

Parramatta Nine

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INTRODUCTION: THE OVERTURE OF ASH

The late November air in the quiet, sprawling suburbs of Parramatta was thick and golden, heavy with the suffocating humidity of an impending Australian summer. The sky above was a blinding, flawless azure, entirely ignorant of the gathering darkness thousands of miles away. It was a Thursday afternoon dripping with mundane, vibrant peace. The streets hummed with a sleepy, rhythmic cadence—the low, rumbling thrum of commuter trains gliding along the tracks, the high-pitched, metallic squeal of

children's bicycles on the hot asphalt, and the relentless, electric buzzing of cicadas hidden within the peeling bark of the ancient eucalyptus trees.

The vibrant tapestry of the neighborhood was a sensory feast of color and light. Brilliant, impossibly purple jacaranda blossoms carpeted the sidewalks like velvet snow, contrasting sharply against the sun-baked, terracotta brickwork of the local apartment buildings. Walking down the bustling avenues, the air was a rich, intoxicating perfume of roasting cumin, sweet, frying dough, and the sharp, floral bite of fresh jasmine garlands hung in shop windows. For nine ordinary women, this was the deeply comforting, predictable rhythm of their existence—a life defined by community gatherings, quiet aspirations, and the warm, golden light of home.

But the call of duty does not respect the sanctity of a summer afternoon.

When the mobilization orders came, the vibrant, sunlit world of Parramatta was violently stripped away, replaced by the stark, terrifying austerity of a military tarmac in the **late afternoon**.

The transition was a brutal sensory whiplash. Gone was the sweet smell of jasmine and roasting spices; in its place was the suffocating, toxic stench of uncombusted aviation fuel, scorched rubber, and the metallic, ozone-heavy tang of impending violence. The warm, golden sunlight was replaced by the harsh, blinding glare of oscillating red security strobes and the pale, clinical blue of halogen runway lights that washed all color from their faces, rendering the nine women as pale, silent ghosts.

They were Agniveers—fresh from rigorous, bone-breaking training that had hardened their muscles in the unforgiving sun, yet nothing could have truly prepared their minds for the abyss they were about

to dive into. **Following a grueling, fourteen-hour flight across the ocean in a military transport plane, they were abruptly transferred to an assault chopper.** As they were hurried toward the waiting belly of the **gunship**, the noise was an absolute, physical assault. The deafening, rhythmic whump-whump-whump of the massive rotor blades tore the air apart, a concussive force that vibrated violently in their teeth and rattled their ribcages. They could not speak; they could only communicate through wide, terrified eyes and the desperate, white-knuckled grips of their hands. **Minutes** later, hovering above the Coastal Metropolis, the true scale of the nightmare finally revealed itself through the scratched, vibrating plexiglass of the chopper doors.

The city below was not a grid of twinkling, peaceful lights, but a chaotic, sprawling canvas of terror. And at its epicenter stood the Grand Horizon Hotel, a once-proud monument of shadowed marble corridors where history had once whispered of empire and elegance. Now, it was a towering inferno.

The sky surrounding the hotel was a bruised, sickening canvas of deep, pulsing purple and violent, neon orange. Plumes of thick, oily black smoke vomited from the shattered ornate windows, carrying the horrific, stomach-churning stench of burning centuries-old wood, melting velvet, and raw cordite. The helicopter hovered dangerously close to the flaming roof, the intense, radiating heat washing over the women's faces like an open furnace.

There were no sleek parachutes, no high-tech infiltration gear, no steel armor. Instead, grim-faced officers, their voices entirely drowned out by the mechanical roar of the engine and the distant, popping staccato of AK-47 fire below, thrust large, white pillows into their trembling arms. The stark whiteness of the synthetic casing

felt absurd, fragile, and utterly out of place against the apocalyptic backdrop of the burning dome.

"For the fall," the officers muttered, their lips moving in hurried, desperate prayers spoken in a frantic mix of Hindi and English.

As the nine women stood at the open door, staring down into the blood-soaked nights of late November, the wind tearing fiercely at their clothes like accusatory fingers, a profound, chilling silence seemed to settle in the core of their minds, drowning out the rotors. They were about to be air-dropped into absolute, unmitigated chaos, completely stripped of modern salvation. Yet, within that terrifying void, the deep, ancestral rhythm of their sisterhood began to beat like a heavy war drum. They were no longer just daughters of the quiet suburbs; they were about to become instruments of improbable defiance, descending into the dark to write a brutal, brilliant epic of survival where fear would be forcibly transmuted into an unquenchable, roaring fury.

CHAPTER 1: SUMITRI'S VIGIL

The night sky over the Coastal Metropolis was not black, but a bruised, suffocating purple, underlit by the angry, pulsing crimson of the inferno below. Sumitri, the eldest among them at twenty-four, felt the wind tear at her like accusatory fingers as the helicopter hovered above the flaming roof of the Grand Horizon. The deafening, rhythmic *thwack-thwack-thwack* of the rotor blades was a physical weight against her chest, vibrating through her ribs. The air was a toxic soup; it smelled heavily of uncombusted aviation fuel, melting tar from the rooftop, and the unmistakable, acrid

stench of burning centuries-old wood. There were no parachutes, only large pillows thrust into their arms by grim-faced officers who muttered prayers in Hindi and English.

"For the fall," they said, their voices barely penetrating the mechanical roar.

The drop was a blur of night sky and smoke. Sumitri plunged through layers of heat, the neon-orange embers swirling around her like violent, incandescent fireflies. She hit the roof hard, the pillow bursting beneath her with a muffled *whump*, a cloud of white synthetic feathers exploding into the amber-lit gloom, jarring her wrists and ankles with sharp cracks that sang through bone. A brilliant flash of white-hot agony flared behind her retinas. Pain bloomed, a heavy, throbbing violet sensation in her joints, but there was no time for tears. Below, the terrorists ravaged—AK-47s chattering like mechanical demons, the staccato *pop-pop-pop* tearing through the structural groans of the dying hotel, accompanied by screams rising from ballrooms turned abattoirs. The scent of copper—raw and metallic—began to waft up through the ventilation shafts, a grim herald of the slaughter below.

She and her sisters scattered into the labyrinth, their boots crunching softly on pulverized masonry and shattered glass that glittered like cruel diamonds in the emergency strobe lights. Sumitri found herself on the ninth floor, a corridor swathed in the flickering, sickly-yellow glow of failing halogen bulbs, claiming the grand male toilet near the presidential suite as her redoubt. The others dispersed to the eight floors beneath, each guarding a similar porcelain sanctuary. From her hidden vantage behind a cold, veined marble pillar, smooth and unyielding against her damp skin, she could see entrants but remain veiled in shadow.