

The Place by Tjai Abdullah - Part One

"Ladies, don't forget about tonight!" I hear the short sprout principal named Mr. Schmidgeran excitedly say as he looks down the hall at the new ladies lined up waiting for their room assignment at the newly built Thee Beckford Manor School for Girls as Ms. Natilee steps off the elevator. "What happens tonight?" I ask as I come off behind her from my cigarette break on my way to my AP math class I am almost late for. I learned on my first night here that if you sneak out behind the red oak tree and wait to walk in behind the janitor on the elevator, they never notice. At least Mr. Schmidgeran doesn't, probably holding his breath because Ms. Natilee smells like a wet ashtray all day every day.

"Oh hey, you came with the group of students last night, right? You haven't been. Ms. Reynolds, is it?" "Yes, sir." I smile, sucking on my perfectly concealed piece of spearmint gum. "Well, young lady, on the other side of the courtyard is an old stadium. This winter there's a carnival every night complete with free food, games, and a great DJ. Everyone's invited, and all you need is your school wristband to get in. They use us as practice to prepare for their spring season. It's a lot of fun, you should join the other girls and come, and like I said, it's free!" The director says proudly, smiling as he gets on the elevator.

After class, I rush to the residence hall to take a nap. When I walk in the room, the girls that came in with me are packing their things, claiming that they are moving in a trio room together in Exodus Yard. I think it is odd only because we all came in together the evening before, and it seems as though they don't know each other. I don't remember seeing them speak to each other, plus I read in the school rules and mandates that you are only eligible for that exclusive hall in the "magical" yard after 9 months.

Last night, I fell asleep early, and I think I saw my two roommates when it was time to sign the population clipboard coming in together from the carnival, but I was still half asleep. I congratulate them as we all go into the dining room to eat. This morning, everyone seems to be the best of friends, giggling and laughing about having the best time the night before. They must be talking about the carnival.

The girls eating at the table with me start talking about this infamous carnival, saying that they have so much food there they shouldn't eat a lot at dinner because it would ruin their appetite. One of the girls asks me if I am going. I mention I might stay in my room and write. She gets up with her tray, still urging me to come out and join the fun.

"Ok, cool, it might be refreshing to try something different," I say and go to my last three classes, then

into my room to take a nap. It sounds like a good thing; I hear a few more girls talking about it at dinner.

I don't hear my alarm and wake up around 10 p.m., and my roommates are already gone. I rush and get dressed in some sweatpants and a T-shirt, grab my wristband, and leave the room. Strangely enough, there are men on the floor. Other than the director, most of our staff I have come in contact with so far are women, so I just assume it is because I don't usually leave my room this late, and I probably just don't know them all yet.

I walk past the nurse's desk, and she is on the computer with a man standing over her. I say, "Hey, can I still go down to the carnival?" They both look up, surprised. She says, "If that's what you choose to do, you still have time, just sign out," and he picks up a clipboard on the desk and starts flipping through it. As I walk past, I hear him say, "I thought you said all were accounted for?" "They were, she never comes out," she replies.

As I walk to the main desk, there are two men over the woman there. She looks up and says sarcastically, "Well, well, well, looks like someone decided to come out and have some fun finally." "Yeah, I hear there's music and free food, probably won't do rides or games, but it'll be a break from the norm," I say. The guy says, "It'll definitely be that." She says, "Don't forget to sign out and be back before curfew. Remember, if you don't get back, we'll give your bed away in the morning, there's plenty of girls that want it."

I say, "Ok, I'm just gonna check it out, I'll be back in a few minutes." I hear them all laugh as I get on the elevator.

I see women crowded by the shelter doors that I haven't seen in days. I guess they need a place to stay again and decide to just go there and hurry back before one of them has my bed in the morning. When I get to the backyard, I see a stadium lit up and busy. At the doors, security in blue are checking wristbands and letting women in. "Hello, can I see your band? Ok, yep, you're good to go, have fun and remember where this door is, we are about to close the other ones because it's close to curfew and our shift change." "Thanks, I'll keep note," I say as I walk in. Just as soon as I walk in through the archway and see all the food stations, people, and festivities, I forget where the door is. I think I walk straight ahead, but when I turn back, there isn't a door, so I just figure I got sidetracked when I get the cotton candy that starts my journey. I walk over to the juice station and order a much-needed smoothie, then as I am walking over to what I think is a bumper car station, I stop at the hibachi grill station and see the Caribbean food station, so I get about four glasses of sorrel just because I am missing it so much.

I have to go to the bathroom, so I search the halls to find them. I see a few people having sex underneath the seats of the stadium; it is so dark I can't see if it is residents or staff or both, I just know they are definitely having sex, and it seems like everywhere I walk, it is going on. I finally find a bathroom and hope I can get a stall without having to wait 'til someone finishes because by this time I am lost and really have to go. It is clean and empty, so I go. As I am washing my hands, a few girls come in talking about some security guards they ran into in all black and are trying to decide how to sneak away from their friend to meet up with them before their shift. I laugh and walk out. I follow a security guard in blue until he walks past the field where the games are going on. The DJ brings some rappers, and they are performing also. I bob my head on the way back to the crowds and behind them over to the food section again.

I walk around to what seems like a hundred stations, getting my fill at each one. Finally full, I decide to walk to the field to observe the games that are just ending. Well, I think at least they have some good music on as I reach the field, and the games have ended, so I decide to do the rounds again. There is so much food and sweets, I just know I have gained ten pounds in one night, but it is fun trying different cuisines; I find some new favorites. My goal is to leave by 10:30, but it is already a quarter of 11 when the fireworks start. I am mesmerized by the music and the fireworks; I don't see the female staff walk past me with a headset mic talking, but I hear her.

"Ok, ladies, it's 10:45, late after you see the fireworks, head back over to the shelter so you don't miss curfew, no lollygagging." The exit is the same door you came in. She puts the mic down, and the DJ goes back to playing music. The fireworks start, and we all watch. A pickup truck crosses the field, followed by a few vans. I see the staff member get in the vans and drive back across the field. The pickup truck has a few men in the back with what looks like water hoses. They start to spray the crowd of girls. Because it is so hot, the girls welcome it and start dancing and shouting for more. I am in the back eating my food, so I try to stay dry. I finish my food and notice the girls are soaked, and the truck has left. I can't see all the way across the field that far, but it looks like there is a fence coming down in front of those doors. Maybe I have too much to eat, I think, as I see what I think is the fence closing in on the field. It doesn't really matter to me at the time because I have to get to the exit to not miss curfew.

I see a few of the girls from my floor, and we decide to return together. It starts with about 15 of us, but as we pass different food stations still open, some of the girls slip off to try and get food to sneak in to eat later. Now it is only 3 of us. One girl says, "I saw one of the guards who tried to talk to me earlier, and he said go to the desk by the statue and go straight, the archway would lead us back to the front door." One girl says, "Yeah, but the one I was making out with in the back said go to the statue and go through the door before the archway." We try both. Neither is the right way, so we are back at the desk again.

We run through the doors by what we think is the front and past a security desk I feel like I just saw. "We are definitely lost," one of the girls says, but they keep going. Seeing no other doors to go through, I follow, and sure enough, it is like we ran in a circle because there is that statue and the desk again.

We run past the security desk again, but this time I see my best friend's older sister talking with one of her coworkers. They have light blue uniforms on compared to the other guards who have on all black.

"I know you, come here, girl", she says rather sternly. I wave and say, "Hey, I can't, I've got to get back before the curfew, we're trying to find the exit, but I'll see you again."

She says almost angry, "No, come here now." Her coworker looks at her strangely as I walk over to her.

"Don't do it, you can't talk to them, and you'll get in big trouble for helping them," the younger guard, also in blue, says.

"Yeah, but she's like a little sister to me," I hear her say as I approach. "Hey, it's great to see a friendly face, it's been so lonely here." She hugs me tightly. "I'm so glad I saw you, you're gonna be alright." She steps back and says, "It's great to see you, I won't hold you up, I know how they are about curfew. Make sure you keep in touch, here's my number." She uses the coding we used to use when we were children: "Don't follow them, it's a trap, get on the elevator behind you and go to the basement. Hide by the doors, and I will come back in 5 minutes to find you. Don't be scared of anything you see, and don't move until you hear my voice." She turns away from me and walks off with the other guard who is urging her on. I see about ten of the girls I stayed with running past the group I was with, screaming, "There's no way out, all the doors lead back here."