

A
Carla Rossi

CHRISTMAS ROMANCE



*Dr. Noah and the
Sugar Plum Fairy*

Dr. Noah and
the Sugar Plum
Fairy

Carla Rossi

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Dr. Noah and the Sugar Plum Fairy

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Dedication

To my dancers, Tiffany and Daniel

Praise for *Unlikely Praise*

Carla Rossi spins a web of a tale that leads to many lessons about forgiveness, faith, hope, grace, and the church. Beginning with a lesson on judging others by what we see on the outside. Rossi brings lessons from the Bible to life in our present times. ~ Bonita L. Ledzius at Radiant Lit

*'Twas the first night of Christmas break
At Jane Trumbull's house,
Monsieur Snowball wasn't stirring
To even paw a catnip mouse.
His breathing was shallow
His tail didn't flick,
Jane knew in an instant
Monsieur Snowball was sick.
So she donned her holiday 'kerchief
And grabbed her beloved pet,
She raced into the darkness
Toward the emergency vet...*

Jane Trumbull hit the northbound frontage road just outside of Austin, Texas and prayed she'd spot a neon sign for the after-hours animal emergency clinic. Strip malls and office buildings had sprung up everywhere in the bustling suburb while she'd been away at college. She no longer knew exactly where everything was.

"Hang in there, Monsieur Snowball. Do not, I repeat, do *not* go toward the light."

She rolled through a stop sign. The sickly feline let out a deep but weak mewl as if to disapprove.

She reached out to steady his carrier. "Sh... Don't worry about it. It's two AM and there's no one around." She poked her finger through a square in the metal cage door. The cat's pink nose and breath were hot against her skin. "You're burning up. We're almost there."

Her gaze darted from road to cat to signage until the beacon of hope that flashed “animal” and “emergency” came into view. She sped across the nearly vacant parking lot towards the only lit business in the cluster of shops and offices.

She burst through the glass double doors and headed for the receptionist.

“Jane? Is that you?”

“Mrs. Salmons?” Jane placed the carrier on the counter and slung her silver metallic hobo bag beside it. “Oh, Mrs. Salmons, is Dr. Salmons here too? Because that would be a blessing straight from Heaven if Monsieur Snowball could see his own doctor.”

“Oh no, honey, he’s not here. I’m just helping out the new guy. His tech had a family emergency.”

Jane’s heart fluttered and sank.

“Don’t worry. Dr. Barron is very good.”

“OK, well, Snowball has been kinda listless today and wouldn’t eat much. His face is a little swollen, and I think he has a fever. I couldn’t get any water in him and that worried me.”

Mrs. Salmons pushed a clipboard toward Jane and plucked the carrier off the counter. “Sign this consent form and have a seat. I’ll pull up Snowball’s records, and Dr. Barron will take a look.”

Jane could barely focus on the page as she checked the box for *do whatever necessary* and scribbled her signature. “Wait. Can’t I come with him?”

The middle-aged woman nodded toward the coffee pot. “Grab a cup and give us a minute. We’ll come and get you in a bit.” She pulled the carrier to her nose and dissolved into cooing baby-slash-animal talk. “Isn’t that right, Monsieur Snowball? We’re gonna have a little triage time together.” Her voice trailed off

as she disappeared through the private clinic door.

Jane ignored the coffee pot and dropped into a plastic seat in the corner. The place was empty except for her. She shed her wool, US Navy pea coat and killed about twenty minutes arranging and rearranging her red Christmas scarf in her mass of long, pale blonde hair.

Nearing an hour, no amount of mind-numbing magazine rifling could take her thoughts far from her cat. She stared a while at the blank space where a television used to be, then resorted to stacking the scattered brochures strewn about the two scratched up tables on either end of a row of connected chairs. There were seven copies of *Does Your Cat Have Allergies?* and only two of *Does Your Dog Have Worms?* Somehow, she felt that didn't bode well for the dogs of Austin. There was a reason people took those brochures.

She checked her phone repeatedly, but didn't really expect to hear from anyone in the middle of the night. Finally, she pulled her New Testament from the pocket in her bag and started thumbing through Galatians and other books written by Paul. Something about that brave apostle and his struggles always made her feel stronger, more determined, and better able to face difficult situations. So amidst the glow of a loosely hung strand of Christmas twinkle lights, she leaned her head against the cool glass front window and prayed. *Lord, please take care of Snowball. I don't know what I'll do if he dies.*

"Jane?"

She jumped straight up. "Yes?"

Mrs. Salmons's serene smile was classically non-committal. There was no way to read good news or bad. "C'mon back."

“How is he?”

There was that poker-face smile again. “Dr. Barron will fill you in. There’s no one else here, so he said you could come back to the treatment room.”

Jane entered the area lined with built-in cages and filled with sterile looking stainless steel tables and counters covered with supplies. She rushed to Snowball’s cage and grabbed the door with both hands in hopes that some part of her fingers would be able to stroke his short, winter white fur.

“How ya doin’, buddy? I was so worried.”

The cat squinted and offered a half-hearted stretch before he closed his eyes and yawned. He lay nestled among a blue bath towel and a piece of flannel bed sheet with cartoon characters all over it. Somewhere stuck in his body was a tube, but she couldn’t see where. She only knew about it because of the I.V. bag hanging to the side and away from the front of his little cat prison.

“That’s a beautiful cat.”

The masculine voice was attached to a tall lean man who came through the door behind her. He gave his hands one final pat with a wad of paper towels and tossed them away.

Was this Dr. Barron? She’d been expecting someone short and fluffy like Dr. Salmons. Instead, she saw shaggy-haired surfer guy with brown leather hiking boots and a red hibiscus-covered Hawaiian shirt peeking out from his open lab coat.

Kinda yummy in an off-beat, messy way.

“Thank you.” She flashed him her best up-all-night-and-worried smile. “You don’t see too many cats that are so completely white. Well, I guess you do because you’re a vet and all, but normal people might

not. Not that you're not normal." She stammered to a stop and took a breath. "Anyway. How is he?"

"Snowball needs a little work, but I think he'll be OK." He rolled two stools toward the cage. "Have a seat," he said and extended his hand. "I'm Dr. Barron."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Jane." She climbed onto the stool, being careful not to let it slide out from under her. "What's wrong with him?"

"You said you noticed his face was swollen?"

She met his steady blue-grey gaze and nodded.

"That's because he has an abscess under a tooth there on that right side. I'm sure it's painful. That's why you couldn't get him to eat."

"And why he has a fever."

"Exactly. You did the right thing bringing him in. He was dehydrated, and those abscesses can lead to more serious problems."

"Are you going to pull the tooth?"

"Not tonight. We need to knock that infection down. I'm giving him fluids, antibiotics, and something to make him more comfortable. You can take him home in a bit after I make sure he's progressing. I'll give you more antibiotics for the weekend and he should start eating and drinking on his own. You'll need to see Dr. Salmons first thing Monday. I'll give him a heads up."

"Do you think Dr. Salmons will want to pull the tooth?"

"That's what usually happens. But I have to tell you, Jane, Snowball's gettin' up there."

"I've had him since I was ten years old. Got him for Christmas that year, actually."

"The tooth would have to be extracted under general anesthesia and that's often not an option for

elderly pets. Sometimes there's a heart condition that would make it too dangerous to anesthetize. He'll need a thorough examination to make sure, but you can talk about all that Monday." Dr. Barron stood and rolled his seat out of the way. "I'll be back to check in a while."

Jane watched him go and then slid as close to the cage as possible. "That's a relief, huh? Everything's going to be fine," she whispered. "Unless, of course, you count us maxing out my credit card. That puts an end to my Christmas shopping. But that's OK. You're worth it. And here I am babbling again while you need to rest which, by the way, you couldn't cough or gag or something when I was rambling to your cute doctor about your fancy white coat? Never mind. I'm sure he's spoken for."

"He's not taken."

Jane jerked, as did the rolling stool. She clawed at the cage to hang on. "That is not funny, Mrs. Salmons. I almost fell off this thing. And you must have ears like a bat because I was whispering."

"Sound really carries in here," she said and put a pile of clean towels on the counter.

Jane started melting from the inside out. "Oh, no. Dr. Barron didn't hear that, did he?"

"No, he's gone down to the corner store for juice. He doesn't much like coffee." She joined her at the cage. "Ah, yes. He's starting to perk up. Noah will probably remove the line when he gets back and let Snowball out of that cage to see how he's doing."

"Noah? Who's Noah?"

"Sorry. Dr. Barron. His first name is Noah."

"Wow. And he's a vet. Clever."

Mrs. Salmons pulled a brochure and business card

from a plastic holder by the door. "Yes. Here you go. He's fresh off the plane from California. This emergency clinic is his new venture. You can read all about it while you wait. I have to get back out front. Call me if you need anything."

"Thanks."

Jane studied the pamphlet until her tired eyes crossed. There were catchy marketing blurbs about his education, his years in practice and certifications, and his triumphant return to Texas—whatever that meant.

She held his picture up to the cage.

"This doesn't look anything like the cutie who was just in here," she told the cat. "This looks like his mom made him put on a suit five years ago just before she wet and combed his hair."

She pressed her forehead against the cool, metal grid. "You're looking better. I sure hope you feel better so we can get home and crawl in bed..." Her eyes closed and her mind drifted. She was weightless and calm and there was no sound.

The crash and boom, however, seemed extraordinarily loud and close. Then her hip hurt.

Her eyes flew open. "Oh, man, that did *not* just happen." Out of pure embarrassment, she glanced around the room. There were no human witnesses, but Monsieur Snowball had come to the front of his kennel to see what had happened.

"Wow, kitty, you look great," she said as she reached to grab the pen and lipstick that had flown from her purse when the stool slid out from under her. At least that's what she thought had happened. "I mean you look *really* great. How long have I been out?"

She was on all fours trying to gather her things and check her phone for the exact time when Dr.

Barron plowed through the door. "How's he doing?"

This is not happening, not happening, not happening...

And yet, here he was, rushing to her side and reaching for her arm.

"Are you all right?"

"Fine." She avoided his help and scrambled to her feet. "I'm fine."

"But your forehead. Did you cut yourself?"

"No. Wait. What?"

"Your forehead. It looks like you hurt yourself."

She pressed her fingers into her skin.

No. Way.

"Oh, *that*." She paused to choose her words carefully, though there was no way this would not be mortifying. "I'm a little clumsy at times, and I think what happened here is that I fell asleep on that stool while leaning against the cage. What you have here," she said and gestured toward her face, "are nothing more than sleep indentations. And if I've drooled all over myself as well, I would thank you to find a shot of horsey knockout drops and allow me to put myself out of my humiliation and misery."

He looked away and placed his fist to his mouth as he cleared his throat. His eyes twinkled a bit. He was trying not to laugh.

"Go ahead and laugh," she said. "It's funny."

"Wouldn't think of it. Now let me get this old man unhooked and out of this cage. He looks better already."

He grabbed gloves off the counter, pulled a supply cart towards him, and sat on the same stool she'd completed an ugly dismount from just moments ago.

She continued to right herself and make sure everything was off the floor. She shoved the brochure

and business card deep into her purse. "I know you must get asked this every day, but do you come from a family of veterinarians? Is that why your parents named you Noah? Because they figured you might end up working with animals?"

She watched his back as he continued to work, hunched over, half in the cage. Strands of tawny hair danced at his collar.

He stiffened and then shrugged. "By that reasoning, you could say I come from a family of ship builders or sailors or even meteorologists. Wasn't Noah's story more about the ark and the flood?"

"Well stated. But I think Noah's story was more about obedience to God. About doing something God tells you to do, even though it might sound impossible and everyone else thinks you're nuts. He could have asked him to do anything. It just happened to involve a boat, a flood, and some animals."

He looked over his shoulder and grinned. "Is this sermon a long one? 'Cause I'm almost done here."

She grinned a little herself but couldn't think of one thing to say.

He tossed Snowball's linens on the floor. "My grandfather's name is Noah. I'm named after him. My parents are people doctors. They're really quite appalled that I became a vet."

"That's too bad." She placed her purse, coat, and scarf on the counter by the door and set her pet carrier on the table in the middle of the room. "There's a lot of that coincidental name thing going on in my family, too. My grandfather's name is Stone."

"Did you say Stone? As in Stonewall Jackson?"

"Yes, but no. It's just Stone as in Stone Trumbull Wholesale Landscaping Supplies. He lives with us

now, but he had a business in Houston for years. And he sold stone."

Dr. Barron didn't really respond, so she kept babbling. It was not one of her more attractive traits.

"Then there's my sister. Her name is Melody. She's almost eighteen and, true to her name, she is all things musical. She sings, she dances, she composes. She'll probably be a famous ballerina one day. She's incredible. She's even been to New York to study." Jane paused to take a breath. "And that leaves me. Just plain—"

"Don't say it." He turned with the cat nestled safe against his chest.

"Just Plain Jane."

He looked down at the cat and gently scratched around his ear. "See? I knew that was coming, and I couldn't stop her." He carried the furry ball to the table. "You forgot about Monsieur Snowball. It's pretty obvious what happened there."

She rushed to cuddle the cat, being careful not to bump his cheek or the stiff Christmas bandage on his leg. "Yeah, I was ten and not too creative."

"But why is he *French*?"

She laughed out loud. "I was very much consumed with dance myself back then. My sister and I danced so much that my parents put a practice barre in the game room between our bedrooms. Monsieur Snowball and I spent many hours speaking broken ballet French. He was my Nutcracker Prince, and I was the Sugar Plum Fairy."

Snowball wandered back across the table and pressed his nose against Dr. Barron's long fingers to ask for another scratch. "He should be dancing again in no time, but take it easy."

"It's not like I do that now," she said as further embarrassment set in. Surely he didn't think she carried on that way as an adult. As if she were going to rush home and don a classic pink tutu and pointe shoes and make her suffering cat watch her *demi plié, tendu, and relevé* at the barre. That would be crazy. Not entirely untrue when the cat was well, but crazy. "I gave up serious dancing a long time ago. In fact, now I'm one semester away from graduation and my first teaching job."

"Yes, I know," he said simply. "Mrs. Salmons told me you were home on break. What age and subject do you want to teach?"

Oh, mercy, what else had Mrs. Salmons said? "I hope to be certified K-12, but I prefer to teach English-Language Arts and writing at the junior high level."

"Are you at UT?"

"No, I'm an Aggie. And before you get too alarmed, you're new here, so I'll tell you it's more common than you think that Austinites sometimes leave Austin and go to Texas A&M."

"I'm not completely new to Texas. My grandparents lived in Wimberley."

"So you know what's what then." She opened the pet carrier door and made kissing and clicking sounds until Snowball meandered inside. "What else did Mrs. Salmons tell you?"

"Nothing. Just that they've known Snowball since he was a kitten and your families attend the same church. She also said that—her words now—your family is a hoot."

Jane sighed. Kiss. Of. Death.

"Thanks so much, Dr. Barron. Have a good rest of the night. Or I guess it's well into Saturday morning

now." She reached in her purse and pulled out two postcards. "My mother says I have to give these to everyone I meet. Please consider visiting our church during the holidays. There are a lot of services to choose from. I promise I won't be preaching about any Old Testament heroes. And this is an invitation to *The Nutcracker* being performed by our community dance company. There's one night you can get in free if you bring a blanket and a jar of peanut butter or jelly for the county's food pantry and shelter. You should come. My sister is the Sugar Plum Fairy."

"You're not dancing the part?"

"Of course not. I gave up serious dance, remember? But I do help out. You might say I'm Melody's personal assistant."

"All right. I'll be here all weekend if Snowball needs anything. Don't forget what I said. He's getting older and this infection is hard on him."

"I understand. I'll take good care of him." She gathered her things. "Good night, Dr. Noah, emergency vet from California and returning-prodigal-to-Texas and most likely cowboy wannabe."

"And good night to you, slightly clumsy Un-plain Jane, cat lover, soon-to-be teacher and probably not really ex-ballerina."

*'Twas the second night of Christmas break
Monsieur Snowball seemed better,
Jane helped her mother bake
And finish the holiday letter.
The stockings were hung
And the chimney was swept,*

*Jane crawled into the attic
Where the giant wreath was kept.
The cat ate tuna pâté,
And to his pillow did creep,
Jane settled in beside him
For some much needed sleep...*

Despite her total lack of sleep from the night before and the massive amounts of all things Christmas she and her mother had accomplished during the day, Jane was once again awake at two in the morning. Snowball was sound asleep on his own blanket at the end of the bed. The cat barely lifted his head as Jane slid from under the covers and headed for the game room. There was no light from under her sister's door, only the soft glow of the moon as it drifted through the shuttered window and onto Melody's various piles of dance shoes and clothing. Jane clicked on the small accent lamp on the table. Melody's Sugar Plum Fairy costume glistened from a hanger at the end of the barre. Jane touched the edge of the stiff, classic pink tutu and reverently ran her fingers across the silver beads and clear sequins that accentuated the bodice. The straps were simple and there didn't appear to be any upper-arm cuffs. That was good because Melody had great ballet arms, and they should never be covered with excessive costuming. In a bag attached to the same hanger, Jane found the headpiece. This year's wardrobe mistress had chosen a classic, lightly-embellished tiara with just enough sparkle to catch the attention of all the little girls with ballerina dreams, but not enough to detract from Melody's shimmering blonde hair.

There were four new packages of white tights on