

A Holiday Romance



AN AUSSIE CHRISTMAS ANGEL



An Aussie Christmas Angel

Clare Revell

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Dedication

To Andy and Chris

Without you guys there would be no story to have written. I hope I have done justice to it and didn't take too many poetic liberties with it. And see we were right. Miss Right did live in Australia.

Thanks to

Therese and Mary for the critiquing.
Andy and Chris for allowing me to use their story —
and see I can write without killing anyone. :D

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Monday's Child
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Wednesday's Child

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Waiting for his suitcase to arrive on the airline carousel, John Connington wondered for the tenth time since he boarded the flight to Sydney if he were doing the right thing. Here he was, twelve thousand miles from home, alone, and, for the first time since leaving England, he had nowhere to stay.

Every other place he'd stopped in—from Europe and the other side of Australia, to New Zealand and the United States, he'd been able to book either a hotel room or a bed in a hostel in advance. Except Sydney. Yet he wanted to come and figured that as he'd gotten a flight, the Lord wanted him here, too.

Well, strictly speaking, I'm not alone, Lord, as You're right here with me. Just like you have been ever since I left home.

He'd get a bed at the first backpacker hostel he could find with a vacancy. Hopefully, the information desk would have a list. If none of them had a room, then he'd hire a locker for his luggage and take a fleeting trip to see the harbor bridge and the opera house, before coming back here to queue for a standby flight.

I trust that You have something planned, Lord. You haven't let me down yet, and I don't imagine You ever will.

Christmas decorations hung from the baggage claim ceiling and canned carols poured from the airport loudspeakers. Only mid-November but already

the Christmas spirit permeated everywhere. Baggage on the carousel bumped along, oddly in time with the music, but his brown case, the one with a bright red strap bearing his name, was nowhere in sight. His oldest sister, Dorrie, had bought him the named strap as a going away present. He'd thought it daft at first, but it did mean his case stood out in the crowd. Where was it now? He clenched his teeth.

Did it even make it from the check-in desk onto the flight?

His heart sank as the last case was collected and the carousel stopped turning.

You know, Lord, if You didn't want me in Sydney, there was an easier way of telling me. Like cancelling the flight, or me not getting a flight in the first place. But no clothes on top of nowhere to stay, really is taking the mickey.

He headed over to the nearest airport employee. "Excuse me? My case didn't come through with the others."

"Are you sure you had the right carousel, mate?"

John nodded. "Yes, I just got off the Perth flight."

"Then if you'll come with me, we'll file a lost baggage claim."

Forty minutes later in the long, snaking line for customs and immigration, he reevaluated this four week globetrotting adventure. Taking in Hawaii, Australia, and New Zealand sounded great when he planned it. He wasn't getting any younger and wanted to see the world while he still could. Everyone at work and home thought he was crazy for going halfway across the world alone. Especially with no mobile phone. But he'd looked into the roaming charges and not only would he pay for the calls he made, his parents and friends would pay to receive them, too.

Right now, he conceded his friends were right. He gazed at the decorations hanging from the ceiling as they moved gently in the breeze from the air conditioning units. Was it really almost December? He'd be home in time to open the first door on the advent calendar. Assuming this never-ending queue moved any time in the next few weeks.

At least in Bethlehem two thousand years ago, Mary and Joseph had each other and probably a change of clothes. Not to mention a donkey for transport. Though the queues they had to wait in were probably a lot longer, hotter, and smellier. And he wasn't nine months pregnant. He knew how tired his sister grew now she was expecting again, and she still had a ways to go yet.

The children behind him started fighting, as he reached the top of the queue. He slid his hand into the front of his rucksack, produced his passport and visa, and waited for the airport security officer to acknowledge his presence. "Hi."

"Purpose of visit?"

"I'm on holiday, backpacking for a while."

"Did you pack your case yourself?"

John grimaced, burying the desire to shoot back a very sarcastic 'What case?' Instead he handed over a copy of the form. Typical paperwork, he'd completed in triplicate. There was a pink form for the baggage people, a yellow one for immigration, and a white one for his own records. "Yes I did, but it never made it here. The last time I saw it was baggage check in at Perth. I've filled in the paperwork. The contact details are my parents in England."

"Do you have any items in your hand luggage on this list?"

John scanned the list, smiling as he realized that marmite and chocolate weren't allowed through customs, as well as the more obvious things. "No, I haven't."

"Turn around and lift your feet please."

"I'm sorry?"

"I need to see the soles of your shoes."

No further explanation was forthcoming, so John did as requested. His passport was stamped, and he followed the signs to the main concourse. The information desk stood to one side of the terminal. He dodged the crowds making his way to it. Another queue greeted him, and he again waited patiently. Finally, he reached the top. "Hello."

"G'day. How can I help you?"

"Do you have a list of backpacker hostels, please?"

"Sure." The young woman smiled at him and pulled a sheet of paper from under the counter. "Here you go. There are several on here, along with phone numbers. Pay phones are to your right."

"Thank you." He took the paper and tucked it into his shirt pocket.

"No worries. Have a good holiday."

John made his way over to the bank of public phones, slid his prepaid card into the slot and started at the top of the list. The place was full. By the time he got to the seventh hostel on the list, he had a fair idea how Mary and Joseph had felt all those years ago. At this point, even a stable looked pretty good.

Hostel number seven did have a bed, and he immediately took it, scribbling down the directions the receptionist gave him. He'd need to take the train to King's Cross. That made him smile. How many other English place names would he find here?

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The station was easy to locate, and the train came almost immediately. Once aboard, John found a seat and sat with his rucksack on his lap. He leaned back and watched the platform start to roll past the window. Today was Friday. That gave him today and tomorrow to find a church for Sunday. Being on holiday was no reason not to go to church. God didn't take time off from loving him, after all.

The train pulled out of the airport into the bright sunlight, and John watched as they passed the buildings. He could almost be in any city, except you didn't get a sky like this at home. At the next stop, several young women clad in shorts and strappy tops, boarded. They sat opposite him, chatting and laughing.

John turned his attention back to the window, grinning as his sister sprung to mind. Not because she dressed like that, but because her light laugh was the same.

"You know why you're still single at your age, don't you?" Dorrie had teased him over the Sunday roast.

"Because I'm boring?" John replied in the same tone.

"No, silly. Because Miss Right happens to live in Australia."

"Yeah, sis, right..."

"Seriously. That's why every girl you ever asked out has said no."

"So I should go export myself to Australia to find her?" John laughed. "Somehow, I don't think so."

He'd blown off the comment and not really thought about it until now, but he couldn't help wonder if Miss Right really *did* live here. Not that it would make any difference. She still wouldn't go out with him if he asked. And besides, he was on holiday and would be going home soon. And home was twelve

thousand miles away. End of story.

The train pulled into Kings Cross, and the Australian heat slammed him like a sledgehammer as he made his way onto the street. His heart sank as he glanced around. The whole area looked tired, even the decorations hanging from the street lamps drooped. Several women stood on the street corner. From their outfits it didn't take much to work out what they did for a living.

Taking a deep breath, John headed in the opposite direction towards the hostel. He made a pit stop in a couple of stores along the way to buy a new case, padlock, and some clothes. Not something he could really afford to do, but he didn't have a choice. He couldn't live in the clothes he stood up in for the remaining two weeks of his holiday. He opted for the cheapest case possible, three changes of clothes, and a couple packs of boxers. That should be plenty. He added a towel and wash stuff to his basket and then paid.

The hostel wasn't much to look at and reminded him of the block of flats on the edge of the estate he'd spent his childhood on. It could be great if only a little care and attention were paid to it.

The bed turned out to be a top bunk in a room that slept ten. It stank, and he didn't feel safe leaving his new case there, but the unsavory place was better than pulling it around the streets with him.

Beggars can't be choosers and this is better than the streets. I'm sorry for sounding ungrateful, Lord. I'm really not.

He did have another option. He pulled the folded piece of paper from his wallet, shook his head, and slid it into his shirt pocket. No, that was a last resort. He

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wasn't the type of bloke to call a total stranger, even if his sister's friend had said it'd be OK.

He set the case on the bunk and packed his new clothes and a few other bits into it. He locked it and then grabbing his rucksack, headed out to find a beach and a payphone to let his parents know he'd arrived safe, even if his case was still on the other side of the country.

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

Jo Heyward closed her Bible and glanced over the small yard. The leaves on the trees moved in the breeze as the sun blazed from a cloudless blue sky. The words she'd read ran through her mind. Hebrews chapter thirteen and verse two—*angels unaware*. For some reason she always quoted the King James Version, even though her Bible was one of the more modern translations. *Angels unaware* sounded more romantic than *angels without knowing it*.

People thought the notion of romance in the Bible farfetched. But in her mind, it was full of romance—the greatest love story ever told. *For God so loved the world that He gave His One and Only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.* Love didn't get any better or romantic than that.

She got to her feet and flung open the window. Heat rushed in like a furnace, and she smiled. In her mind she could hear her housemate, Pip, complaining she was running the air-conditioning with the windows open. She loved Pip to bits, almost as much

as she loved living in Sydney. She loved her job, the people, and the city with its bright lights and long stretches of amazing coastline. Only one thing would make it perfect. She dropped to her knees by the window.

Lord, I'm thirty-one. Sometimes it would be nice to have someone to share my life with, to spend my occasional evening off with other than Pip. And she's spending more and more time with Rob now as they plan their wedding. Being single is hard, and if it's what You want for me, then I trust You to give me the strength to use my singleness for Your glory. If, on the other hand, You want me to marry, then show me who the man You have set aside for me is. And I don't want to sound impatient, Lord, but soon would be nice. I'm not getting any younger.

Listen to me. I should be thanking You for this glorious, albeit very hot day, praising You for Your mercy and love, and here I am complaining about being single...

Tears rolled down her face as she prayed. She knew that she would serve God, no matter what. Being single was hard when all her friends were married, getting married, or involved with a guy. Something she so desperately wanted for herself.

Half an hour later, as she got to her feet, the front door slammed shut, and Pip called her name.

"Jo? Are you even out of bed yet, sleepy head? The day's a-wasting and almost half over."

She smiled. "Yeah, I'm up."

Pip opened the bedroom door and bounced inside. She tossed Jo a pair of running shoes. "Come on. Aren't you ready yet?"

Jo caught the shoes. "Ready? Oh, yeah, tennis."

"Yes, tennis. You're making up the fourth today."

Jo wrapped her tennis skirt over her shorts and

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slid her feet into her shoes. "I must be mad playing in this heat. And this had better not be *another* of your blind dates."

"Oh, you wound me." Pip laughed, pressing her hand to her heart. "As if I would do something like that to you. It's a tennis match. Jackson's wife is sick, so I volunteered you to play."

"That's fine." Jo stood, wriggling her toes within the canvas shoes. "Just remember, if God wants me to marry, He'll find me someone. Just like He found Rob for you."

Pip laughed. "Can't I help a little?"

"Nah. He can manage. If need be, He'll import him. I know Mr. Right is out there somewhere. I just have to hope he turns up before I'm old and grey."

"It's too late for that." Pip chuckled, playfully elbowing her friend. "Now come on or we won't have time for a full game before I have to go to work."

John stared at the harbor. Small boats floated lazily on the water's surface, sunlight sparkling on top of the waves. Above him seagulls soared and wheeled, screeching mournfully to each other. The afternoon sun shot rays of gold across the slowly bobbing water. It sure was beautiful here. He'd spent the day on the beach, walking and admiring the beauty of God's creation. Tomorrow he'd climb the harbor bridge and maybe take the ferry over to Manly.

He also wanted to walk from Bondi beach to Coogee as the guidebook suggested. Maybe he'd do that later in the week when it was supposed to get a little cooler. He was yet to find a church. Maybe the

hostel could suggest something.

Slowly walking back to the hostel, he noticed how the area had changed in the few hours he'd been gone. A lot more girls strolled by, and cars tooled down the street. John cringed as a car slowed and after a brief conversation, picked up a girl.

It looked even seedier in the dark than in the daylight. He started walking quicker, soon reaching the hostel. He went inside and strode up to his room. Several of the other occupants sat on the side of their bunks, reading or sleeping. Stale smoke hung in the air.

John smiled. "Hello."

A couple of people responded without warmth. Shrugging slightly, he crossed to his bunk and hoisted himself up, his rucksack knocking the adjacent bunk.

Fear surged through him as he realized the lock on his new case was broken. The things he'd transferred from his rucksack were missing, though his clothes were still there, but no longer in neat piles. Bile rose in his throat. He knew he'd locked it.

Closing his case, he lowered himself to the floor. He couldn't stay here another minute—couldn't afford to if his things were getting stolen and broken. He couldn't afford yet another new case. Maybe a padlock would keep it secure until he got home.

He grabbed his case and left. He'd go to the airport and get a standby flight to anywhere. Right now home seemed a great idea.

On his way down the hallway, he passed a phone. The paper in his pocket crinkled. He paused. It wouldn't hurt to try. She could only say no, right? In which case, he'd be no worse off than he was now.

He slid his card through the phone and dialed the

number. It rang twice.

"Hello?" a very warm and feminine voice answered.

John took a deep breath, not sure about asking for a place to stay from a stranger. He wasn't impulsive and never made a decision without praying about it for several days first. "Hello, my name's John Connington. Is Pippa there?"

"I'm afraid she's not. I'm Jo, her housemate. Can I take a message? I can get her to call you back."

For a moment, John was tempted to hang up, and he wiped his damp palm on his jeans before he slid his free hand into his pocket. "Not very easily, I'm afraid." Something prompted him to speak. "I'm calling from a pay phone. I was given Pippa's number by a Christian friend of hers—Sandy Franklin. She works with my sister, Emma, in the UK. The short story is I was told if I needed a place to stay in Sydney, that I should ring Pippa, and she'd put me up."

Silence echoed before the voice stammered. "I—I see. Well, like I said, Pip isn't here right now. She should be back in an hour or so. Call back then."

His heart sank. "All right. I'll do that. Goodbye." He set the phone back on the wall. *What do I do, Lord?*

Gentle feelings touched him that he should go on faith and just leave the hostel.

No room at the inn, yet they found a stable. I will provide.

John nodded to himself, headed down to reception, and checked out.

He'd walk back to the station, wait there, and if Pippa said no, he'd get on a train to the airport and start queuing for a standby flight. He couldn't blame her housemate for being so cagey. She didn't know