

Yarra Ripper

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Introduction: How Steve Ended Up on Skid Row

Steve Parry, right, he was doing it tough, a homeless bloke knocking about the edges of Melbourne. The city, it just sparkled with its fancy lights, not giving a rat's arse about him under that massive Aussie sky. Homeless, that was him and his trusty bulldog, Vuddy. They'd been navigating the big grey maze of concrete and those dodgy, echoing alleyways for weeks, the poor buggers.

Steve, he was carrying a bit of timber, and his hair, a messy brown mop, was all over the shop. Didn't look like much, old Steve, but he had this stubborn spark in his eyes, like a proper little Aussie battler, refusing to let the city's cold shoulder and all the hurrying feet grind him down.

He used to be a pen-pusher, right? Spreadsheets and the hum of those fluoro lights in the sterile halls of MANZA bank. That was his life, until his job went belly-up, outsourced to who-knows-where. That was the kick in the guts that started his life going down the drain. His missus, Rashmi Bongi, she didn't muck about. Her divorce papers landed like a king-hit, that crisp white paper feeling like bad news in his hands. Steve, totally gobsmacked, lost the next round in the sterile, echoing courtroom, where the sun streamed in through massive windows, lighting up dust specks dancing in the tense air. The judge's gavel cracked down hard, and just like that, his home – once full of warm colors and good laughs – his savings, everything he'd worked for, went to Rashmi as alimony.

So there he was, cast adrift with hardly any dosh – the coins clinking with a depressing finality in his pocket – and staring down a job market as dry as a dead dingo's donger. Steve joined the ranks of the invisible. He'd always felt a bit sorry for the city's homeless,

chucking 'em some spare shrapnel – silver and copper glinting as they dropped into grubby, outstretched hands – and getting nods of weary thanks in return, their voices often just raspy whispers. Now, he was one of 'em. Stone the crows.

Day I: A New Digs and a Wet Welcome

The grey pre-dawn light was filtering through the city smog, painting the sky in dull shades of lilac and ash. First thing on Steve's mind: a roof over his head. A spot hidden from the dodgy types lurking in shadowy doorways and the regular patrols of the coppers, their boots thudding on the pavement. He hopped on his pushie, its chain clicking away, and pedalled towards the edge of the CBD.

There, looking like a skeleton against the pale, overcast sky, was a derelict hospital. It used to be full of cancer patients, poor buggers, and the air around it felt heavy, stale, with a faint, weird metallic whiff under the smell of rot and damp dirt. The quiet was deafening, only broken by the sad whistle of wind through broken, filthy window panes. A faded, rust-streaked sign, its white paint peeling, screamed in big, bold black letters: 'DO NOT ENTER! Radioactive hazard'. Bonza. Perfect.

Behind the main building, in a courtyard choked with dull green weeds and littered with rubbish, he found he wasn't the first drongo there. Shadows shifted – a few blokes had already staked their claim, huddled in the rubble like statues in the gloom. But there was room.

"Steve? What happened, mate?" a young voice, thin but clear, cut through the quiet. It was Michael, a familiar face from the streets, his eyes wide in the dim light. A weak smile touched Steve's lips. "Michael. Good to see a friendly face. Reckon I won't be completely on me Pat Malone."

Steve found a relatively clean patch of cracked concrete, his boots scraping on the grit, and unrolled his sleeping bag, its dark blue synthetic fabric rustling loudly in the quiet. The other blokes watched him, their faces hidden in shadow, eyes narrowed with that silent, "this is my turf" anger of the down-and-out, their stillness a bit unnerving.

Steve cleared his throat, the sound way too loud. "G'day. I'm Steve. Used to be a 'Business Analyst' at MANZA. Job went overseas. Ex got the house, the savings... the whole kit and caboodle." His voice felt flat.

A bloke with eyes that looked like they'd seen a fair bit, all 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 off to Canberra? Sick old man?"

Michael let out a short, dry laugh, the sound sharp. "Nah, mate. Orphan. Pinched that story from a Pakistani fella 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 jingle 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 bloody 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 rack off, their voices clipped and annoyed, eyes sliding past you. You need a yarn, something to tug the heartstrings, make their eyes soften a bit. That's how you get a feed."

Steve met Mark, the poet, whose intro was a verse belted out in a resonant baritone that seemed to warm the chilly air a tad: I'm an Australian born and bred Long in the leg And Large in the heart A few croaky, half-arsed 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 popping out in powdery white, startling blue, and faint yellow.

And Angela. She sat apart, wrapped in a thick, drab grey blanket and silence, sometimes broken by a choked sob or a bitter curse hissed at the indifferent grey sky. Love, Steve found out, had been her undoing. A whirlwind romance with some bloke from the Middle East, a fella with expensive tastes, flashing gold jewellery, and empty pockets. He'd shot through back overseas, leaving Angela up to her eyeballs in debt, the bright colors of love faded to the dull grey of homelessness.

Evening rolled in, bringing a biting chill that got right into your bones, carrying the distant sounds of city traffic – horns honking, engines rumbling. Steve zipped himself into his sleeping bag, the zipper sounding harsh and metallic. He pulled Vuddy close, tucking the shivering bulldog onto the bag's surface, feeling the tremor through the fabric. Vuddy, not too chuffed with the cold, hard ground, let out a low, guttural growl. Steve hugged him tighter,