

The Iris Ransom

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Introduction
Chapter 1: Sumitri
Chapter 2: Puju
Chapter 3: Rashmi Bongji
Chapter 4: Komal Gupta
Chapter 5: Pallavi
Chapter 6: Priya Sharma aka Ms. Aussie
Chapter 7: Priyanka
Chapter 8: Khushboo
Chapter 9: Rohini
Conclusion

Introduction

In the endlessly sprawling, sun-dappled expanse of Parramatta, the atmosphere is a heavy, living thing, thick with the scent of melting asphalt and the sweet, medicinal tang of crushed eucalyptus leaves baking under the fierce Australian sun. "Here, the ancient **Parramatta River** cuts a slow, muddy, jade-colored path through the landscape, quietly carrying the murmurs of millennia beneath the relentless, rhythmic steel pulse of modern Sydney. The auditory landscape is a chaotic symphony: the deafening screech of the T1 train line hurtling over metal bridges, the chaotic chatter of colorful lorikeets fighting in the canopy, and the overlapping, musical cadences of a dozen different languages spilling out from the

bustling shopfronts. It was within this vibrant, overwhelming sensory crucible that nine women of Indian heritage found their fiercely independent lives violently, inextricably entangled in a single, merciless thread of malicious digital code.

They were the resilient daughters of the diaspora, women whose very existence spanned vast oceans and fractured timelines. There was Sumitri, smelling of warm flour and devotion; Puju, vibrating with the sharp, blue-light energy of a creative savant; Rashmi Bongi, wrapped in the sharp scents of acetone and fading henna; Komal Gupta, dusted with classroom chalk and quiet authority; Pallavi, her fingers stained with the ink of untold poems; Priya Sharma, known universally to her glowing ring-light followers as Ms. Aussie, smelling of expensive vanilla perfume; Priyanka, cloaked in the rich, earthy aromas of roasting mustard seeds and sambar; Khushboo, a whirlwind of bright magenta silks and the dizzying scent of marigold garlands; and Rohini, carrying the sterile, quiet weight of hospital antiseptic and profound medical wisdom. Together, they formed a complex, luminous verse in the greater, ongoing ghazal of human migration, unyielding resilience, and the quiet, everyday defiance required to build a home on foreign soil.

Their smartphones had long ceased to be mere electronic tools; they were intimate, glowing talismans of connection that effortlessly bridged the painful chasms across wide oceans and multiple generations. These cold slabs of glass and rare earth metals held the very essence of their lives: the bright, pixelated laughter of distant parents, the carefully curated digital archives of growing children, and the secure financial ledgers of their hard-fought independence. Yet, these precise instruments of connection tragically became fragile vessels of both precious memory and

unspeakable menace on the fateful day the national system upgrade arrived, masquerading flawlessly as a bright, false dawn.

The glowing notification chimed with a sweet, innocent, bell-like tone, bathing their faces in a soft, ethereal blue light that promised optimization and security. But this was absolutely no ordinary data breach or clumsy digital theft. It was a meticulously orchestrated, surgical reckoning, engineered with terrifying precision by a shadowy, transnational collective operating under the enigmatic banner of Chaddichandan. In the dark, whispered forums of the internet, this figure was heavily rumored to be a terrifying hybrid—part unparalleled technical genius, part vengeful phantom. He was said to be a fallen son of the subcontinent, a brilliant mind who had twisted and turned the very tools of modern progress into blunt, devastating instruments of elegant extortion.

The hostile takeover unfolded across their screens with a cold, terrifying, clinical poetry. The screens flashed stark white, followed by a sequence of unyielding demands. "Enter your DigitalID," the screens commanded in harsh, sans-serif fonts. "Offer your fingerprint," they demanded, forcing a physical submission to the machine. "Surrender your iris," the final, most invasive violation, where the phone's unblinking camera lenses drank in the delicate, colored fibers of their eyes, digitizing their very souls.

Once the biometric toll was forcibly extracted, the encryption slammed down like a heavy iron vault door. The familiar, colorful app icons vanished, replaced by a glaring, blood-red lock icon that pulsed with the steady, mocking rhythm of a digital heartbeat. The identities, the memories, and the vibrant digital souls housed within their devices were instantly plunged into an impenetrable cryptographic darkness. The ransom demand that followed was chilling in its brevity: a demand for 0.1 BTC, completely sealed and

finalized with an anonymous email address that promised a miraculous restoration upon payment. What followed this cold, financial demand was absolutely not mere theft; it was a profound, agonizing unmaking and a subsequent, fiery remaking of their very sense of self.

In the grand, sweeping tradition of the great historical epics, where the quiet struggles of ordinary, overlooked lives spectacularly illuminate the vast, cosmic order of the universe, this novella unfolds its rich tapestry chapter by chapter, intimately exploring the psyche of one woman at a time. Their individual stories are as wildly varied, complex, and intoxicating as the pungent, deeply colored spices of their bustling kitchens and the irregular, passionate rhythms of their beating hearts. Together, their interwoven narratives weave a massive, breathtaking tapestry of sheer terror, brilliant ingenuity, profound sorrow, and ultimate, soaring transcendence.

Here, beating loudly in the concrete heart of Australia's sprawling western suburbs, the cold, calculating digital age violently collides with the messy, eternal, bleeding human drama. Technology, that miraculous, double-edged boon that promised to make the world infinitely smaller and safer, brutally exposes the terrifying, glass-like fragility of modern identity. Yet, in the fierce heat of this digital crucible, it simultaneously forges utterly unbreakable, adamantine bonds of sisterhood among women who previously only shared passing smiles. As the afternoon shadows stretch long and purple across the concrete, and the deep, silent river keeps its ancient, muddy counsel, these nine remarkable women fiercely illuminate a single, enduring truth: even when the cold machines rise to claim our physical fingerprints and our digitized gazes, the soul's vibrant,

messy narrative absolutely remains ours alone to write, to edit, and to author.

Chapter 1: Sumitri

In the heavy, honeyed and humid embrace of a Parramatta summer, the air itself felt like a physical weight pressing against the skin. The **Parramatta River**, a ribbon of murky jade, whispered ancient, unintelligible secrets to the sprawling, sun-baked concrete of Sydney's western suburbs. Inside her modest kitchen, Sumitri Kaur moved with a fluid grace, a silhouette reminiscent of a figure stepped gracefully out from a forgotten, melancholic ghazal. The room was a sanctuary of scents: the sharp, golden bite of mustard oil heating in a cast-iron pan, the earthy, grounding aroma of blooming cumin seeds, and the sweet, lingering ghost of morning cardamom tea.

Her hands, weathered but nimble, had long been synchronized with the ancestral rhythms of her mother's Punjab kitchen. Today, however, they trembled slightly as they hovered over the sleek, impenetrable black slab of her smartphone. This cold, rectangular prism had served as her silent, glowing companion through the tumultuous years of migration. It was a digital bridge spanning vast oceans, connecting her to the fragile voices of aging mother in the bustling heart of Amritsar. It was a reliquary, holding the pixelated memories of her two children taking their clumsy, triumphant first steps, and it was a quiet archive of the invisible victories and profound defeats of a life slowly, painstakingly remade under the piercing light of southern skies.

That morning, the light filtering through the floral curtains cast long, dancing shadows on the worn linoleum floor. The upgrade arrived utterly unbidden, masquerading as a modern miracle. It