

The Crimson Yarra: A Desperate Hunt

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Introduction

Steve Parry was a homeless man haunting the edges of Melbourne, a city that shimmered with indifferent, gleaming lights under the vast Australian sky. Homeless, he and his loyal bulldog, Vuddy, had been navigating the grey concrete labyrinth and shadowed, echoing alleyways for weeks. Steve, a man whose frame carried extra weight and whose hair, a clumsy brown mop, defied any sense of order, possessed little outwardly remarkable save for a stubborn flicker of defiance in his eyes – a fighter's spirit refusing to be extinguished by the city's cold shoulder and hurried footsteps. He was once a man of spreadsheets and the hum of fluorescent lights in the sterile corridors of MANZA bank, until his job vanished, outsourced to a place unseen, unheard. This rupture was the crack through which his life drained away. His partner, Rashmi Bongi, seized the moment, her divorce petition landing like a final blow, the crisp white paper feeling ominous in his hands. Steve, reeling, lost the ensuing battle in the sterile, echoing halls of the court, where sunlight streamed through high windows, illuminating dust motes dancing in the tense air. The gavel's sharp crack gifted his home – once filled with warm colors and laughter – his savings, his life's accumulation, to Rashmi as alimony. Cast adrift with dwindling cash – the coins clinking with depressing finality in his pocket – and facing a job market as barren as his prospects, Steve joined the ranks of the invisible. He'd always felt a pang of sympathy for the city's homeless, offering spare change – silver and copper glinting as they dropped into outstretched, grimy hands – and receiving nods of weary goodwill in return, their voices often raspy whispers. Now, he was one of them.

Day I

The grey pre-dawn light filtered through the city haze, painting the sky in muted tones of lilac and ash. Steve's first imperative: shelter. A place hidden from the predatory eyes that gleamed in shadowed doorways and the routine sweeps of uniformed authority, their boots thudding rhythmically on the pavement. He pedaled his bicycle, its chain clicking with metallic insistence, towards the CBD's fringe. There, skeletal against the pale, overcast sky, stood an abandoned hospital. It once held the fading hopes of cancer patients, and the air around it felt heavy, stagnant, laced with a faint, unsettling metallic tang beneath the scent of decay and damp earth. The silence was profound, broken only by the mournful whistle of wind through broken, grimy window panes. A faded, rust-streaked sign, its white paint peeling, screamed in bold, stark black letters: 'DO NOT ENTER! Radioactive hazard'. Perfect. Behind the main building, in a courtyard choked with dull green weeds and littered with debris, he found he wasn't the first. Shadows shifted – a few figures had already claimed territory, huddled amidst the rubble like statues in the gloom. But there was space.

"Steve? What happened, mate?" a young voice, thin but clear, cut through the stillness. It was Michael, a familiar face from the streets, his eyes wide in the dim light. A wan smile touched Steve's lips. "Michael. Good to see a friendly face. Guess I won't be completely alone." Steve found a relatively clean patch of cracked concrete, the sound of his boots scraping on grit, and unrolled his sleeping bag, its dark blue synthetic fabric rustling loudly in the quiet. The other occupants watched him, their faces shadowed, eyes narrowed with the silent, territorial anger of the dispossessed, their stillness unnerving.

Steve cleared his throat, the sound unnaturally loud. "G'day. I'm Steve. Used to be a 'Business Analyst' at MANZA. Job went

overseas. Ex got the house, the savings... everything." His voice felt flat. A man with eyes that seemed to hold old stories and were webbed with fine red lines nodded slowly. "Mark. Welcome, mate." His voice was a low, gravelly rumble.

Steve turned back to Michael. "Thought you were heading to Canberra? Sick dad?" Michael let out a short, humourless laugh, the sound sharp. "Nah, mate. Orphan. Picked up that story from a Pakistani bloke near the casino. Had a sign, chalked on the pavement – powdery white letters stark against the dark grey stone: 'Need \$400 to return to Pakistan'. People chucked coins, generous like – you could hear the jangle and clink. Every donation, he'd rub out the number with his sleeve, write a new one – 395, 390. Next day? Back to 400!" Michael grinned, a flash of white teeth in the shadowy light. "He never left. See, ask these city slickers – all sharp suits in black and grey, phones glowing white against their ears, footsteps clicking – for spare change, they tell you to piss off, their voices clipped and annoyed, eyes sliding past you. You need a story, something to tug the heartstrings, make their eyes soften a bit. That's how you eat."

Steve met Mark, the poet, whose introduction was a verse delivered in a resonant baritone that seemed to warm the chilly air slightly: *I'm an Australian born and bred Long in the leg And Large in the heart* A few raspy, half-hearted cheers echoed from the small group. Then there was Jack, the artist, hunched near a crumbling wall, the soft scrape and tap of cheap chalk filling the air as he conjured surprisingly vivid dinosaurs onto the grimy brickwork, their shapes emerging in powdery white, startling blue, and faint yellow. And Angela. She sat apart, wrapped in a thick, drab grey blanket and silence, occasionally broken by a choked sob or a bitter curse hissed towards the indifferent grey sky. Love, Steve learned, had been her undoing. A whirlwind romance with a resident of Arabic origin, a man with expensive tastes, flashing gold jewellery, and

empty pockets. He vanished back overseas, leaving Angela adrift in a sea of debt, the bright colours of love faded to the monochromatic grey of homelessness.

Evening deepened, bringing a biting chill that seeped into bones, carrying the distant sounds of city traffic – horns honking, engines rumbling. Steve zipped himself into his sleeping bag, the sound of the zipper harsh and metallic. He pulled Vuddy close, tucking the shivering bulldog onto the bag's surface, feeling the tremor through the fabric. Vuddy, unhappy with the cold, hard ground beneath him, let out a low, guttural growl. Steve hugged him tighter, whispering into his coarse brown and white fur, "This is it, boy. New home."

The full moon rose, enormous and brilliantly white, bathing the derelict hospital in a cold, ethereal silver light. It seemed mocking, this luminous beauty hanging over their desolation, making the shadows stretch long and black. From nearby Carlton Park, the melancholy, flute-like call of a night bird drifted on the crisp air, a lonely sound.

Sleep came fitfully for the homeless, punctuated by the startled bark of a distant dog, the sudden roar of a motorbike, the constant fear. Midnight vigils were essential, guarding against the sudden rush of unseen footsteps on gravel, the threat of violence emerging from the inky blackness. Steve succumbed first, Vuddy twitching beside him, snuffling softly. His dream was vivid: pure white snowbanks, not of snow, but ice cream. Angels, wings shimmering gold and silver, tossed down scoops of every imaginable colour – pistachio green, strawberry pink, vibrant mango orange, deep chocolate brown. He and Vuddy feasted, the sweet coldness melting on their tongues, the bright colours a stark contrast to his waking world, forgetting the grey reality. But reality intruded harshly.

"Steve! Mate, wake up! It's pissing down!" Mark's shout was almost drowned out by the sudden, violent drumming sound of heavy rain hammering on the concrete and corrugated iron scraps nearby.