

Part One

April 2024

Ammy

Ammy's fingers curl around the bottle in her blazer pocket. They have been drawn there repeatedly, as if magnetised, ever since she lifted it from the chemist on the way home from school. Not the local chemist, duh. That's way too risky. They know her mum there. Everyone in Mulgrave knows her mum, or at least it feels that way.

That's what happens when you're the kindergarten teacher: people constantly stopping you in the street, pushing their snotty-nosed offspring forward and demanding, 'Say hello to Miss Maccioni! You remember Miss Maccioni, don't you?' *Of course they don't*, Ammy wants to yell at them. They were, what – four? – when they last laid eyes on her; they've moved on with their lives since then. But her mum is always happy to be recognised, will simper and gush over how the kid has grown, then turn to her and say, 'Ammy, this is Grace' – or Coco, or Jewel, or whatever stupid name was in favour when they were born – 'I used to teach her, gosh, it must be five years ago now!' As if Ammy cares, as if Grace cares, as if anyone gives a flying fuck.

She exhales and stares out the window of the bus, her hand sneaking back into her pocket. So, no, she hadn't chanced the local

pharmacy; had instead wandered the aisles of a Chemmart near her school on Clayton Road where hardly anyone spoke English, at least not enough, she hoped, to call the cops. After pocketing the hair dye, she made a show of deliberating over the eyeliners for so long that any security staff watching her must have surely got bored and turned away, then finally bought the cheapest and ambled out to wait for her bus. Paying for *something* is the trick. If you bypass the till you immediately look suspicious and, besides, if anyone questioned her after she left the store she could protest, with some justification, that of course she'd intended to pay. She'd paid for the eyeliner, hadn't she? She'd just forgotten she'd even put the hair dye in her pocket. Then the tears would brim and they'd take the dye but leave her alone.

People are so stupid, she thinks. So trusting, which is the same thing. Ammy pulls the bottle from her pocket and studies the label. *Blue Doom*, it says, superimposed over a picture of a girl with azure hair and tattoos climbing one arm. She smiles. Blue Doom. She likes that. She likes the tattoos too, craves them, but she knows her limits. The hair she might get away with – there is an athletics carnival tomorrow at school. There's no way she's going to do anything as outlandish as *run*, but dyeing her hair in her house colour . . . that shows participation, right? It shows support, engagement, all the shit her teachers are always banging on about. How is she to know that the dye is actually permanent?

Her smile steals into a smirk. What a shame! She'll just have to wait for it to grow out. That should give her until Year 10, and in the meantime she gets to have blue hair, instead of dumb red; blue hair in a whole school of interchangeable blondes and brunettes. Let's see what the teachers have to say about that! And if they insist she dyes it back, she'll make another mistake, a red so shrill, so

strident, they'll wish she'd left it blue. Tattoos though, she thinks sadly, not yet. Not until she is eighteen, still four long years away, and can get them without her mother's permission. Fat chance of ever obtaining that. Her mum is so overprotective. She'd been okay about Ammy having her ears pierced when she was twelve, had even paid for it, but when Ammy mentioned she wanted seconds a year later, Mum reacted as if she had suggested a mohawk.

'Not a chance,' she proclaimed without even considering the request.

'Why?' Ammy demanded.

Her mum paused. 'Because they'll make you look . . .'

'Cheap?' Ammy swooped, ready to fight, to shame her for the word. Was that any way to label women?

'Too grown up,' her mum said instead. 'You're only thirteen. Why do you need your ears pierced twice?'

Because it looked cool. Because why not? Because it was just skin, for God's sake, it wasn't *sacred*. And because, yes, it might make her look a bit more grown up. Ammy was itching to grow up – still is. It couldn't happen fast enough, but there was no way that particular reason would wash with her mum, none of them would, so she just mumbled something and left the room, then did it herself two days later with the help of her friend Maddy and a darning needle Mads borrowed from her grandmother. It took her mother a week to notice, but by then it was too late. The studs were in, the holes scabbing over.

It will be different once she is older, she tells herself, standing up and hoisting her schoolbag onto her shoulder, pressing the buzzer for her stop. She'll get all the tattoos she likes. She'll get her nipples pierced if she feels like it, and she probably will. Our Ladies won't be happy, but so what? She hadn't asked to be enrolled there. She'd

wanted to go to Mulgrave Secondary, with her friends from primary school, but her mother had insisted. It was ridiculous! They aren't even Catholic . . . Her father's family are, though, so her mum seized on that and made the application.

'But why?' her dad asked when her mum thrust the papers for him to sign under his nose, almost as soon as he dropped Ammy off from one of her weekends at his place. They thought she was in her room, but she was skulking in the hallway just outside the kitchen, hidden by the coat rack. It was a handy spot for eavesdropping. She'd used it before. 'There's nothing wrong with Mulgrave Secondary. Or send her to Oakleigh, near me, if you think there is.'

Ammy almost heard her mum turn away and scabble through the top drawer for a working pen. 'It's just that I think she'll meet a better class of person at Our Ladies,' she said eventually. 'And they'll expect more from her. They'll give her more too. They have to, don't they? Isn't that why you pay fees?' She laughed, a hollow sound.

'Since when do you care about class, Kelsey?' her dad asked. He sounded confused, a little sad.

'I don't. Not really. You know that. As long as she finishes Year 12 without dropping out to work as a pole-dancer I'll be happy. But she's all we've got. We should do the best we can by her, give her a good start.' The drawer was pushed shut. 'I'll pay,' her mum added. 'I've done the sums. I can manage it. It's not like it's Lauriston or something.'

'Kels—' her father began, but was cut off.

'I know, we're still paying off the clinic, and the mortgage – you are, anyway. So let me do this. I really think it will be the making of her. And all-girls too, Raf . . . that's a good thing. She's already distractible enough.'

Ammy can still remember how she felt, lurking in the shadows, cheeks burning. *What about me?* she wanted to call out. *Do I get a say?* And she wasn't distractible, it was just that her teacher was so boring.

'Do you really think it will suit her, though?'' her dad persisted. 'Our Ladies is pretty old-fashioned, isn't it? I can't really see Ammy in a hat and a tunic.'

Too right, Dad, Ammy thought, but he was overruled. They both were. Her mum, Ammy later decided, was a snob. She would have loved to have sent her only child to Lauriston, or St Catherine's, or any other of Melbourne's exclusive grammar schools, but she couldn't afford them. Our Ladies was the compromise, the pseudo-private education, even if she'd had to fake a whole religion to get Ammy enrolled.

The house is quiet as Ammy lets herself in. It smells faintly of laundry detergent and last night's dinner. Of course it's quiet: her mother is at work, teaching her kinder class, and it's only the two of them living here, has been ever since her parents separated almost ten years ago, when Ammy was four. She doesn't remember it, doesn't remember them ever living together as a family. It's always been this back and forth, like a tide pulled between two moons: most days with her mum, and then Tuesday nights and every second weekend with her father. Ammy dumps her schoolbag and wanders into the kitchen to get something to eat, checking the clock on the microwave: 1.25. Good. Plenty of time before Mum gets back around four, the same time Ammy would normally be arriving if she hadn't faked a dentist appointment and nicked off early at lunch, but there is no way she could have done this with her mother at home.

What was it that Maddy once said? Better to beg forgiveness than ask permission. There is no way Ammy plans to apologise for what she is about to do – her body, her choice – but she doesn't intend to ask permission either.

She sets everything up in the bathroom: an old towel, the bottle of Blue Doom, two flimsy plastic gloves that are folded inside the instructions. Ammy gives the leaflet a cursory glance, but she's pretty sure she knows what she's doing. How hard can it be? Wet hair, put dye on hair, wait, rinse it out. She fills the basin, lowers her head and watches as the auburn strands darken into russet. The ginger fuzz she'd been born with had darkened over the years, but never disappeared, surprising both her parents. 'Bloodnut,' her dad called her when she was little, fondly, but with surprise. He is Italian, and swarthy; there are no redheads on his side of the family. Her mother, in contrast, is Scottish, sharing Ammy's pale skin, but has light brown hair and eyes. Ammy doesn't really look like either of them, but that is okay. She doesn't want to. Anyway, she isn't going to be a redhead for much longer.

She lets out the water, squeezes her hair and bundles it into the towel while she takes off her uniform, pleased with herself for remembering. *See, Mum?* she thinks. *No stains. I can be responsible. You just have to trust me.* But her mum never trusts her, still takes her laptop and her phone away every single night before bed, even though Ammy has promised that she won't use them after lights out. She probably goes through them both, spying on her, trying to catch her out. *Bitch.*

Ammy catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror, face flushed with anger, and quickly looks away, but it's too late. She's already seen the way her stomach pushes out from her undies, the acne on her shoulders, her ridiculous breasts, etched with silvery stretch

marks like snail trails. She wants boobs, of course. It would be awful to be flat, like Charlotte in her sports class, who everybody teases. But she doesn't really want them to be *this* big. It is as if they've grown another size since last week, have a life of their own.

Flustered, she pulls off the towel, uncaps the dye, starts pouring it onto her head. The sooner she looks like somebody else the better. *Oh, Ammy.* She can almost see the disappointment on her mother's face, and the vision excites her, goads her on. But, shit, she's forgotten about the gloves, and her hair is already dripping blue, inky drops onto the porcelain, the floor. She thought the dye would be thicker than this, would stay in one place.

Ammy grabs for the towel, wipes her hands, swipes at the mess in the sink. This only smears it further, seeping into the cracks around the plug hole, staining her fingers, her nails. *Fuck.* She's dead. Her mother is going to kill her. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* She's trying to pull a glove on when she knocks the half-full bottle of Blue Doom onto the floor, watches helplessly as it shatters all over the tiles.