

Dark Ugly Places

Prologue and Chapter One

Ashley Mansour • Monikher Press • September 15, 2026

Prologue

No one likes to be kept in the dark.

In the dark, everything is murky, even the Los Angeles sky.

But the day of Nicola's accident, I had a pretty clear view of things. It tends to be that way—clear—when Nicola isn't.

Nicola, Ben, and their daughter, Emmy, were walking holding hands, something the three of them hadn't done since Emmy was a little kid. I felt the itch in Nicola's palm, like she didn't want to hold hands. But Emmy insisted. She was between them, arms outstretched, making that little humming sound she sometimes made when she was nervous or lost in thought. Ben walked on slightly ahead, his head down, eyes focused on the phone in his hand. I could almost hear his teeth grinding.

Up ahead, the road was clear. The sun covered everything in butter-yellow light. Crows perched in the bare-barked trees and made long, scratchy cries like a group of smokers laughing. They rustled leaves and crossed the pavement before them. But the trees were still, like the air had been sucked out of the city. Up ahead, the road was clear.

The three of them approached the corner, Emmy and Nicola chatting aimlessly. Ben narrowed his eyes and squinted at the screen as if the sky was too bright. He stepped out into the road first. Emmy, next. She skipped slightly—braids flying—and pulled her mom's arm.

Nicola looked up and saw one of the crows overhead, its beak open, making a dreadful sound. When she looked back at the road, her gut pinged with a horrible dread she couldn't place.

Then she—we—saw it.

From the middle distance, something large and white hurtled into view, its body glinting in the sun. Emmy screamed. Nicola tried to pull her back, but one by one, her fingers slipped out of her grasp.

It was too late.

Nicola's body collided with the big, white thing, and in the next moment, she was airborne, tumbling through the air as if she had been taken by a tornado. Her thoughts spiraled with her, spinning out of control.

I'm going to die.

I'm going to live.

Don't let me die.

I'm going to die.

She kept spiraling, around and around, until I stopped her with a simple suggestion: *Breathe, Nicola. Breathe.* We have this power, those of us who live in the darkness.

The asphalt grated her spine. It must have hurt, but Nicola did not cry. Perhaps because the air was too full of Emmy's screams.

She rolled to her left, her left arm pinned against her chest like a piece of limp fabric. Her left leg lay stretched out before her perfectly straight, but dead. Cold. Frozen in place. She rolled to her side and saw Emmy, blood coating half of her face as though she were wearing a mask. Five feet away, Ben lay in the road unmoving, his body contorted, his face turned away.

Overhead, the stretch of blue sky angled down Beverly Boulevard and went on forever. Cars passed, some honking, others slowing to stop and help or to get a better look. Nicola grunted and heaved herself along the ground, her jaw gritting with pain. She reached for Emmy, reached for Ben.

The white body of the car stirred. A door opened. A black polished shoe emerged onto the asphalt as the driver leaned out, then disappeared again as the door shut. I heard the engine as the car started and rolled backwards, slow at first, then picking up speed until it was gone.

Chapter One

Nicola

Snap. Prick. Burn.

The pinch of electricity in my dead leg wakes me from the dream of the accident, Emmy's scream still ringing in my ears. *Perhaps I'll always hear it now*, I think as I roll to my left side—the dead side, useless as a doornail—and slap feeling into my thigh, but there's nothing. If you took a needle and jabbed it in, I would probably twist it a few inches deeper to see if I could feel it tickle.

A groan escapes me as I heave myself from the bed and stare at the nightstand cluttered with six months' worth of post-accident prescription bottles. I stand with prickling tendons, the burn of an aching, underused muscle, my whole left side from my shoulder to my toes as limp as if I have novocain in my limbs.

I snatch a bottle from the dresser—the usual cocktail to start the day—painkillers, anti-anxiety medication that does next to nothing, and Topamax. Sweet, beautiful, woefully expensive Topamax—the anti-seizure medication that happens to work for migraines too, even if doctors don't quite understand why. My mind races as I swallow the cocktail, thinking back to the first day I took it and couldn't recall how to make oatmeal—a stunner of a brain fart. I stood there at the stove, paralyzed, unable to count to three, like an Alzheimer's patient grappling for a memory. Everything was blank, my brain ticking silently away but coming upon blank numbers, blank time.

And then there is Imitrex, the migraine abortive—easy, cheap, always available. My reliable old friend. I take her, and like magic, my migraine slowly fades to the background.

And the foreground? That's where Anger resides. Anger is my constant companion, a vampirish love connection I cannot seem to part with. It's with me even as I make the bed and get dressed, my feet stumbling along the floor, left foot dragging from the nerve damage. My hands fumble in the dark for clothes in the pit of my closet shelf, and I pull out clothes for my shift at the Whitmore—yoga pants that are designed to look like trousers, a black tee shirt, and a cardigan with a curious dark stain on the sleeve, so I tuck it under and hope no one will notice, especially Emmy.

Emmy will be grossed out by it. She'll wear an entire perfectly clean outfit like she does every day. We'll fight about it. I'll tell her, "Just wear stuff twice! It's not so bad!" And she'll say, "Mom, do you know how disgusting you sound?" And for a second, I'll agree with her in my head that it is disgusting. The whole thing is disgusting, but what it comes down to is this: Our home isn't ours anymore. Neither are our washer and dryer. Our apartment building has precisely one washer and dryer that cost \$2.00 a

load, and I'll be damned if I'm going to do laundry every week with my shift schedule. Truth be told, I'm in no shape to be hauling eight million loads of laundry around until kingdom come, even if I wanted to.

Down the hall, limping, limping, I bang on Emmy's door, her laptop squawking away with the sound of a teenage girl with a British accent talking about some celebrity's latest plastic surgery.

"Get dressed, Em!"

She's into something on YouTube called CelebrityStalkShow, run by a Hollywood-obsessed kid who seems to beat all the paparazzi to the punch. She yells something at me through the door, my signal to disappear from her area, and I depart down the flight of stairs at the speed of a centenarian.

At the landing, I sense something wet on my bad foot and look down at it in the center of Scotch's cold pee puddle. The foul smell hits me, and I curse.

Not "fuck." Not "shit." The bad one. The one my mother would hate to hear me say. Rhymes with *hunt*.

"Classy."

I look up. Emmy is behind me on the landing. Isn't it funny how teenagers have this tremendous gift of sneaking up on you precisely at your worst possible moment?

"Scotch peed," I say lamely.

"I can see that."

"Let him out, Em, will you?" I ask, my voice tired and insistent.

"I think he's already relieved himself right here. In our kitchen. Where we eat."

I release a long, exasperated sigh, and Emmy pushes down the stairs past me, her hair matted in place, showing the pink crest of her scar. I try not to stare and pinch the spot on my hand that Dr. Constance said would be calming in moments like these. But it's 7:32 a.m., and I don't feel calm. I feel angry. And tired. And like I want to be teleported out of my own life for even a brief minute.

I give Emmy the look, the one my mother gave me and that her mother probably gave her. The one that lets her see a little into the quiet, grieving parts of me. Lately, I've been peeling back the layers often and letting her see more than usual. Maybe too much.

Emmy opens the back door to the shared courtyard and takes Scotch outside. I mop up his mess, then peel the pee-soaked black sock off my bad foot and dump it in the trash. One stair at a time, I haul myself back up to wash off my foot and leg in our tub—the one crusted with brown rings and white soap stains still because I don't have the strength to scrub it, despite what the physical therapist tells me.

I hobble back downstairs. Emmy is still with Scotch outside, wandering around with his plastic bag, trying to figure out what to do with it. His little white body shakes and shivers as he follows Emmy and sniffs at the ground. I never wanted a dog, or a Westie for that matter. Scotch—including the name—was Ben's idea.

Ben. Our good Ben. Dead Ben ...

For a moment, I think that if I can just close my eyes, more details will emerge.

The car—so brilliantly white it hurt to look at it.

Those shoes. Black and heavy.

The scent of freshly applied cologne.

A single tattoo around the man's middle finger, like a wedding band.

He was that close, and yet, for some reason inexplicable to me, I cannot remember his face.

My ears ring for a moment before I snap out of it. I go to the window over the kitchen sink and silently mouth, "Garbage can. Don't bring it inside," and then put breakfast out on the counter. Cereal and the last of the milk, but not the organic kind like we used to get. I place Emmy's pills beside her bowl on a paper towel. There are things we still haven't found a way to talk about.

When I look up, Emmy has pulled open the sliding glass door, no bag of shit in her hands.

"Relax, I threw it away."

"A+," I say sarcastically and instantly regret it. Why can't I just say thank you?

"You're welcome."

She washes her hands, then hops silently up onto the breakfast stool and turns to gaze outside at the shared courtyard of our apartment complex. Her hair is still growing back over her scar, but it's patchy, uneven, and it looks awful. I reach for her arm, but she flinches. She turns. Her eyes are cold and blank.

"Can I stay home today? I don't feel great."

"Em. It's your first day."

"So?"

"So you know this isn't a good start. You have to go. It will be fine ..."

She glares at me. "I really don't feel like I can face it."

I take her in, a million micro-signals at once. Her hunched shoulders, the marks on the back of her hand—ballpoint pen, drawn by her, but who could guess? The friendship bracelets that were on her wrist from the summer before last, faded and fraying, now bombarded by dark leather bands and multiple hair ties. Her nails bitten down to short nubs. Her head, shaved at the side where her scar is, parted unintentionally along where her braid used to be. I feel a jolt of grief in my core before the usual wave of rage rises up inside me, a hot, ruthless tide. I force it down again.

“You know, Em, it’s okay to feel the way you do. You’ve been through a lot. We’ve been through a lot.”

I try for genuine emotion without anger. It’s so much easier to be angry. Anger is my default. Anger is a nice, easy substitute. Anger gets the job done.

Emmy turns, her face bright, like she’s realized something. “It’s okay. You’re right. I’ll go.”

A forced smile spreads across her face. She ducks her head low and finishes her cereal with three whopping bites. Her scar seems to wriggle while she chews.

“I’ll go,” she repeats quietly.

“Honey,” I start. I pause, searching for the words. “It’s okay to hate it. I hate it, too.”

She smiles that same weak smile, like there’s something I’m missing, something I just don’t get. Outside, a siren blares from the main road, and Emmy jumps. I try to make it seem like I don’t notice.

Emmy jumps in her sleep now. Her body jolts like she’s being electrocuted. It’s like when you’re falling asleep, and you dream you’re actually falling, and your body twitches. That’s what Emmy does, except she does it over and over again. I asked her if she was dreaming of that day. She said she wasn’t, but it didn’t start until six months ago.

I scoop some kibble into Scotch’s bowl. The tiny brown pebbles *ting ting ting* against the cold steel. He nudges toward me and sits, waiting until I finish. Emmy sets her half-eaten bowl of cereal in the kitchen sink and runs the water over it.

“Can we get soy milk next time?”

“Yeah, whatever you want.”

“Good,” she says, looking pleased. “Ready to go?”

Upstairs, I quickly brush my teeth and hear my stomach growl. I hear it but don’t feel it. That’s the thing about Topamax. You know you’re hungry, but you never feel like eating. I pull up my tee shirt and examine my frame. I can’t tell if I look different, except for the hollowness that’s formed around my

cheeks and under my eyes. The scale says differently. Thirty pounds fell off me over these past six months. And I haven't even been trying.

In the bathroom, I pry open the mirror door to the medicine cabinet facing me and reach for the day's setup: a Topamax and a couple of Imitrex. Imitrex, my old faithful, goes into my pocket for the migraine that will return later, just as it does every single day. I also know that aspirin or over-the-counter fare won't cut through the fog, the nausea. The sensitivity to light, sound, and smell—and the blinding, throbbing pain. It's not *if* I'll get a migraine, but *when*.

The tap runs cold for what feels like an eternity, and I swallow the extra painkiller, then wash my face in freezing cold water that lightly smells of chlorine.

Technically, I'm considered an "eggshell claimant," which means there was something considerably wrong with me before the accident. A "migraineur," or a person who suffers from chronic migraines. They got a lot worse after that day, after I rolled off the hood of the Rolls-Royce. The police didn't believe me, but I knew it was a Rolls-Royce that had sped through the stop sign, taking the turn at a whipping pace, accelerating into the three of us without a hint of braking.

Rolling off a Rolls. It's almost comical now. For a quick moment, I peer down near my navel and rub the small circular scar where the hood ornament—a lady with wings—punctured my left side and sliced into my pelvis, leaving the slight impression of a pointy feathered wing on my skin.

The thing is, only a Rolls-Royce makes a hood ornament like that. I know because Ben wanted one for a long time. He said the Mercedes didn't have the same feel now that Mercedes-Benz started embedding their hood ornaments on the front of their cars, making them all nice and flat. I guess they knew their drivers drove fast and their Mercs were hitting a lot of people. Maybe Rolls-Royce doesn't care that its status symbol is basically akin to a deadly weapon.

The strangest thing—I haven't seen a white Rolls-Royce since that day.

From the medicine cabinet, I take out the bottle of bright blue mouthwash and gulp a mouthful.

One swish. *Don't think about it.*

Two. *Don't picture it.*

Three. *It's all in the past.*

Four. *You don't have to be afraid.*

Five. *It won't happen to you again.*

Spit. *But it might. It could.*

My mind starts to buzz as the painkiller takes effect and dulls my thoughts, a shade pulled down over the window of a sunlit room. The thinking stops for a little while.

I watch the blue liquid swirl around in the sink, tinting the porcelain as it goes down, slowly, slowly.

It's not the same sink, or the same house, as that wretched day from before, when Emmy was a baby ... but my brain doesn't know that. It thinks the thoughts it wants to, drugs or not. I'm a hostage.

And what do I think about?

Death, of course. How near it was and may still be. I think of how death seems like that nice, clean break, but it leaves so much behind. The seeping, oozing wound of loss, regret, and confusion. The questions unanswered. The things unsaid.

But I also think of that day and finding him, the man behind the wheel. He's out there somewhere. Alive. Untouched. Carefree.

Or perhaps care/less.

I'd like to be as careless as he.

The blue swirl of my saliva and mouthwash moves round and round, and I turn on the tap to make it run clear again. When I look up, my own face catches me off guard. The dark circles. The abrupt pointed end of my nose. The blotchy, colorless yawn of both cheeks that used to be full, that used to make me pretty. Below, small, accented lines strut toward my mouth. I rub my forefinger across my lips and try to make them disappear. I don't enjoy looking into my own eyes, but I do it anyway, just for a second.

A thought appears, quick and sharp, a tack pressing into my temple. I resist, but it swells, unstoppable, an ocean inside me ...

You are not who you thought you were.