

## The Last Take-up

Here's your spline, spline roller, and awl," Kori said, dropping the items one by one on the old brown Army-issue towel that lay crumpled upon the wood planks of the porch. "I felt stupid asking the guy at the hardware store, but he knew exactly what they were.

"Great!" Brenna clapped her hands together and reached for the torn screen door that she had removed and leaned against the decrepit railing.

Kori carried another armload of sacks up the front steps and paused over Brenna, already at work on the screen. "Do you know what you're doing?"

Brenna gave her a irritable expression. "Of course. I told you I've done my research on this. I Googled it. This little rubber gasket do-hickey is called a spline—" she explained, prying it out of the groove around the screen with the awl. I just replace this ancient aluminum screen with some of this new nylon screen." Kori shifted the sacks for a better hold, as Brenna continued, "Why nylon, you ask? Well, see, it has better solar penetration."

"Sounds good to me," Kori said, lifting her eyebrows suggestively.

"That just means that more sunlight can come through it," Brenna went on. "And this is the little roller that puts the spline back in." She held the tool up proudly.

"I'll make us some lunch," Kori said evenly, carrying the packages inside.

Brenna sighed. She hadn't seen much of Kori lately. This was the first Saturday in a while that Kori hadn't gone in to work overtime. Since returning to her job from vacation time, and making the roundtrip into Fayetteville each day, it was little more than a hello and an air-kiss before Kori watched the news and then went to bed. They hadn't had sex in so long, that Brenna was having fantasies about the UPS guy.

Resolving to open a discussion about that very thing today—not fantasies about the UPS guy, but their own sex life—she bent back to repairing the screen.

Minutes later, Brenna sat back and congratulated herself on a job well done. The screen was replaced, and she would only need one Band-Aid this time. She squeezed the puncture made by the awl atop her thumb, and wiped away the blood absently. When she lifted her head again, she noticed the movement from the direction of the knoll. Someone was headed toward her on horseback. As the horse drew nearer, Brenna could see that the rider was a young woman with short blond hair, clad in faded, ripped jeans and a T-shirt. Brenna thought she bore a striking resemblance to the actress, Mary Stuart Masterson, from her role in *Fried Green Tomatoes*.

As the woman urged the animal close to the porch, Brenna stood and wiped her palms on the front of her jeans. "Hello. . ." she offered cautiously.

The young woman grinned with one corner of her mouth and continued to smack at a wad of pink gum. "Hi."

Brenna noticed that the T-shirt the woman was wearing had the image of a hot air balloon on it with the words *Up Up and Away* written below it. "Thought I'd come see what all the hoopla was about."

Her country accent was strong, and Brenna tried not to seem entertained by it. "The hoopla?"

The woman patted the chestnut's neck affectionately. "Me and ole Sassafras been hearin' bushel baskets a' stuff about the two sisters that moved into the old Pate place." She crooked one leg easily over the withers of the gelding. "Name's Tilly. What's yours?"

"Brenna."

"Pretty name, that." The young woman took a deep breath and squinted into the sun, casting a sidelong glance at Brenna. "Am I yer first viz'ter?"

"Actually, no. We met Harvey Hunsicker last month."

"Sorry to hear it."

"What?"

Tilly licked her lips and tried not to grin. She jerked her head away in a mannerism of forced self control and cleared her throat. "He's a handful, he is. Fize' you, I'd keep a ditch `tween ya."

"Oh? Why do you say that?"

"He's kinda loose in the upper story. Got a mean streak a mile wide and twice as ugly."

Brenna nodded slowly, her brain busy deciphering the colloquial assertions Tilly shared. "That's. . . good to know."

"Mind if I sit a spell?"

"Not at all." Brenna indicated the rockers, and knew that this Tilly-character would appear someday in one of her novels.

Tilly pushed her leg the rest of the way over and slid off the pony, dropping the rein to the ground. The Chestnut wandered across the yard in search of edible greenery. "Been too pooped to pop since the last take-

up." She sighed heavily and dropped into the chair, rocking.

Brenna sat in the other. "Since what?"

"The last take-up." Tilly said this matter-of-factly, pulling a seed-like burr that was stuck to her shirt like Velcro. As she turned her head to mop her neck with an old bandanna, she saw Brenna's bewildered frown. "I get took up ever now an' then. Been happenin' since I was knee-high to a toad. Mighty spooky at first," she continued, smacking her gum. "But a body gits used ta stuff after a while."

Brenna was blinking rapidly, trying to compose her next question, when Kori came out to the porch, testing the new screen door a few times before she noticed they had company. "Kori, this is Tilly."

Kori nodded in her direction. "Would you like a glass of tea or something?"

"If it ain't no trouble." She half smiled with the corner of her mouth again.

Kori stepped back inside, giving the screen door another skeptic's perusal.

Brenna considered Tilly as she sat there, chomping her gum and watching Sassafras graze in the front yard. She kept trying to make sense of Tilly's phrase about being 'took up', and wondered if it was just a backwoods colloquialism that meant being tired, or sleepless, or ill, or maybe it meant having sex—

Kori came out with tea for each of them, and took a seat at the top of the steps. Brenna cleared her throat after a swift drink and decided to be abrupt. "Hey, Kori, Tilly was telling me about being *took-up*."

"Took up?" Kori parroted.

"Dang! I reckon I have to explain it to ya'll, too." Tilly pulled the wad of pink bubble gum from her

mouth, and stuck in under the rim of the chair, unaware of the almost comical dismay this action incited in both the other women. "I know nobody takes me serious, but I ain't tetch'd like they say. Some say I'm crazy as a bessie-bug, but don't ya'll swaller that for minute. They's all just green 'cause they ain't the one's bein' took up." She nodded, as if she had just released some sensitive information.

Brenna tried again, "Uh, Tilly, I think we are just confused about . . . what you mean by 'took-up'. Took where? By whom?"

Tilly turned and studied their faces with surprising thoroughness, her lids contracting into slits over her hazel eyes, then nodded slowly. "In that flyin' machine. They come and take me up 'bout once't a year or so."

"Oh! An airplane!"

"Naw. Ain't no air-o-plane. And don't nobody use it fer crop-dustin', neither. It's round."

"Helicopter?" Kori offered weakly.

"Ain't no heelicopter, neither, I tell ya. Ain't got no swangin' blades on the outside."

Brenna and Kori exchanged animated glances. "Uh, Tilly, are you talking about a UFO?"

"You-ef-oh?" she repeated carefully. "What's that?"

"An Unidentified Flying Object—"

Tilly leaned back and swept a derisive hand in their direction. "Course not!"

The two breathed a sigh of relief.

"Don't take no genius to figger it out. . . Once't ya see it, ya can **identify** it right enough."

Kori began to play with a loose board on the porch, and Brenna pretended she had something in her eye, so she could mask a burgeoning giggle.

"Last time was Sundee last. Thangs were dif'ernt that time. They done some stuff to me they ain't never done before."

"Who? What stuff?" Brenna asked, clamping a hand over her mouth.

"Them white varmint with buggy eyes. They ain't as big as me, but they don't have no trouble keepin' me in a bridle. Last time they done some funny stuff, and now I think I'm nailed."

Kori looked up suddenly. "Nailed?"

"Yes'm. Lord knows how long it'll take that young 'un to hatch. They never told me nothin' about it." She sipped her tea calmly. "But it's in there, shore as shootin'." she patted her stomach. "I can feel it."