

The Rocking Horse

By

Cassandra Dunn

The party, like most of my friends' parties, wasn't kid-friendly. I spent much of it chasing Dylan around, blocking him from ascending or descending stairs, pulling discarded napkins and half-full cups of alcoholic beverages from his grasp. After nearly an hour of this, Sam, gracious host and husband of my best friend, saw the trouble he was causing and stepped in. He got Dylan onto his shoulders and continued socializing, as if such an exuberantly loud hat was perfectly normal party-wear. Dylan was in heaven, and I got a precious few moments to collapse onto the pillow-laden sofa.

I took in the room from my low vantage point, the women dressed in slinky dresses and heels, while I sported Keds and the unforgiving skinny jeans that I was finally able to squeeze back into. It must've been nice to get dressed up. None of them had an eighteen-month old to keep up with.

One of Sam's friends, a beautiful dark-haired, intense-gazed guy whose name I'd already forgotten, was watching me. He held up his drink, as if in toast, and I smiled. He pointed to his cup, toward the bar, toward me. I shook my head, but he kept pointing, refusing to take no for an answer. I mouthed "water," and he bowed before heading to the kitchen.

"Brent," he said, settling down next to me, reading my mind.

"Shoshanna."

"I remember. Beautiful name."

I took a long sip of the ice water. “Thanks. It’s been a long time since a man has waited on me.”

He laughed and shrugged. His profile was half illuminated in orange by the setting sun, and half in shadow. The effect was striking. He was handsome even without the appearance of glowing. I looked away, afraid I was staring. A leggy blonde, standing carefully on one stiletto, her other shoe tipped back onto the heel, eyed us from across the room.

“Your girlfriend?” I guessed. She didn’t look happy to see him fetching water for another woman.

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“You suppose?”

“She’s a girl and a friend.”

“Does she know that’s all she is? She looks ready to stab me with that heel.”

“She’s...” He turned away, careful not to look in her direction, until he had the full orange-rose hue of the sunset across his chiseled features. “Dramatic.”

“Ah, one of those,” I said, settling back. “I myself am not one of those.”

“I know. That’s why I’m sitting here.”

He looked me over, his brown eyes shining gold in the fading sunlight. I laughed, high and nervous, butterflies stirring in a way that I hadn’t experienced in years. Not since the early days with Jeremy, before the late nights, the endless cases, the constant distractions that were his daily job.

More and more since Dylan was born, it felt like Jeremy didn’t want to be around. When he was home for more than a few hours, he grew anxious, fidgety, snappish, like

he couldn't breathe around us. He found errands to run, or just withdrew into his home office, his laptop, his files, his phone. He no longer had time for my friends, the mindless chitchat of social gatherings, the mundane trappings of ordinary life. Jeremy had loftier goals. What they were exactly, I wasn't sure. We didn't talk much anymore.

"You have to stop looking at me like that," I said, and Brent laughed, warm and inviting.

"Sorry," he said, not sounding sorry in the least. He bounced a little on the sofa, testing out its firmness. "Nice ride you have here."

"It's not helping my bad back any, but it beats chasing my little guy all over the room. Sam's great with him."

He followed my eyes and nodded. "They'll be hopping on the bandwagon any time now."

I smiled, hoping for this. Once the rest of my friends had kids, I'd get them back, on my terms. The daily grind of parks, playdates, preschool research, and puppet shows.

Brent touched my forearm with his knuckle, raising goose bumps all over my body.

"Anything else I can get you?"

I took a sip of water, considering. "Are you able to lift and carry heavy objects?"

After Brent hoisted the huge, hand-carved oak rocking horse into the back of my car, I leaned in with the dog's blanket to wrap the bow-shaped rockers in, but the stubborn blanket refused to stay. It fell twice in my rush to get this job done gracefully, to send this handsome stranger back in to the party he was missing on my behalf, and I sighed with frustration. Brent leaned in behind me, tugging the blanket with me, trying to

slide the horse until the padding was wedged between the rockers and the glass of the side window. It was an awkward maneuver, made more difficult by his height and the low space beneath the open rear hatch. He held onto the horse with his right hand, wrapped his left arm around me, and shoved with me until we nearly had it where we wanted it. His breath stirred my hair by my right ear.

“You smell good,” he whispered, shoving one last time, his chest against my back, his face inches from mine.

I laughed, nervous at the closeness, my hair catching in the stubble of his beard. He smelled so good I’d been breathing through my mouth, afraid his intoxication would make me dizzy.

“You, too,” I said.

We nearly had it: the horse, blanket, bags of random kid things all wedged together to keep the horse stable on the winding road back to my house, but he was still there, leaning against me, adjusting something. I turned toward him, maybe not realizing how close he really was, but maybe knowing subconsciously exactly how close he was, and my lips grazed his bristly chin as I turned. His lips lowered and he kissed me, first tenderly, testing, then with more force, the passion catching us both off-guard. He held me, half-turned toward him, leaning backward into my own car, until we both pulled back with a gasp.

“Oh,” I said, covering my mouth. He gently released me, glancing at our handiwork in the car. I stood up, straightened my shirt. “I’m sorry.”

“No, no, it was me. I...” He shook his head.

“God, and your girlfriend’s inside.” I ducked around him, looking toward Sam and Beth’s house. Luckily the balcony overlooking the street was empty. Nothing but a row of people’s backs visible through the windows.

“And you have a husband who’d likely kick my ass for a move like that,” he said, roughly adjusting the mess inside my car one last time before closing the hatch.

“Nah, he wouldn’t care,” I said, locking the car. Brent looked at me, his dark eyes cutting through the casual nature of the comment.

“Oh,” he said. “Sorry.”

I shook it off, headed back toward the house. “Thanks for your help. I’m just going to say goodbye to Sam and Beth before I head out. And get Dylan, obviously.”

Brent smiled and nodded, but his eyes were still locked on me, tearing away the shield I needed to get through my daily life. He took his time coming back inside, and I didn’t see him as I made the rounds, Dylan on my hip, saying goodbye to all of my childless friends who would be staying up late partying while I was watching TV alone, listening to Dylan deep-breathing on the baby monitor. Jeremy was away on business, somewhere near LA, doing research, he’d said, for a case. He’d offered no other explanation and I hadn’t asked for one. I hadn’t heard from him in two days.

I stepped out the front door, already thrown off balance by Dylan, starting to squirm and fuss at being carried, and bumped right into Brent.

“Hey,” he said, catching us both with confident ease, his broad hands on my back and Dylan’s, his biceps flexing as he held the pair of us upright.

“Hey,” I said, nodding toward the writhing toddler in my arms. “He’s crashing.”

I shifted Dylan from one hip to the other, his twenty-eight pounds feeling more like fifty when he was struggling like this. No wonder my back was in constant spasm. A bolt of pain shot through my lower back and I had to set Dylan down. I lingered as I massaged my back, knowing I should be walking away. Running, even.

“I was just thinking. Is your husband around tonight?”

It seemed like a question I shouldn't answer. Information I should not be giving to a man so striking that I could barely look at him, and yet couldn't turn away from. A man who'd just kissed me.

“He's in LA.” I grabbed Dylan's hand, and started pulling him toward the car. Brent followed.

“Right. So, I was just thinking. How are you going to get that thing out of the car?”

I stopped and looked at Brent. He was medium height, medium build, medium everything, except the perfect shape of his face, the blinding intensity of his eyes. He waited, patiently, no agenda visible in his passive expression.

“I hadn't really thought about that. I guess I'll have to lift it.”

“You'll hurt your back worse.”

I tugged Dylan along, half leading, half dragging him down the steps to the sidewalk.

“Yeah, well. That's life, right?”

Brent took Dylan's other hand, lightening my load. We carried his limp, uncooperative body in that fashion down the last few steps.

“I could come by is all. Later, maybe, after the party, just to carry it in for you.”

We'd made it to the car, but Dylan refused to get inside. I bent over to pick him up and Brent stepped between us. He hoisted Dylan up and into his car seat with little effort.

"He's solid, all right," he said. Dylan beamed at the attention, at having a man buckling him in for a change. "I don't really know how this contraption works," Brent said, tugging on the loose straps here and there. I pointed at the right one, Brent gave it a tug, and just like that, my bucking, car seat-hating cherub was locked and loaded without a peep.

"You have a gift," I said. "We've been having major car seat battles. Sometimes I have to sit on him just to get him belted in."

Brent chuckled, stopped when he saw that I was serious, then started laughing again, harder.

"So, if you'll just give me your address and phone number, I can give you a call when I'm on my way. Maybe an hour. Sooner, if you need me sooner."

He held out his phone to me, a blinking cursor on a blank contact page. I looked at Dylan, happily kicking his chubby legs and hard shoes into the passenger seat, leaving little scuff marks that Jeremy would scold me for, as if I had any control over this willful child. I peered behind him at the heap of hand-me-downs in the back, donations from Beth's sister, who was done having kids after two rambunctious boys. The antique rocking horse was a beautiful beast, overly generous, impossible to resist.

"Sure. Make it at least an hour, so I have time to get Dylan down first?"

I handed the phone back and Brent slid it into his pocket, looking into my eyes. He leaned forward, and for a fleeting, heart-fluttering moment, I thought he was going to

kiss me again, right here in front of my son. He reached across me, his arm brushing mine, and touched Dylan's knee.

“Easy on the seat there, buddy. Save that energy for the rocking horse.”

Dylan smiled and settled, his pumping legs coming to rest. Brent turned and headed back up the walk, to the party, his girlfriend, my friends. I hovered in the cooling night air, transfixed, until Dylan made a raspberry sound to get my attention. I realized I'd been holding my breath since Brent's touch. I took a long breath and looked Dylan over.

“Yeah, I know.”

I walked around the car and got in, proud of myself for not looking toward the house as I did so. Dylan wasn't the only strong-willed one in the family. I turned the car around on the narrow hillside street, slowly, watching the rocking horse in back to make sure it didn't shift. It held tight.