeah.”

“Presentation?”

“Yup.”

“I saw them when I was making your bed earlier.” No need to mention the snooping. I picked up *The Journal Entries of Mercy Howard*. “This one looked interesting. Read it at all?”

“Nah. The librarian gave it to me, but it’s not really my thing.”

“Maybe I’ll take a look at it? See if there’s anything useful?”

He shrugged. “Whatever.”

I fought the frustration climbing my throat for release in a satisfying scream. I didn’t think I’d be able to take one more “whatever” out of my kids for the day. They were like temperamental toddlers who replaced their tantrums with lumps of meaningless words. What more could I do? I had tried to break through to them. Suddenly all I wanted was a warm bath laced with lavender oil.

“Thanks.” I took the book and headed out of the room.
“Good night.”

I didn’t say “I love you” because I knew, like every other night, it would be met with silence. A slight rebuff, a nonverbal “whatever.”

Of course he knew I loved him. I’d only told him every night of his sixteen years. He’d never doubt my love, of this I was certain.

If the twins could feel secure in one thing, it was their parents’ love.