“Tiff­–a–ny!” Marjory sings as she skips over to me.

She rests her arm heavy on my shoulder.

“Don’t forget my party today. It’s at 5:30.”

She says it as if she actually wants me to go, but I know she’s lying. Marjory Crenshaw doesn’t like me. Marjory has never liked me. She picks on everyone who isn’t her version of normal. The invitation is a set-up.

She digs her hands through my kinky hair. “You really should keep straightening this. You look so much better.”

Before I have time to touch her smooth blonde locks in retaliation, she skips ahead of me.

Her blue and white striped Hillcrest skirt flies up and down as she goes, and I’m left wishing it would slip off.

The crowded parking lot is full of kids walking to their cars, standing around waiting for rides, or approaching the bus––all of them glued to their phones.

It’s a cloudless sunny day but not too warm. It’s perfect late March weather.

I rest at the sidewalk while I wait for my brother, Rueben, to pick me up, and he’s always late. I’ve got one year to go before I can finally ditch my learner’s permit and drive a car without a babysitter next to me. I can’t wait.

Taylor Swift sings through my earbuds, but I take them out when I see Hadley approaching me.

Her striking red hair sways left and right as she walks over to me.

“Hey Tiff,” she says. “I saw you out here with the witch. What’d she want?”

I roll my eyes. “To ruin lives. Did you expect anything else?” I say, tucking my earbuds back into my cross body.

Hadley nodded. She invited you to her ‘party’, she says with air quotes. “Didn’t she?”

I giggle at her spot-on guess. “Yep.”

Marjory had done it to another student at school––one very close to Hadley. His name was Brent. As much as I hate to admit it, his look––uncontrolled acne, big nose and buck teeth–– was begging to get bullied, and some of the kids here at Hillcrest just couldn’t resist. It probably had a lot to do with why he transferred, although I never asked Hadley.

“So you’re gonna come over to study tonight?” She asks. “Right?”

Her question is almost a plea. Hadley is so smart but she doesn’t realize it. She’s let the Marjory’s of Hillcrest bully her into thinking she isn’t.

Hadley and I have been friends since the beginning of freshmen year. She and I teamed up because we were the odd ones out. I was bullied for being one of three black kids at this elite private school, and Hadley was bullied for being too white. Her skin is pale like a ghost and I think it works for her. Her complexion makes her red hair and green eyes stand out. I wish she would tell these kids where to put their mouths.

“I’ll be there. It just won’t be till later. My parents decided to go on a date tonight and Reuben already has plans.”

Hadley smiled at the sky. “Your brother is so cute!”

I snickered while shaking my head.

“Did you wanna come over my house instead?” I ask her.

“Ok. I’ll ask my dad,” she says.

I see Reuben’s black Lexus coming through the parking lot. When it stops in front of us Hadley starts to recede.

I place my hand on the door and look back at her.

“Want a ride?” I ask.

Hadley strokes the spirals of her notebook. “Is it ok?”

I ask through the back door. “Reuben, can Hadley come to?”

He nodded without a fight, unable to refuse in Hadley’s presence.

Reuben dropped us off at home. He’d sped off as soon as I closed the back door of his Lexus.

Hadley and I both took our shoes off at the door. It’s what mom always made us do whenever we’d come home. *A clean house is a happy house*, she’d always say.

The grand piano is playing a classical tune by itself at the large window overlooking the lake.

“Can we take the boat out?” Hadley asked, anxiously.

“Definitely not before homework. My mom will skin us both, and then kill us.”

Hadley looks around at the empty hall. “Where *are* your parents anyway?”

“Probably still at the hospital.”

My parents both work as surgeons at Hastings Medical center. They met their first year in med school. Dad locked eyes on the prettiest girl in class, and then sat next to her.

Hadley and I wasted no time getting to the books. We both filled our notebooks with notes and took turns quizzing each other on the material from class.

When we were done, we settled on watching tik-tok videos.

“What do you think Marjory’s doing?” Hadley asks, sifting through her red strands.

I shrug. “Probably coaxing some boy into doing her homework, why?”

“You wanna go to her party?”

“Have you lost it?” I ask. “She doesn’t want us there.”

“It’s not about her. Landon will be there.”

Landon Yates was probably the best-looking boy at Hillcrest Highschool. His piercing eyes are a special shade of greyish blue. His features align perfectly on his face. The kid looks like he belongs in a catalogue. Even with a straight face he looks like he’s posing for a photo shoot.

I don’t know why Hadley keeps bringing him up to me. I know I have no chance with him. She knows I have no chance. Everyone knows I have no chance. However, I’ll humor her anyway.

“Maybe he’ll be impressed with my hooker heels.”

A smile that’s way too big for Hadley’s face immerges.