

# *Sweet Tea*

Piper Huguley

Nothing about the college town was obvious from the road. That was on purpose with the design, she knew. A school like Milford College was best hidden near the waterway, because someone might want to do the school or its students harm. That was one thing that had always hung over her head as an anxious child.

Her father, a former soldier and head of security at the school, always promised her he would protect her, but when danger came, it took him and her mother. Together. Nowhere to be found.

That's when she left Milford for an Eastern boarding school. To avoid the danger.

And now she was here again, fulfilling the saying that she hated the most.

Milford. The town no one ever really leaves.

Sigh.

The town square was bordered on one side with small shops of all sorts of things that students needed. The McDonald's was also cleverly designed to be a part of the small-town décor. At the end of the street was the sandstone brick building of Milford AME, her family's home church. The beginning of the campus was on the other side of the square, the side that faced the water.

The biggest building on campus, as well as the oldest, Porter Hall beckoned. That was where her grandmother had worked for most of her life in the main student cafeteria. On a Friday afternoon, just about four p.m., she would be leaving Porter, walking across the square toward her home on the back side of the strip away from where the students lived, toward where staff and faculty lived. Allie could sit on her grandmother's porch and wait for her, but everyone in the neighborhood knew who she was. It was better to be quiet and just wait on a bench.

She answered some calls and worked on her computer a bit. Then, walking along, laughing and talking, came her dear sweet grandmother on the arm of this drifter person. He resembled Apollo more than the devil, now that she could get a close-up look at him. His hair was not as short as it was in the picture on the website, and it curled around his head. His hair, like some kind of god from Greek mythology, made him appear to be otherworldly. She had never seen a man like Jack Darwent, and the fact that her grandmother was giggling and laughing like a teenager didn't give her any comfort.

Slipping a Tums between her lips, Allie chewed on the chalky fruitiness to help calm her, to keep the acids in her stomach from eating her up from the inside. She stood and faced the two of them, her grandmother in her little chef's coat, bent over but walking on the protective arm of this man, who wore

a tightly fitting polo shirt with the expensive logo on it and more snug jeans with navy blue deck shoes.

Oh yes. A devil for sure.

Standing there, Allie pushed back her chicly cut bob over her ear.

“Granda,” she called.

Her grandmother froze in her steps. “Oh my Lord. It’s Tea. She come home to me, like I’ve been praying.”

The tremor in her grandmother’s voice stirred Allie in an unexpected way so that she didn’t realize Granda had called her by her old childhood name. A lump rose up in her throat as her grandmother uncertainly tried to cross to her on the uneven pavement. Allie went to her instead, taking big quick strides down the sidewalk in her Jimmy Choos, but when she reached her, Granda stumbled a bit. In order for them both not to fall crashing to the pavement, Jack Darwent reached his big arms out, steadying both of them.

At once.

“Whoa there, ladies,” his voice boomed.

“Jack, you are making a specialty out of saving the Smithsonian women,” Allie’s grandmother purred.

Allie shook his hold from her, because all of a sudden, she felt dizzy, and she didn’t like any fizzy feeling fuzzing up her head.

“Always happy to help, Miss Ada.”

“Tea, meet Jack Darwent. Jack, this is my grandbaby that I raised up, Althea, but when she is in Milford, I call her Tea.”

“Nice to meet you, Tea.”

“What are you doing here with my grandmother?” Allie spoke entirely too sternly, because if she didn’t, her legs would turn to egg noodles at the way his voice sounded when he spoke her old childhood nickname.

“Excuse me?” His eyebrows raised up.

She gulped at the surprise on his face.

“Tea, that is no way to be. Excuse her, Jack. She been living up in the North with rude Yankee people and forgot her upbringing I gave her.”

“Granda, I didn’t mean to be disrespectful. I just want to know who this...this...man is. He’s been here for a long time.”

“It’s so he can make the best movie of me that he can.” Her little grandmother straightened up and Allie’s heart danced. She didn’t want Granda to be mad at her, so she softened her tone.

“He’s making a movie of several subjects, Granda, not just you.”

“I film at my leisure, Miss Tea. Your grandmother is particularly fascinating.” An amused smile formed on one side of Jack’s lips.

Once again, Granda giggled.

Tea, Allie, whoever she was, had had enough. “Let me get you home in the car.”

“No indeed. I like walking and Jack is making sure I get home safely. I don’t know what you are doing here, but you probably have your things in the car. You’re welcome to drive to the house, but I look forward to my daily constitutional walk with Jack.”

Her grandmother put her hand in the crook of the man's arm and with that, walked away from Allie.

She ate another Tums—a wildberry one, the kind she liked least of all.