

The Parramatta Shakedown

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Introduction: The Broken Promise of the Harbor City

The brochures had lied. They usually do, but the sheer, breathtaking scale of the deception was something none of the nine women had anticipated when they first held those glossy, heavy-stock pamphlets in their hands thousands of miles away. The paper had smelled of expensive chemical ink and the promise of a golden future. The photographs had depicted a Sydney bathed in perpetual, honey-colored sunlight, showcasing blindingly white sails set against a sapphire harbor, where the air theoretically tasted of sea salt and limitless opportunity.

When Sumitri, Puju, Rashmi, Komal, Pallavi, Priya, Priyanka, Khushboo, and Rohini finally dragged their heavily scuffed luggage out of the sliding glass doors of Kingsford Smith Airport, the initial sensory hit was exactly what they had been sold. The Australian air felt highly charged, crackling with an electric clarity. The sky was an aggressive, saturated blue, devoid of the gray smog they were used to. The chaotic symphony of the arrival curbside—the rhythmic *thump-thump* of idling diesel buses, the sharp whistles of traffic wardens in high-visibility neon vests, and the overlapping cacophony of a dozen different languages—sounded like the opening notes of a grand, glittering dream. They came from different, bustling cities, carrying different, hard-earned degrees—engineering, finance, logistics, arts, commerce—but they shared a singular, vibrating ambition of an Australian life. They had invested their families' life savings, navigating a grueling, mind-numbing labyrinth of visa processes that smelled of stale bureaucratic offices and drying stamp ink, and uprooted their entire existences for the promise of a fair go.

But the beautiful, sun-drenched harbor city was an exclusive, heavily guarded club, and the bouncers at the door were faceless corporate recruiters demanding the impossible paradox of "local experience."

Within three agonizing months, the golden dream had corroded into a terrifying, gray reality. The transition was a slow, agonizing sensory deprivation. The bright, hopeful mornings were replaced by the harsh, blue-white glare of laptop screens illuminating their exhausted faces at two in the morning. Their impressive, carefully formatted resumes were swallowed whole by the black void of automated job portals, generating nothing but the cold, digital *ping*

of automated rejection emails that sounded, increasingly, like a death knell.

Their collective savings, once a formidable stack of colorful foreign currency, evaporated against the punishing, invisible friction of the city's cost of living. This financial terror forced all nine of them to cram into a damp, poorly insulated four-bedroom rental in the deep, sprawling western suburbs. The house was a sensory nightmare. It perpetually smelled of wet plaster, creeping black mold in the grout, and the heavy, lingering scent of cheap turmeric and boiled lentils. The walls were paper-thin, vibrating violently every time a freight train roared down the nearby tracks, a deafening, metallic shriek that shook the cheap, mismatched crockery in the cupboards. They were surviving on discounted, broken-grain rice, clearance-rack vegetables that tasted faintly of the plastic bags they came in, and a rapidly dwindling reserve of hope. The daily commute to the city—a grueling, two-hour ordeal on freezing, air-conditioned trains smelling of damp wool and stale coffee—for interviews that went nowhere was draining the color from their cheeks and the life from their bank accounts. They were highly educated, fiercely intelligent women who were suddenly facing the very real, visceral prospect of destitution in a foreign country, a fear that tasted like pennies and ash in the back of their throats.

The turning point, the moment the atmosphere in the house shifted permanently, happened on a dismal, bone-chillingly cold, rainy Tuesday. The Sydney sky had turned a bruised, heavy purple-gray, and the rain drummed a relentless, mocking staccato against the single-pane windows that completely failed to keep the draft out. After another soul-crushing round of failed interviews for entry-level, mind-numbing administrative jobs they were vastly overqualified for, the nine women sat around their chipped, faux-

wood laminate kitchen table. The silence in the room was heavy, suffocating, broken only by the hum of the struggling refrigerator and the rhythmic dripping of a leaky faucet. The threat of eviction was a week away; they could practically feel the cold pavement waiting for them.

It was Sumitri who finally broke the silence. Her voice was entirely devoid of its usual warmth and melodious cadence; it had been replaced by a cold, sharp, metallic pragmatism that cut through the damp air like a serrated knife.

"The system isn't broken," she said, her dark eyes reflecting the flickering, harsh light of the solitary overhead bulb as she looked at the exhausted, shadow-drawn faces of her friends. "It's working exactly as it was designed—to keep us out. To starve us out. If they won't let us sit at the table in their climate-controlled, perfume-scented high-rises, we aren't going to beg for their scraps anymore. We are going to build our own table, and we are going to fund it entirely with their money."

The shift in the room was palpable, a sudden, electric spike in the stagnant air. They didn't need a career anymore; they needed raw, untraceable capital. They set a hard, non-negotiable target: \$500,000 AUD. It was enough to secure their visas, put substantial, heavy cash deposits down on their own legitimate business ventures, and buy them the financial runway they had been so brutally denied. They just needed a hunting ground.

They didn't have to look far. The massive, sprawling Eastfield mall, a glowing, neon-lit temple of immense, unregulated daily cash flow, was sitting just two train stops away. From the outside, it looked like a monolithic spaceship of concrete and glass, vibrating with the low hum of thousands of air conditioning units and the chaotic,

intoxicating scent of roasted cinnamon nuts, expensive leather, and unbridled consumerism. They didn't want jobs within its walls; they wanted an infiltration point.

By the end of the week, they had pooled their final, crumpled dollars—notes that felt thin and greasy with desperation. Entrusting Sumitri to handle the negotiation, she returned hours later with nine stiff, scratchy, cheap yellow polyester Eastfield security uniforms. The uniforms felt heavy as they unpacked them in their damp living room, but they wore them like armor.

As they adjusted their collars in the dim light of the staff locker room, breathing in the scent of aerosol deodorant and ambition, they were no longer victims of a rigged, hostile job market; they had just become the architects of their own ruthless, brilliantly illuminated survival.

Chapter 1: Sumitri – The Architect of the Hustle

Migrating to Australia was supposed to be the golden ticket, the glittering dream sold in glossy brochures and enthusiastic immigration seminars that smelled faintly of cheap coffee and expensive cologne. For Sumitri and her eight friends, however, the reality of Sydney was a harsh, physical wake-up call. The skyline was a beautiful, razor-sharp silhouette against a painfully bright blue sky, and the beaches were pristine stretches of blinding white sand, but the job market was a fortress they simply could not breach. Weeks turned into months. Rejection emails filled their inboxes like digital junk mail, accompanied by the endless, depressing *ping* of smartphone notifications. The rent on their cramped, shared house in the deep western suburbs—a place that perpetually smelled of damp plaster, stale turmeric, and creeping mold—was a constant, looming threat. They were nine educated,