



**It is the 1970s, when young women are discovering  
their voice, changing, demanding equal rights.**

## **Chapter 1**

She can't remember when she hasn't retreated behind the brick fence isolating the school in the red light district. It's an old church inner city school. Expensive. Only girls. Built before the prostitutes, drug dealers, homeless took possession.

Her thick black hair is pulled tightly back. She rubs her hands along her black-ribbed stockings, straightening them, then carefully puts on her regulation hat. She hurries past other girls towards the school. The girls look out of place in their large, blue-rimmed felt bowlers, like escapee bishops. Those hats would have been a penance for the archbishop, but there is no mercy shown to the girls.

Tessa's felt bowler is always worn neatly on her head. She envies her closest friend Athena, who squashes her hat into the smallest of balls and crushes it into her school bag. Only when a teacher appears does Athena unravel the felt ball and place it casually on her head. School rules say the hat has to be worn or there's a detention. Sometimes someone stops Athena, but she never gets a detention, or a new hat. At the end of the day, they walk to the bus stop together. They talk about school and family and the rough sandstone brick terraces they pass with their decaying occupants. There's unconscious irony at a girl their age, standing against 'Power to Women' slashed across the wall of the Church of Christ. Her thin legs are smoothed by clear stockings that disappear into a shiny leather skirt. The girls catch her eye and she calls out laughingly, 'Wanna join me? You can make a lot of money.' Her hand rubs the air.

Tessa looks down as they walk past. She whispers, 'Her stockings aren't like ours.' The girl is occupied now, talking to a man who towers over her. Tessa shudders. 'Is she eighteen, like us?'

Athena shakes her head. 'I don't know.' They walk quickly then, their reflections a precious secret between them.

The bus trip is short, and Tessa watches Athena move away towards her home. They are joined in their Greek ancestry, but Athena is third generation Australian and only speaks Greek to her grandparents. Her parents go on short holidays and leave Athena and her brother to look after the house. Tessa can't imagine her father ever allowing that. Athena has parties and goes to other girls' homes and school camps. Tessa is forbidden. Sometimes she argues with her mother. 'Please, tell me why? Everyone is going. Tell me.' Her mother never answers properly, hiding behind tables and chairs until Tessa shouts. 'It's not fair.' Then her mother cries and Tessa whispers. 'I'm sorry.' Tessa dares not ask her father. He remembers the village he came from and still looks to the traditions and old ways.

Tessa is allowed her special friend because Athena's parents go to the large white Greek Orthodox church. The church stands firmly planted between the red brick Australian cottages. It would have looked magnificent against the green twisted olive trees on an ancient hillside, but its round basilica and looming towers sit alien among its neighbours.

Sundays are precious to Tessa. She has faith, even when the service is endless. Tessa looks at Athena who sits beside her. Athena nudges her when the priest's hat is crooked or if someone chants out of tune, and they laugh secretly behind their hands.

Sometimes Athena shakes her dark hair and lets her fingers slide slowly through the long strands. Tessa notices men look, until their wives or mothers nudge them back to their prayers. Tessa touches her hair nervously, in anticipation, but no one looks.

This Sunday is special, because Tessa's parents have given her permission to go on a picnic with Athena's family. The service ends and people gather outside for the social talk that is a necessary ritual, inquiring about each other's health and family, talking politics and taxes and church. Athena puts her arm through Tessa's, as they wait for people to complete their observances.

Tessa is relieved to wave goodbye to her parents and her younger brother Peter, who is sixteen. Tessa is relieved that she's not going home to prepare their usual Sunday lunch. She doesn't want to help her mother cook and serve and clear up today. She doesn't want to watch Peter sit with her father at the table expectantly. *I am happy. I'm going on a picnic with Athena.*

Athena's voice is musical as she calls her into the car. They hum to the songs on the radio and Athena rocks against her until they are in rhythm.

The greenness of the park makes a wedge in the suburban sprawl of bricks and mortar. They drive into the park and stop midway between rose gardens and lakes. Athena's parents spread out a blanket on the grass. There is so much food, and they indolently eat roast lamb and buttered rolls. It is the hottest part of the day and Athena's parents lie on their picnic lounge chairs, half dozing.

'We're going for a walk. Is that all right?' Athena asks.

'Go on. Enjoy the park. But don't go too far,' her mother answers.

The sunlight drifts through the trees, making the girls appear dreamlike. Athena's hair glistens in the reflections of the hot rays. They wander past gardens, through trees, following unknown trails far from the blanket and picnic lounge chairs. The girls lean against each other. Tessa puts her arm around Athena's waist. Athena softly murmurs Tessa's name.

Playfully Athena shakes her head, letting the lethargy fall from her. 'Let's go to the lake.' She takes Tessa's hand, pulling her towards the blueness. They run slowly at first, tripping leaves and grass. Then they skip, moving their legs high like show horses cantering, then galloping, then racing, panting, with black manes flicking. They reach the lake's edge breathless; laughing as they fall at the lake's shore.

Athena splashes water on her face, enjoying it trickling down her neck, wetting her blouse. The lake shimmers like sunlight. She lies back at the water's border, heaving unhurriedly, rhythmically.

'Tessa, it's so hot. Come here. Under the willow trees.' Athena's grey eyes entice. Tessa moves towards her friend. They lie in the afternoon sun, whispering of school and parents and Sunday services. They talk about the prostitutes lingering outside the church and, why they linger and what they do in the dark alleys and cheap terrace houses. It makes them hold onto each other, but the sun is hot and their grasp softens into turning, touching, as the fingers of the willows stir around them. They doze, arms entwined, with Tessa's face nestling into Athena's breasts.

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Monday. Tessa buttons her white school shirt and knots her tie. She pulls too hard. *I hate this.* Tessa loathes the rough material of the blue serge tunic that scratches her skin, making it itchy, raw. She slams her hand against her brother's bedroom door.

'Wake up. It's already eight.'

There's grunting inside. 'Okay. I hear you.'

'It's late. Get up.'

'Say please, Tessa. Please,' Peter laughs.

Tessa slams against his door again. 'I've got things to do you know, Peter.' The household duties never used to disturb her before, but they do now. She hurries to set the table.

Breakfast is an ordered meal, as is every meal. Mr Kassis nods, satisfied with his wife and daughter as he sits at the head of the table and Peter sits on his right. Tessa and Mrs Kassis run to get the food, clear the table, stir the thick black coffee on the stove. It's habitual, automatic, as Tessa moves through her duties, but her thoughts aren't automatic. She thinks of Athena arguing teasingly with her father at the picnic. She glances at her father. *I couldn't argue with you. You'd be so angry.* She shudders as Mrs Kassis brushes past, the black linen of her mother's dress making her skin goose bump. She remembers Athena's mother in a pale rose skirt pushed above her knees, sunbaking in the afternoon heat. *Imagine my mother doing that. Sunbaking.*

Hiding a smile, Tessa gives her father his coffee. Suddenly she turns away as she remembers yesterday, behind the science block. They'd poured over the pages of *The Female Eunuch*. Athena had been so funny reading out all the sex bits, but it had really shocked them.

Tessa brings the fig jam her mother made to the table. She glances at Mrs Kassis, who's finally sitting at the table. *Why don't you drink your coffee? Why don't you ask something for yourself?* Pushing the fig jam in front of her mother, she jerks out a chair and sits beside her. *Well, I'm going to ask.*

'The jam is very good.' Mr Kassis bites into the bread, so that the seeds of the fig catch between his teeth. Mrs Kassis smiles.

*Be calm. You're not asking for much.* She starts. 'Papa. I really liked the picnic with Athena.'

'You had a good time?' He determinedly finishes his coffee. There are problems with a machine at his furniture factory. He works long hours and sometimes at night he nods to sleep in his armchair with the newspaper falling beside him. Then Mrs Kassis wakes him gently and they walk together up the staircase to their bedroom. Tessa helps with the accounts at the end of each week and on Saturdays Peter works on the factory floor screwing wood into wood. Mr Kassis refuses to use the glue that's cheaper and easier. He'd be ashamed of making bad furniture.

'Can I ask you something, Papa?' Her dark eyes flit from her father's face to her plate. She feels her stomach knot. He nods impatiently. *Don't be stupid, Tessa. You're not asking for the world. Everyone is allowed to have friends over. I want to too.* 'Can I invite Athena over? To return her parents 'hospitality,' she adds hurriedly.

Tessa is rarely allowed friends to visit, but Mr Kassis understands hospitality. He stops to deliberate. Slowly he stands, then looks at his daughter. 'Yes, it is right. Athena may come, but only after your exams.'

'After the exams? Why do I have to wait so long?'

'Tessa, I cannot talk about this. The big machine is broken.' He turns to Peter. 'After your school, I need you to help me in the factory today.'

Peter grunts because his mouth is full of fig jam. Mr Kassis' face creases into worry lines and Tessa can't pressure him now. He pushes his chair away, leaving his wife and daughter to clear the breakfast plates.

'Athena 's coming over, Mama.' *I don't care that he's said later. He said yes. Yes.* Tessa hums *All You Need Is Love* as she wipes the dark oak table that's always stood in the middle of their kitchen. Mrs Kassis hums with her until they're wiping and humming around the table.

Peter shouts over them. 'You can't sing.'

Mrs Kassis stops but Tessa sings louder. *All you Need Is Love ... Love ... Love...*' until Peter blocks his ears with his hands.

'Come on, we'll really be late.' Tessa throws the tea towel on the sink, kisses her mother in a flurry and grabs her bag, singing *All You Need is Love* all the way out of the house until Peter's ready to murder her. Then she's quiet. *I'm happy. Athena is coming over. Athena.* Peter's irritating comments don't irritate her today and she runs her fingers around the inside

of her collar to stop the chafing of her uniform. There's a new splash of graffiti on the Church of Christ: 'Women have rights too.' Peter thinks the graffiti is funny. 'You're so ignorant, Peter.' But she's not interested in arguing today and leaves him laughing.

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*Where's Athena?* She's anxious as she crosses the bitumen courtyard, where the girls usually meet. Tessa stands still, turning to look left, then right, then left, then sees Athena. Friends are chatting to her as the bell rings. Everyone wanders towards the classrooms. Tessa can't concentrate in Science. Miss Newland stands in the front of the classroom, a thin, pale lady but flushed now. No one pays attention. One girl starts making animal noises. Other girls copy until the class sounds like a farmyard. The red of Miss Newland's face gets redder. There's snickering.

Miss Newland flees the classroom saying she won't teach such animals and there's laughing. Some girls look down at their desks, embarrassed. Tessa coughs acid into her mouth and runs to the toilet block. She rinses her mouth with water, spitting it into the stain less steel basin. Then she hears crying. It's Miss Newland, locked in a toilet cubicle. Tessa quietly leaves.

The bell goes for lunch and Tessa presses Athena's arm as she moves out of the classroom. 'Can you come to my house on a Saturday, after the exams are over?' Athena half hears as girls crowd around her. 'Come on,' she says to Tessa. 'We're eating next to the tennis court.'

They all sit with their sandwiches and salads. Tessa takes out the feta cheese and thick bread her mother packed for her. She hopes they don't notice her lunch, as they talk about teachers and exams and who they are going out with and how far they've gone. 'But I'd never go the whole way,' one of the girls says. 'I'm going to wait until I'm married.'

*Sex.* Tessa shudders.

'Then you'll have to wait a long time, because we've got a lot to do before we get married.' Athena flicks back her dark hair. 'Don't you want to travel? I want to try a few different foods at least.' She bites into a red apple. 'Maybe I'll eat a sheep's head in Iceland.' They laugh. Athena winks at Tessa. 'There's too much to do first.'

Yes. You're right. Tessa admires Athena sitting there among those girls who think they are so free, so different. *Married. How can they even think about it?* Her cousin flickers into her thoughts. Twenty and engaged. Arranged by the parents. *I'll never do that.* She looks curiously at the girls eating their lunches. *My cousin's doing what's expected, but you're free to do what you like. Why would you waste that?*

No one asks Tessa her thoughts, because she's not part of their days at school. She doesn't share their lives outside the red brick fence. But if they'd known her she might have told them about a girl standing against the walls of the Church of Christ, or about the power between a man and a woman, or amazing new ideas from women. Germaine Greer and Simone de Beauvoir. Smiling, she remembers a hot afternoon lying beneath wispy willows and a shimmering lake. I'd never tell you about that.

Tessa watches Athena. The bell goes again. As they walk to class, Tessa whispers, 'So will you come to visit, after the exams?'

'Of course, I'll come.' Then Athena joins the other girls, but Tessa doesn't feel left behind. She'll have Athena to herself for more than the bus journey home, more than the half-disturbed whisperings in the church. Athena will be hers for a whole day.

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The girls are cruel to Miss Newland, but Tessa isn't. She remembers the teacher locked in the toilet cubicle. Miss Newland is leaving at the end of the term. Tessa writes a card to her.

All the classes are quiet, orderly now. No one dares disturb the inevitable push towards the final exams. The only break from the pressure is Speech Day, the last school day before the exams. Tessa's and Athena's parents sit together, well dressed, expectant. The final-year girls line the hall to listen to speeches. Athena wins the English prize and Tessa's parents applaud. Tessa wins no prizes.

Athena is head girl, so she speaks to the audience like all head girls have done for as long as the school has existed. Even in her uniform she has a magnetism that makes the audience stop their whisperings. Her grey eyes capture them in dreams of the future. Her tie and shirt and school trappings don't restrict her, as she spreads her hands outwards. 'There are new and exciting challenges for women today. Women are entering law, medicine, engineering, business and, most importantly, they are exploring life.'

Many of the girls cry in the school hall. Athena cries and the headmistress puts her arms around her. Tessa cries too, in anticipation, because she will leave the red brick fence and blue serge uniforms and walk past the prostitutes and drug dealers and be part of a world which is at least different. 'Grant me at least a new servitude,' Tessa says under her breath. She remembers Athena arguing with her over Jane Eyre's words in the library.

'Tessa, women don't have to serve.'

'But I do.'

Athena had scoffed. 'My parents come from Greek background too. So I know. You don't have to.'

'That's unfair. You know how traditional my family is. It's like the Greek village is here. I'm Jane Eyre at home.'

Athena had been angry. 'Did you miss International Women's Year last year?'

'Don't, Athena.' Tessa had turned away, hurt.

'The final exams are exhausting: studying at night, sleeping restlessly, waking to her family's expectations and then the long day. The plastic chairs sweat in the school hall in the November heat. Or is it Tessa's sweat? Athena sits two seats across with her head bent down, writing furiously. The hall is big, isolating as the teachers march between the wooden desks checking for cheats and liars. Tessa doesn't need to cheat because she's studied until the information solidified into heavy immovable facts inside her head. The exams end. *Thank God.* Tessa shoves the plastic chair under the desk. There's excitement. Girls are going away for holidays. There are parties and celebrations. Tessa pretends she doesn't care, that there won't be any parties for her. Exam results will be afterwards. She's sure that Athena will get

into Philosophy so 'I'll be a thinking, journalist,' Athena had laughed. Tessa will get into Arts and the librarian diploma that follows it.

It's the last day of school. Girls hug, kiss, write their names in chalk on classroom blackboards. Tessa walks out of the wooden gates, past the school brick fence. She swings her school bag, humming to herself, kicking a newspaper flapping along the street. She looks at the discarded needle lying under it, and edges it with her laced black school shoes into the curb. The day is warm and she notices a man leaning over the wrought iron lace balcony, in a white singlet and navy shorts. Tessa imagines a blacksmith with his huge hammer forcing hot iron into the intricate patterns of the balustrade. Machines do it now, like in her father's factory.

She stops, slowly surveying the street with its inner city confusion: the rough, handmade convict bricks of the terraces and the abrasive corner store with its aluminium windows and neon signs; the old, old lady who's lived there all her life and the young, young girl selling sex for heroin; the Church of Christ and the brothels. This is a street Tessa has known most of her life, coming to and from school. Suddenly there's fear as she realizes she's leaving it. Tessa throws her bag onto the bitumen. 'No. No, I am not scared. I'm not scared.' She grabs her blue felt, hat, squashes it into the smallest of balls and, with the pleasure of a juggler, flings it into a council garbage bin along the roadside.