

"You're seriously not getting in?" Lila demands, officially frustrated. She has been, so far unsuccessfully, pleading with her best friend to join her in the water however the fair skinned beauty remains seated on the cushioned furniture in their private cabana completely unphased. Lila waits for a sign of acknowledgement, a reaction of any kind, but her friend acts as if she hadn't heard anything at all and goes about applying sunblock to her long toned limbs. Lila is not one to be ignored. She swims to the side of the pool and folds her arms on the ledge. This causes her blue and purple hair to graze her shoulders, making her suddenly aware of her newly reddened skin.

"Oiy!" She shouts, tilting her head attempting to make eye contact. "What the hell is the point of a holiday in Australia if you won't even bloody swim? Stop being a lame-tard."

The girl peeks over the top of her large round sunglasses and sighs. "I told you," she explains in the tone a parent would take to address a nagging child. "I can't get in without a swim-cap."

"For the life of me, I can't figure why! What? Are you frightened your hair's gonna curl?" Lila watches her friend's lips crinkle into a bashful smile at this remark. They both know underneath her black sunhat she is completely bald.

"Yes, that's exactly it." She says, stifling a laugh.

"Did you think to bring a cap wif ya then?"

"No."

"Dear Lord, Alley! What are you like? What about Gov? Did she pack ya one? I don't even care if I've gotta go all the way back to the suite to get it. You are swimming with me before this holiday is over."

Alley lets out a single laugh at Lila's determination and then looks away. She pulls the floppy brim of her hat over her eyes, before answering. "I didn't ask her."

"Wha-You didn't-" Lila gasps unable to comprehend this outrageous response and Alley snickers quietly thinking the same of her.

Lila springs off the side of the pool and twirls underwater, propelling herself to the direction of the swim-up pool bar. She submerges herself as she nears the waterfall feature that separates the swimming and lounging sides of the pool to avoid the water spilling over her head. When she resurfaces, she is momentarily overwhelmed by how much more crowded this side of the pool is. There are scattered groups of people standing in the water chatting, drinks in hand, laughing obnoxiously as one does on holiday. Lila quickly scans the crooked queue of people wading by the bar but isn't interested in wasting much more time. A storm was rolling in and the resort was sure to close the pool shortly.

"Gov?" She calls, "Govvy?" She doesn't see the woman right away until a salty margarita glass is raised in the air. Her eyes follow the glass down the plump arm of the 53 year old governess and Lila smiles when they make eye contact. Gov smiles waving the girl over. As Lila gets closer she notes Gov's cheeks are especially rosy; this clearly isn't Gov's first margarita of the day.

"What's goin' on girlie?" Gov shouts back. Lila slips through an awkward group of tipsy twenty-somethings in order to get to the Governess' side. "Keep your eyes in your head you pervert. She's 16!" Gov snaps like a Rottweiler. Lila looks over her shoulder to see the chastised young man blush.

“Sorry.” He says disappearing into his crowd of rowdy friends that all look essentially the same, drunk, tan, and foreign. Gov reaches through the water and pulls Lila closer to her, guiding her nearer to the built in pool-bench. Gov sits, and Lila newly self-aware props herself up, peeking past Gov’s head to see if she still has the attention of the twenty-something. Especially now that she was above water, from her bellybutton up, with her magnificent purplish hair and what she thought to be rather impressive boobs now glittering in the sunshine. However, Gov had effectively scared her off. “*His loss*,” Lila thinks.

“So, what’s up girly?” Gov repeats, sipping on her red straw as she waits on the distracted girl’s reply. Lila smiles again, forgetting about the young man and remembering her mission at hand.

“Govvy, did you pack Al a swim cap? She is literally refusing to get in the water without one.”

“Cats don’t take well to water.”

“Please say you brought one.”

“Is she asking for it? She doesn’t really care for swimming.” Gov turns her eyes to the cabanas but her view of the other girl in her care is obstructed by the waterfall feature.

“Yes Gov, she needs it. She promised she’d swim with me.”

“Nice of her.”

“Did you bring one? Please say you have.” Lila throws her head back exasperated.

“Of course I have.”

“Thank goodness. Where is it? You don’t have to worry, I’ll fetch it. You haven’t got to get out.”

Gov looks back to the freckled face before her and smiles, “It’s in my drawstring bag. By my seat. In the cabana.”

“Perfect. Ta Gov.”

“That’s what I’m here for.” She says practically to herself, since the girl has already lunged through the water out of earshot.

Lila swims as fast as she can to the other side of the pool, surprisingly only knocking into one person on her way back to her friend. She pushes herself out of the water and hops one foot at a time over the hot pavement to the cool bamboo floor of their cabana. Lila spots Gov’s bag, which comically reads: “*BEACH, please!*” She begins recklessly rummaging through it purposely making all sorts of noise but not rousing the slightest bit of interest from Alley who has lost herself in a book. When Lila’s finger skims the rubbery cap at the bottom of the bag she shrieks. “Ah ha!”

“What are you doing?” Alley says turning in her direction. Lila smirks and extends her arm, holding the cap on the end of her index finger.

“What’s your excuse now?”

“Fine.” Alley says sitting up and taking her sunglasses off. Her emerald green eyes sparkle even in the tiny bit of sunlight that sneaks into their shaded retreat. She snatches the cap from Lila and shakes her head.

“Yay.” Lila claps her hands with childish delight and draws the white linen curtains of the cabana closed to allow her friend privacy. Alley always wore a wig to school and Lila knew she wasn’t going to take her hat off with the chance anyone would see. It isn’t that Alley is ashamed of being bald. In fact, she was shaving her head for years before she realized it wouldn’t grow

back even if she wanted it to. She loves being bald. After school, she can't wait to get home, to pull off her wig and let her brain breathe but very few people know that Alley is bald, and it has to stay that way. It was one of her many complex secrets. The kind of secret that MUST stay secret for a really important reason, and that really important reason ALSO just happens to be a secret for really important reasons. Lila over the years has come to accept that this is just how Alley is, cocooned in a bundle of secrecy.

As Alley places her hat on the lounge, she does her best to maintain an annoyed expression. In truth, she always found it hard to say no to Lila. She enjoyed spoiling Lila with her luxuries, like this all expense paid vacation at a five star Australian resort. It was nice to have someone to share her excessive wealth with. Lila's family didn't have much. Her family immigrated to America when Lila was five and the move basically wiped them of all of their savings. Her mother worked two jobs but was never able to save and was never around. Whereas her father was a useless lump, who collected disability from a faked work related injury, and developed a severe drinking problem in his free time. Fortunately, he was a happy drunk and was at least mildly entertaining when he wasn't blacking out. Alley loved being able to provide Lila an escape from that world.

Alley's mother taught her to care for people and refused to allow her to grow into, as she lovingly put it, "A sheltered, preppy-pampered-pussy." In spite of her family's influential status and wealth, her mother made sure to keep Alley humble and never let her think too much of herself or too much of her things. Alley attends public school, instead of some prep-school-academy, which is how she and Lila met. Her mother insisted that it built character and she didn't put much stock into secular education anyway. In fact, the few times Alley made honor roll her mother was offended instead of filled with the expected motherly pride. She told Alley off for drawing undue attention to herself and said that if she had the time she'd punish her, but of course she was too busy. Gov had to reassure Alley that she had done nothing wrong and that her mother's feelings were only hurt because she knew she wasn't able to attend the awards ceremony. It was a rule they lived by. The two of them were never to be seen in public together, in order to maintain her mother's public image and to protect Alley from the corruption of fame and infamy.

Lila is the only school friend that actually knows who Alley's mother is and has spent time with her, making her basically family. Over the years, her mother has even begun to spoil Lila, treating the girls as if they were sisters. Once, days before its long anticipated release, her mother broke into a store's warehouse and stole two of the newest tablets. She gave one to Alley and one to Lila. Alley remembered this because Lila was so ecstatic that she cried and hugged her mother, which was something Alley herself rarely did. *"It's nothing,"* her mother purred. *"It's just stuff, Lila, and rich people have soooo much of it."*

"Uh, can you get a move on?" Lila asks impatiently, tapping her foot in the puddle of water her dripping body has formed on the cabana floor. Alley smirks as she delicately adjusts the cap on her head, carefully smoothing out the wrinkles, elongating the process simply to antagonize her friend. When she's done, Alley spreads her fingers holding her hands up by the sides of her face as if she just performed a magic trick. "Finally!" Lila grabs hold of her wrist. "Let's go." She says, tugging Alley's unresisting body through the white curtains.

“Oh fu...” Gov yelps, swallowing the end of her word. She was heading back to the cabana and was startled by their sudden departure. Alley laughs. “Looks like you found it.” Gov recovers quickly, sipping the watered down end of her drink.

“Yes thank you Gov-Eve.” Alley says politely to the woman. The governess’ name is Eve, but since she has cared for Alley from toddlerhood to this point, Eve is more family than she is staff. They love each other. Gov was the one who kissed her boo-boos and readied her for school. Alley never calls her by her name like she does her other servants. No she is special, and since she can’t call her “Mommy” because that position is technically filled, she lovingly refers to her as Gov-Eve, Govvy or Gov.

“Yeah, thanks a million. It’ll save us a trip to the salon.” Lila says rolling her eyes. She tugs Alley toward the edge of the pool and suddenly releases her, springing off the ground, pulling her knees up into a cannon ball. Alley braces herself for the splash but the water barely touches her. “C’mon!” Lila laughs, wiping water from her face.

There wasn’t a single thing Alley liked about swimming. The water felt like her enemy. Instead of feeling freed by it, she felt restricted, surrounded, and overwhelmed. She hated how it slowed down her movement. She hated not having full control over her body and preferred keeping her feet on the ground. With every move she made water betrayed her, giving away her location, by the sounds of it parting or the currents of her body displacing it. She didn’t like it and Gov-Eve knew this. Alley looks over her shoulder and Gov discreetly tilts her head, suggesting she go toward the shallow end. She wanted the girl to have fun; she knew it would be the last time for a long time that she’d have a chance to be carefree. Alley as quickly as she can, while still respecting the no running signs, makes her way around the pool to the steps at the shallow end. She could swim just fine but sometimes being in water induced panic and anxiety. This was a lingering emotion, left behind to plague her, after the one time she almost drowned. It was years back but it wasn’t a panic Alley could control, or reason away. Gov and her both remembered the day quite well.

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Alley was about six years old and Gov sat at the side of the pool, helplessly watching, as Alley’s mother instructed her assistant to bind Alley’s hands. Twice already, he had put her in a piece of luggage and thrown her into the pool, and she managed to escape both times but with some difficulty. As the duct tape wound around her tiny wrists she became nervous.

“Don’t look so frantic, Alley-cat,” her mother tut, “Don’t you think you can do it?”

“You’re being unreasonable!” Gov snapped.

“Unreasonable? It’s a big bad, hateful world out there. What kind of mother would I be if I didn’t prepare her for it?”

“I think she gets the point. Let her be done for the day.” Gov pleaded, “What else does she have to do to prove herself to you?”

Her mother shrugged. “This.”

“H-h-how will you know if I need help? Or if I’m taking too long?” Alley stuttered looking between Gov-Eve’s desperation and her mother’s indifference.

“Hm,” She said thoughtfully as her assistant finished up. “I suppose I won’t. But YOU certainly will when you start needing air.”

Needless to say, Alley was unable to free herself and nearly drowned. Her mother's assistant fished her out after she had struggled in the luggage and lost consciousness under water. When she came to, she was wrapped in a towel in Gov-Eve's arms, spitting and choking.

"Why did you wait so long?" Eve screeched. She hugged and rocked Alley. "She could've died!" She sobbed. "You're a fucking lunatic! You're crazy!" No one ever spoke to Alley's mother like that and although it was hard to see out of her stinging-chlorined-eyes, and water filled lashes, Alley focused hard to get a glimpse of her mother's face. She saw a single tear slide down her chiseled cheek-bone before Gov whisked Alley away.

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She was never sure if her mother's tear was because Alley had almost died or if it was because of her failure. She never dared to ask the question. She is too afraid of the answer. Now, Gov-Eve watches as Alley cautiously wades into waist deep water to appease her indulgent friend.

To Gov-Eve's relief and Lila's dismay, it's only about fifteen minutes before the resort life-guard announces that the pool will be closing due to the approaching storm and instructs everyone to get out. The girls dress in the privacy of the cabana, chattering about how girls like the few they had just finished playing pool volley-ball with, would never speak to them back home.

"More like we wouldn't talk to them. They were merely convenient for the moment's occupation." Alley says dismissively. It has always baffled Gov that neither Lila nor Alley were popular in school. Both were very beautiful girls. Lila's English accent and constantly changing hair color and Alley's multi-pierced ears and assumed muteness, set them apart. They weren't picked on, or bullied. They were simply overlooked. Extras. Non-speaking roles in the constant drama that is high-school life. Their only other friend is a boy named Lyn. He is an adopted, overweight Asian-American, who is disparagingly bad at math, and to top it off, gay. He had only transferred to their school last year but he was clearly the perfect finish to their trio of misfits.

"You know Lyn would have read that girl like last week's news." Lila jokes, as she rubs the ends of her hair in a towel, some of the cheap dye bleeds into the expensive terry cloth.

"I wouldn't wish that on her." Alley says securing her sun hat on her head. "She didn't seem nearly as bad as Britney."

"Britney, that nasty, gorgeous, bitch. How I hate her."

"Shut up." Alley rolls her eyes. "You're prettier than her and you know it."

"I do." Lila crinkles her nose. "I just like to hear you say it." Both girls laugh at this as Gov checks the cabana for any more of their belongings. Alley would have loved for Lyn to come on vacation with them but she knew her mother would never in a million years allow it, so she didn't bother asking. Even when the three of them were working on a school project her mother wouldn't permit Lyn a visit to Alley's house. It isn't that her mother is against Alley having boyfriends or friends that are boys, but she keeps the visitors to Alley's house to a minimum and regularly monitors the log her security men keep of all the comings and goings.

"Your Mum's paid for unlimited wi-fi in our suite, yeah?" Lila asks as she begins braiding her hair. Alley takes a seat watching her; she was always the first one ready.

"Duh."

“Well, can’t we video chat wif Lyn?” Lila asks hopefully. Alley takes in a deep breath before looking down at her sandaled feet and exhaling. Lila directs her puppy eyes at Gov who purses her lips and raises her eyebrows. “Aw, c’mon Govvy!”

“You know the answer to that Lila.” Gov says, a little more annoyed than normal, the sun and maybe the alcohol, had made her tired and she was hoping for a nap soon.

“But whyyy?” Lila begs.

“He can’t know we’re here.” Alley says, still looking at her chipped toenails instead of her friend.

“I get why your secrets are secrets from that lot at school and everything. I mean, sort of. But Lyn, he’s our mate.”

“I’ve only known him for a year.”

“So?”

Alley gives Lila a bored look. This was a recurring argument that Lila has lost over and over since they were six. “You know, I can’t trust him like I trust you.”

“You don’t know until you try.”

“Enough, Lila.” Gov interrupts. The girl quiets at the stern tone and pouts. She kicks her feet into her flip-flops.

“Can you imagine if he outed me to the media before it’s time? It’d ruin everything.”

“And your Mum would kill you.” Lila adds. She did know the extreme importance of keeping the secrets, secret, but sometimes got caught up in the excitement of it all. She wanted to brag.

“You haven’t posted anything on social media have you?”

“No.” Lila says almost offended. “Give me some credit Al.” She hands Alley her bracelet and holds out her arm.

“I know. I’m sorry.” Alley says as she clasps the bracelet for her friend.

“Believe me, it’s tempting though.”

“I know. It’d certainly shut Britney up if she knew all the places we’ve been. She thinks she’s so special.”

“She’d shit herself.”

“Your mother would too,” Gov laughs to Lila. “I bet she doesn’t even know you’ve got a passport.”

“No.” Lila smiles. “God I wish I could tell ‘er. She’d love to know I’ve been back to England to see me Gran. It literally kills me inside every time Mum talks about her, like I wouldn’t remember.” She pinches her nose mimicking her mother. “‘*You were only four.*’ It burns me up not being able to say anything.”

“I know” Alley shrugs, although she didn’t really. Her entire life was a secret, even her father knew nothing of her existence. Secrets were as natural to her as breathing. And in the way of family, Alley’s only known blood relative was her mother. She didn’t completely grasp family connections like Lila had with her Gran. She remembers once, in one of her libraries, she pointed at a painting of a fancifully dressed man holding an androgynous looking baby, and she asked her mother who the people were. Her mother didn’t know and said it didn’t matter. Then as if to exterminate the infestation of family-past, just a few days later, a team of interior designers overhauled Alley’s estate and redecorated. All the strangers that hung over her

mantles disappeared. Alley knew she would never meet her own grandparents which might be why she always enjoyed their visits with Lila's Gran.

Alley's maternal grandmother committed suicide when Alley's mother was only nine, leaving her and her sister, Maggie in the care of her long-term boyfriend, an abusive alcoholic who very shortly after, drank himself to death. This resulted in Alley's aunt Maggie and mother being put into foster-care. Her mother said the younger cuter kids got adopted quickly and a friendly couple took Maggie from the orphanage to presumably live happily ever after. She hasn't heard from her since. For years, her mother was passed from home to home and sometimes even street to street, until she was eighteen and aged out of the system making her officially homeless. By luck or blessing, after a short court trial and one damning DNA test, Alley's mother inherited a Fortune 500 company, an estate and billions of dollars when a man she'd never met, called Leo, named her in his will as his daughter and only surviving heir. Her world changed. It was as if God had finally checked the 1,600 missed prayers in his inbox. Alley's mother was never bothered that she knew nothing of her deceased father and eventually her daughter adopted the same apathetic attitude toward their lack of relatives. She considered her family to be the people presently in her company, this sun-burnt-coconut-scented-freckled-friend and her clearly exhausted, mildly impaired Governess.

"I wish we could get our mum's together again. Your mum's bound to like mine. Don't you think so, Gov?"

"Of course," Gov yawns "She loves you to bits. How could she not like the woman who made you?" Alley wipes the grimace from her face before anyone sees it. She thought Govvy used the word 'love' more generously than her mother would.

"She'd like her. And then she'd trust 'er and THEN I could tell my mum." Lila continues wistfully.

"But your mom's always working." Alley interjects.

"Are you joking? It ain't my mum always working. It's YOUR mum always working."

"Lila, for real. Your mother is always at work. Every time we go to yours, she's on her way out to her next job. Or her new job. You only see her for a second and that's if you don't blink."

"She works a lot. She's gotta. But it's your mum's schedule that's the problem. I mean you never even know IF you'll see her. Forget arranging a meeting."

"Girls," Gov hushes them. "Both of your mothers are always working. That's why you're stuck with me ALL of the time." Lila laughs and swings her arms around the bulky woman, wrapping her in a hug.

"You love it really. What would you do wif'out us?"

"Probably have another drink." Alley suggests, amused by the affectionate display.

"Ha, probably." Gov smiles still locked in Lila's hold.

"Don't worry Gov. We'll never leave you! You can even come to university wif us." Lila smiles looking up at the woman's soft brown eyes.

"Can we take all of this love to the room, please?" Alley says grabbing Lila's waist. "Let's go" She carefully detaches her friend's skinny arms from Gov and then hugs Lila from behind using her body weight to nudge her forward. The two girls shuffle clumsily out of the cabana, still embraced, and Gov watches as they laugh, tripping and stepping over one another.

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Back in their luxury-two-bedroom suite, Gov tells the girls to shower and to reconvene later in the living room to decide on dinner. As usual, Alley showers first. Her longest showers were maybe five minutes long considering she had little to shave and nothing to comb. Lila on the other hand, took centuries. Knowing this and not being able to tolerate Lila's amplified shower singing, Alley retreats to the living room to be alone for the first time today. She stands for a moment looking out the balcony doors and watches the rain pelt against the glass.

*Pat. Pat. Tap. Tap.*

As if shielding herself from the rain, she folds her arms, holding her left shoulder with her right hand and her right shoulder with her left. She closes her eyes and breaths. Slowly. Deeply.

*Pat. Tap. Pat. Tap.*

*Tap. Tap. Pat.*

And just like that, her anxieties bombard her as if an invisible force knocked the door in, changed the current of the winds, and aimed the cool rain directly at her. Alley surrenders herself, falling back on the sofa, only opening her eyes at the soft impact of her back on the plush white cushions. She stares up at the sparkles from the crystal chandelier dancing on the ceiling. Syncing its rhythm with the raindrops. Her worries hanging over her head.

In two days their vacation will inevitably end. They had to be back in time for New Year's Eve. Simply imagining the cooler weather, placing herself back into that familiar concrete world causes goose bumps to form on her arms. In a few days, fun would end. This New Year, is the beginning, the start to the rest of her life. One slip up could set back the entire plan and screw up everything she's worked for, everything that she's dedicated her life to. This is the year that matters most. This is the year she proves herself to her mother.

Unlike her peers, Alley has known her destiny since infancy. She didn't have to fret over her SAT scores (which were only OK) because she knew it had little impact on her future. The real learning, the lessons that mattered, were the ones that she received at home. The parkour, the fighting, the gymnastics, pickpocketing, petty theft, the techniques to pass lie detector tests; these are the skills she will need in life. These will keep her alive, keep her rich and make her mother proud of her. If she does well, if she succeeds, she will finally be allowed to live with her mother, which is something she has always wished for.

Her mother met with Alley upon request, checked in on the girl's progress and monitored her training but from what Alley can remember, they have always lived apart. Alley is kept in the quiet expansive family estate while her mother resides in a modern penthouse in the heart of the city. One of the main reasons for the extreme secrecy is that her mother is the head of an organized crime family or OCF as Alley calls it. In laymen's terms it is The Mob but Alley hates the term.

Mob: noun

- 1.a [disorderly](#) or riotous crowd of people.
- 2.a crowd bent on or engaged in lawless violence.

She feels the word 'mob' undermines the structure and functionality of their complex system of hierarchy and operations. Her mother is a grand, powerful, intelligent boss, essentially *The Godfather* which is what makes Alley royalty, the most prized child in their OCF, the

princess. The family, however, is forbidden to speak of her, to protect Alley from rival families and revenge schemes. Although very few people have the guile or are insane enough to go up against the Calabrese family, not just because they're dangerous, but because her mother is also revered as one of the most notorious thieves in all of Gotham city. The media has dubbed her *Cat-Woman*.