

The Parramatta Flare

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Introduction

In the hour before the sky forgot its manners, the Parramatta River moved sluggishly beneath a canopy the color of steeped tea left entirely too long in a cast-iron pot. It was a suffocating, bruised-copper afternoon in Western Sydney. The oppressive heat did not radiate; it hung suspended, trapping the city's exhaust fumes, the brackish, muddy scent of the low-tide riverbanks, and the sharp, eucalyptus tang from the distant Blue Mountains beneath a dome of stagnant pressure.

Light in the streets thickened rather than faded. It possessed a bizarre, viscous quality, turning the glass facades of the new high-rises into blinding sheets of liquid gold and painting the older, cracked pavements in deep, unnatural violet shadows. The air itself seemed to hesitate, vibrating with a low-frequency hum—like the held breath of a massive, unseen lung awaiting an instruction that simply never came.

Then, the solar flare arrived.

It did not announce itself with the theatrical, fiery violence of a cinematic apocalypse. There was no blinding flash, no concussive shockwave shattering glass. It arrived, instead, with the quiet, devastating, absolute authority of a heavy vault door closing on an entire city.

Telecom towers stretching from the concrete spine of the CBD all the way across the sprawling western suburbs froze mid-transmission, their blinking red aviation lights dying simultaneously. Millions of glowing screens—phones in palms, monitors on desks, digital billboards hovering over the M4 motorway—went completely, uniformly black in mid-sentence. The relentless, invisible web of microwave signals, Wi-Fi frequencies, and radio waves that held the modern world together simply evaporated. Voices that had traveled seamlessly for years through subterranean fiber-optic cables and orbital satellites ceased in a fraction of a millisecond.

What was left behind was an acoustic vacancy more total, more terrifyingly complete, than any physical power blackout the city had ever known. The sudden absence of the electronic hum that underpins modern existence felt like a sudden plunge into deep water. The pressure in the inner ear shifted. The silence was not empty; it was heavy, ringing, and intensely physical.

And in that vast, newly evacuated space, something older and far more dangerous stirred to life.

Human thought, a phenomenon long accustomed to the absolute, sovereign privacy of the bone skull, suddenly found itself untethered. It became a rogue frequency, wildly audible. It began traveling without consent, without encryption, and without the polite filtering of vocal translation, moving seamlessly between minds that shared plaster walls, copper water pipes, and the long, exhausting, unspoken contracts of marriage.

At 69 Cowper Street, a sprawling, aging Federation-era house built of dark red brick and stubborn timber, the change arrived like a catastrophic shift in the weather. The house had stood for over a century, its high, ornate ceilings and wide, drafty floorboards having learned to hold many desperate, overlapping lives without structural complaint. It currently sheltered nine *desi* couples and one bachelor within its subdivided rooms. Before the flare, their nine separate weathers—their private griefs, their financial terrors, their unspoken resentments—had been neatly, safely contained by the polite, necessary courtesies of spoken English and the merciful, evolutionary limitations of ordinary human hearing. The house smelled of nine different dinners cooking simultaneously: the sharp bite of hot mustard oil, the earthy warmth of roasting cumin, the floral smoke of cheap incense, all layered over the underlying scent of old, damp timber and Parramatta dust.

Chunmun Singh, a senior solution architect at Baba Bank in Redfern, felt the very first, terrifying pressure of the new medium while standing at the second-floor landing window. His professional life was entirely dedicated to the meticulous structuring of data, the building of secure architectures, and the routing of information through impenetrable firewalls. As he looked out through the

rippled, antique glass at the bruised, violet sky, he tasted something metallic and sharp on the back of his tongue—like the tang of a 9-volt battery against wet skin.

He felt the sudden, dizzying collapse of the physical architecture around him. Not the bricks and mortar, but the architecture of isolation. He heard a flash of someone's raw anger rising from the kitchen below, smelling of burnt garlic. He felt a sudden, icy spike of pure financial panic radiating from the attic room, carrying the visual texture of a red bank statement. Chunmun gripped the wooden windowsill, his knuckles turning white as his own meticulously organized mind was flooded with raw, unstructured, un-firewalled human data. He understood, in that paralyzing moment before any of the others fully comprehended the mechanics of the disaster, that the grand, aging house would no longer permit the old, comfortable separations. The walls had become glass.

What follows is not a cinematic chronicle of a global technological catastrophe. It is a precise, intimate record of nine marriages as they collided head-on with the sudden, absolute impossibility of silence.

Each chapter belongs to one couple. The cosmic flare did not invent a single one of their difficulties; it possessed no creative power of its own. It merely, mercilessly, removed the soft, polite, acoustic furnishings in which those specific difficulties had been so comfortably accustomed to hide. Outside, the Parramatta River continued its dark, indifferent, muddy journey toward the harbor, smelling of wet stone and algae. The residual, violent light of the flare lingered stubbornly in the western sky, spreading like a massive, subcutaneous bruise that had not yet decided whether to heal or to fatally rupture.

And inside the humid, spice-scented rooms of the house on Cowper Street, **nineteen** minds that had spent years, sometimes decades, rigorously practicing the art of careful, loving omission began—without preparation, without armor, and entirely without permission—the far more dangerous, exacting art of finally being heard.

Chapter 1 – Sumitri

The okra had already begun to darken when the first foreign thought entered the kitchen, riding on the back of an unnatural, bruised-plum light that bled through the frosted glass of the louvre windows.

Sumitri did not look up. She had learned, over years of careful living, that the body often knows before the mind is ready to accept the jagged edges of a new reality. Her hands possessed their own memory. The steel knife continued its rhythmic work, the blade moving through the ridged, viridian-green flesh of the vegetables with a sharp, wet *thwack* against the scarred wooden chopping board. She applied the same steady, surgical patience she once brought to grant applications in a sterile, fluorescent-lit office years ago—removing what was bruised or unusable, preserving only what could still be made coherent for the pan.

The kitchen smelled fiercely of heated mustard oil, its pungent, eye-watering sharpness cutting through the heavy, static-laden air. A handful of cumin seeds hit the cast-iron pan with a violent, crackling hiss, releasing a sudden, earthy bitterness that mingled with the sweet, underlying rot of overripe mangoes sitting forgotten in the fruit bowl. The residual light of the solar flare—a sickly, pulsating