

The Homecoming

White Oak Book 1

Terri Jones

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Spring

1.

At midnight, from her third-story window, Autumn surveilled the parking lot in front of her apartment complex. Rows of cars sat in quiet darkness. Located three blocks from the University of Tennessee campus, cheap, and filled with students the apartments were never this quiet. She did not see the black Camry, nor did she see anyone lurking around the lot. He may have borrowed a car to throw her off. Her every move from here on out would be crucial. As soon as the coast was clear, she snuck down the stairs and backed her car up to the breezeway and stuffed her belongings into the backseat, hangers and all. A thick layer of clouds covered the full moon and steeped the night in a dark haze. Using the cover to her advantage she worked quickly, shoving three boxes of clothes and a few other personal items into the trunk before checking around for any new cars or movement. Her phone was set to give a caller an automated “this number has been disconnected or no longer in service” message. She turned the key in the ignition, the engine roared to life, and she drove away, her apartment key and a portion of the next months’ rent left on the counter for her *ex*-roommate. At first, she pulled onto the highway, heading the wrong direction to avoid a tail; she needed to fill up the tank before heading out. Autumn drove a few miles before finding a station. Once she had enough gas, she got back in the car and headed north, but not before checking to make sure she wasn’t followed. With a sigh of relief, she exited the highway and turned southwest toward her parents’ home in White Oak, the small East Tennessee town she left four years ago.

Two days later, Autumn sat alone in her parents’ half-acre backyard among a sea of relatives. The McMillan’s spared no expense for her graduation party. More family members than should ever be allowed in one place filled the yard along with tables of food. It was beyond overwhelming. It wasn’t like she never came home for holidays. But this time, she was back with her college diploma in hand and no idea what she was going to do with it. Even temporarily returning home meant failure, especially after sneaking out of Knoxville like a criminal on the lamb. She had to let go of the thought and pretend to be happy. To appear ungrateful would not help her case. A few relatives surrounded her, endless hugs and congratulations all around; others waved from across the yard while the rest busied themselves with better conversations. She scanned every face to make sure *he* didn’t show up.

Autumn’s cousin, Dee, came over and plopped a toddler on the seat across from her. “Stay,” she ordered the girl before leaving her at the table.

Autumn stared at the toddler, who smiled back and proceeded to hit the tabletop as hard as she could for no discernable reason.

“So, I hear you’re moving back.” Dee returned with a paper plate full of food before sliding onto the picnic table bench next to her daughter. The child snatched a roll off of the plate and crammed it into her mouth. Half the roll disappeared while and she used her finger to keep pushing even though she could barely chew what was already in there. The girl might choke.

Autumn nodded, crunching on a potato chip eyes plastered on Dee's child who devoured the roll like a snake. Then she reached for the other roll on her mom's plate.

"What'cha got planned?" Dee asked.

"Looking for a job, I guess."

"Well, you've got a fancy degree now, so it shouldn't be too hard." Dee popped a piece of fried okra in her mouth.

Autumn's job prospects, or lack thereof, were not the conversation she wanted to have at the moment. "How are the kids?" she asked instead.

"Crazy," Dee replied. "Connor's seven and Mattie here just turned three."

"Where's Connor?"

Dee shrugged. "Around here somewhere." She offered Mattie a spoonful of mashed potatoes; the girl clamped her mouth shut and shook her head in an emphatic "no".

"I thought all kids liked mashed potatoes," Autumn said.

"This one doesn't like anything but bread. Connor ate everything; this one, not so much."

If Autumn slammed her head on the table hard enough, maybe it would render her unconscious. Dee was only a year older than Autumn and she already had two kids and a full-time job at a daycare. She'd skipped college after having Connor in high school. What would it be like having two kids and a job at twenty-four? At twenty-three, Autumn was unemployed and moving back in with her parents. Sure, many other people she knew were too, but most of her friends were getting jobs, being promoted, and getting married.

"What kind of job are you looking for?" Dee asked, snapping Autumn back to reality.

"One that'll pay the bills and get me a place to live."

"Wow, I don't know how you'll find one of those."

"I guess I should narrow it down a bit." Autumn studied the pile of chips on her plate.

"That might help. You could come work with me. We always need people to watch the kids in the afternoons. After the daytime teacher leaves, all you have to do is keep them alive until their parents get there."

"That sounds difficult," Autumn replied.

"Some days it is," Dee admitted.

"Is that what you do?"

"Back when I started. I have my own room now, the three- and four-year-olds. Mattie's in there with me."

"I'll consider it," Autumn said, though she had no intention of working in a daycare. Kids were okay, at a distance. But being locked in a room with a group of them? No, thank you.

"Do you know where Jason is?" Dee asked.

Autumn shook her head. Her brother was in the army and somewhere in the desert, as far as she knew. "Deployed somewhere. He's still got a couple of months before he'll surface again."

Dee continued talking about her kids, but Autumn tuned it out. She gave the occasional nod, to convince Dee she was listening. Autumn glanced around the backyard. Relatives from all over the region were eating, talking, and laughing. Time and distance had created a space between her and the rest of her family. She had changed, and most of them ignored her whenever she was around. It didn't matter how much she tried to relate to them. Maybe being aware of the fact only made it worse. Autumn and Dee practically grew up together, inseparable from the ages of nine through fourteen. After that, Dee was busy with boys and now, she was practically a stranger. Autumn's head throbbed and she was desperate to get away from the crowd surrounding her even if most of them didn't pay her any attention.

Autumn was extricated from her conversation with Dee by her toddlers' exhausted tantrum. Inside the kitchen, the air was cool and quiet. The commotion of the large family gathering remained outside. Autumn found the headache medicine and considered sneaking off to her room when Daniel appeared at the door. The last time she saw him, he was a skinny eighteen-year-old leaving for boot camp with her brother. The scruffy, military man in front of her was over six feet tall, an imposing figure even in shorts, a t-shirt, and a ball cap. "Hey, it's the graduate," Dan said. "I've been looking for you." He closed the door behind him.

"Well, here I am," she replied. Autumn had known Dan since childhood; he was her brother's best friend. Jason and Dan had spent endless years torturing Autumn and her friends. When she was seven, they tied her up with a vine that turned out to be poison ivy. In the moment, she swore she would never forgive them. But time faded the anger along with the rash, and the incident became a footnote of a long-forgotten summer. They initially exchanged letters after he and Jason went to boot camp; she'd gotten to know Dan well through their correspondence. But she had been fifteen then, and he was cute but too old for her. Eventually, the letters slowed until they came to a stop. She hadn't seen him in nine years.

"Hiding from your party?" he asked.

"Trying and failing." Autumn shot him a sarcastic smile.

Dan smiled. "You want to go for a drive?"