

A close-up photograph of a young woman with vibrant red hair styled in a bun, smiling warmly. She is wearing a blue denim vest over a light-colored top. Beside her, a young man with dark hair is also smiling, his face partially visible. The background is a soft, out-of-focus white.

**BETH REEKLES**

**OUT OF TUNE**

*Do opposites attract . . . or tear you apart?*

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## About the Book

**Ashley Bennett has it all:** a hot boyfriend, Josh, a place in the cool clique at high school, straight A grades . . . It's definitely better than when she was invisible, a nobody, ignored by everyone except her best friend Allie. Or make that ex-best friend - Allie And Ashley haven't spoken since Josh came into the picture.

**Enter the new boy next-door, Todd.** He's sweet, introspective, and prefers to play his guitar to football. As he and Ashley grow closer, she starts to wonder whether she and Josh have enough in common to go the distance. But what will breaking up with him do to her picture-perfect life? Should she follow her head or her heart?

The third published book by Beth Reekles - the internet sensation everyone is talking about!

# OUT OF TUNE

BETH REEKLES

RHCP DIGITAL

*To Gransha, my biggest fan*

# Chapter One

Number thirty-one Maple Drive has been vacant for as long as I've lived here.

At least, it was empty, until 6:27a.m. on the Friday morning before school starts. That's the exact time I'm woken up by the incessant *beep-beep-beep* of a truck reversing outside. Curiosity gets the better of me, and I drag myself out of bed, pulling the comforter with me, to peek through the drapes. I refrain from yelling out of my window that some of us are trying to sleep, as I try to get a good look at our new neighbors.

The 'For Sale' sign in their yard disappeared a week ago, and I'm still eager to know who exactly is moving in next door. I can't see much of them from here, though: a new-looking blue Ford, and the back of a man's head as he talks to a guy in a red uniform polo shirt climbing out from the driver's seat of the moving truck.

I'm tempted to stay longer at the window and see more of them, but when I yawn and realize my eyes are drooping, I crawl back into bed. Mom will make us go over and introduce ourselves soon enough anyway.

It's Sunday afternoon when we meet the new neighbors.

'Ashley!' Mom yells up the stairs.

'What?' I shout back, sounding exactly the way I feel - ever the uncooperative, angsty teenager. Much as I want to know who's moved in next door, I really don't want to have to go over there with a big, bright, fake smile and welcome them to the neighborhood. To be honest, I'm kind of nervous. What if they've got some horrible teenage daughter who looks down her nose at me, even if she's a

year or two younger than me? Or some spoilt, bratty kid I'll be obligated to babysit? The thought makes me shudder.

*You're being too pessimistic*, I tell myself. My mood lifts when I wonder what it would be like if it was someone my age there next door – a girl, maybe, who's not horrible and someone I can actually talk to, have something in common with.

I don't get my hopes up too much, though. Not yet.

I'd much rather just meet them from a distance. Like, from the safety of my bedroom window.

'We're going to welcome the neighbors. Come on.'

'Tell them I'm . . . I'm doing homework!'

'Ashley Bennett, they will not buy the homework excuse when school hasn't even started yet!'

'Then tell them I'm an honors student!'

She laughs at that, before the stern tone returns and she yells, 'Get your butt down here right now, or—'

'All right, all right! I'm coming!'

I huff and dog-ear the page I am reading before tossing my book onto my bed. My mom hates when I do that, but I'm always losing the bookmarks she buys me.

Throwing my legs off my bed, I shove my feet into the nearest pair of footwear I can see, which happen to be a pair of blue canvas shoes that clash horrendously with my green shorts. I duck down quickly to check my appearance in the mirror over my dresser, and shrug; my hair is fine, but I slap some make-up over my freckles before I head downstairs.

Mom waits impatiently at the foot of the stairs, next to the front door, tapping her foot pointedly – loudly. I roll my eyes at her.

'Here.' She places a basket in my hands.

I swear to God, it's an actual wicker basket, with cookies inside that are still warm. I don't know from where my mom gets this stuff.



‘Hold up, let me just go grab my red cloak – you know, the one with the hood – and I’ll be right with you.’

She laughs, even though she tries to maintain the ‘I’m-not-in-the-mood-for-your-sarcasm’ expression. But there’s more important business at hand than scolding me. Mom has been itching to go over and properly introduce herself to the new neighbors, but she’s left it this long since she didn’t feel it prudent to interrupt them – after all, they were most likely extremely busy settling in.

Now I know why Dad took an impromptu trip to the hardware store declaring he was finally going to fix that broken stair after procrastinating over it for like, the last eight months. Lucky escape for someone at least . . .

Mom picks up the bottle of expensive-looking wine on the table by the door and we leave.

Waiting on the porch of thirty-one Maple Drive, I realize it doesn’t have that desolate feel about it any more. I look around. There’s a small yet distinctive hole where the realtor’s sign was in the lawn. The new neighbors have already hung up drapes at the windows of the room at the front of the house alongside the porch. Behind the peach curtains, there’s a TV on a stand with an Xbox and DVD player hooked up, and I can see a bookshelf that’s only about a third full.

The door opens before I can look at any more of the house.

It’s a guy, around my age I’d guess, with messy brown hair and a loose-fitting Blink-182 T-shirt. He looks at my mom and me for a brief second, as though we’re from another planet, before breaking the silence with a stiff, ‘Hi.’

‘Hello!’ Mom trills. ‘We’re just dropping by to welcome you to the area. We’re your new next-door neighbors.’

‘Todd!’ someone yells from inside – a male voice. ‘Who is it?’

‘Next-door!’ he bellows back over his shoulder.

Then, with all the grace of a bear running downhill, a man around his mid-forties comes barreling down the staircase into sight. He runs a hand through his graying hair to smooth it down, make it more presentable.

‘Hello, there. I’m Callum.’ He offers a hand, and Mom shakes it. ‘And this is my son, Todd.’

‘Great to meet you. I’m Isabelle,’ Mom introduces herself. ‘Isabelle Bennett. My husband, Jeff, is at the hardware store at the moment – but I’m sure he’ll drop by as soon as he gets back.’ What she means is, she’ll make him come over and introduce himself. ‘And this is our daughter, Ashley.’

‘Hey,’ I say, because I feel like I have to say something.

‘Anyway,’ says Mom. ‘We were just dropping by to introduce ourselves and give you a little housewarming gift.’ She gestures to my wicker basket with her bottle of wine.

‘Oh, thank you so much. Please, come in. Would you like some coffee? Tea? A soda?’

‘I’m good, thanks,’ I say, when he looks at me.

‘We wouldn’t want to impose . . .’

‘It’s fine, honestly, don’t worry!’

‘In that case, a coffee would be wonderful, thank you,’ Mom says graciously, and steps inside, leaving me to follow.

I make to wipe my feet on the welcome mat outside the door, but there isn’t one, so my foot kind of just hovers in the air for a second before I step inside. The guy who opened the door – Todd, I suppose – watches me with the tiniest hint of amusement on his face. That is, until I look him in the eye, and he turns away and walks ahead of me to the kitchen.

I know it’s the kitchen because the layout of this house – and every other house on Maple Drive, for that matter – has more or less the same layout as my house.

The kitchen’s a mess, for which Callum apologizes. I like that it’s messy, though. It makes the place feel like

somebody's *home*, not just a bland show home with nobody living there.

'So, what brings you to Greendale?' Mom asks with a polite smile.

There's a brief, somewhat awkward pause. I want to slap my forehead.

Todd opens his mouth, but Callum says hastily, 'We just needed a change.'

I look at Todd, who's staring at his bare feet and wiggling his toes. A smirk tweaks at his lips for a split second. I get the impression that whatever his response would have been, it wouldn't have been as vague and polite as his dad's.

I can tell Mom is wondering if there's a politely inquisitive way to find out what that story is, but since she doesn't ask, I know she can't find one.

'Todd's going to be attending the local high school,' Callum says, flipping the switch on their electric kettle. 'Is that where you go?'

Oh, right, me.

'Yeah. I'll be a junior.'

'Hey, isn't that great! So will Todd.' He smiles to me. 'How do you find the school?'

I shrug my shoulders one after the other. What does he want me to say? 'Oh, yeah, it's great. All the teachers are wonderful and don't give so much homework it drives you to insanity. There are never any fights and everyone gets on and everything's always fine and dandy.'

But it's high school - who'd believe that answer?

'It's all right,' I say. 'It's just high school. Most of the teachers are okay, and the people aren't too bad, I guess. Like I said, it's just high school.'

Mom cuts me a look. 'The SAT scores are some of the best in the state every year.'

Callum nods. 'Can't ask for much more than that, can you?' The kettle switch flips off and there's a quiet *ding!* to

signal that it's done boiling water. He pours it into two mugs for coffee.

'Do you take sugar? Milk?'

'No, thank you.'

'Okay.'

There's a two-second burst of music from my back pocket, and I reach for my cellphone to answer the text. It's probably Josh, finally replying to the text I sent him earlier. But as my hand creeps to my back pocket, Mom clears her throat and I get the message loud and clear, and drop my hand. The better I cooperate now, the sooner we can get out of here. I hope.

We stand around the kitchen making small talk for a couple of minutes before Callum says, 'I'm sorry, would you like to sit down? I apologize in advance for the state of the living room, we haven't finished unpacking yet . . .'

Mom laughs. 'It's not that bad. Besides, every house is a bit hectic right after you move in.'

Todd speaks for the first time since he answered the door. 'I'm just going to head back upstairs, and—'

'You can show Ashley around the house,' his dad suggests. But we all catch the undertone that makes it more of a command than an option.

'I'm sure Ashley doesn't need a tour of the house,' he replies curtly. Callum gives him a look and Todd sighs. 'Sure. Whatever. Come on.'

He doesn't even look at me, just walks out and expects me to follow. But I'd feel rude if I stayed, so I have no choice but to follow him out of the kitchen and down the hallway.

All right, so the new neighbors don't have some bratty kid, or some cheerleader-type daughter, either, so things could be worse. But Todd has barely said a word, and I don't know what to make of him. I don't know that obnoxious is quite the right word to describe him. Or even

arrogant . . . Aloof, maybe. That seems the best fit. It's something more than plain indifference.

He turns to me at the bottom of the stairs, one foot on the lowest step and the other on the floor; his eyes are focused on his feet. 'Look, I don't want to be in this situation any more than you do, so you'll forgive me for not showing you round the place.'

'It's okay,' I say. 'My house is laid out exactly the same.'

'Right.'

He starts up the stairs and I hesitate. Am I supposed to follow him?

I do, just because I have no idea what else to do.

'Where are you going?' I ask, though the options are limited.

'Narnia. Where'd you think?'

I bite back a laugh.

He seems to realize that I'm not going anywhere, and I guess our friendship isn't yet at the level where he'll invite me to his bedroom to sit down. And neither of us really want to sit with our parents, with the risk of being asked about our academic achievements and extracurricular activities, or anything like that. So he turns and sits on a step most of the way up the stairs instead of carrying on going up. I sit on the stair below him, my back to the wall and my feet propped against the banister.

I look at Todd out of the corner of my eye, trying not to be obvious about it. He's a few inches taller than me. His lean build reminds me of a soccer player, but he doesn't look much like the sporty type. The movement of his hands distracts me; he's twirling a dark gray guitar pick over and over between his fingers. His eyes are downcast, concentrating on the motion of the guitar pick - but then he looks up at me, saying, 'What?' and I frown a little, because I can't quite determine if his eyes are blue or gray.

'Nothing.'

He shrugs his left shoulder and holds my gaze for a brief second before looking down again. I cock my head a little to the side as I scrutinize him. God, those cheekbones are to die for! If he wasn't acting so aloof and brooding, I'd think him handsome - but I refuse to, just on principle.

'So you play guitar?'

'Evidently,' he says, making a gesture with the pick. He opens his mouth to say something then closes it again, forehead puckered in a scowl.

'That's cool. What kind of stuff do you play?'

He takes a moment before answering, which he does quite grudgingly - I can see it in the curl of his lips. 'Mostly things I come up with myself. I, uh, I took to writing music a couple of years ago.'

I nod, not knowing what to reply. He clearly doesn't want to talk to me much. Well, maybe I don't want to talk to him. Stubbornly, I sit in silence for a few minutes. We both sit there on the stairs and listen to my mom and his dad talking and laughing in the lounge. Their voices float up through the open door, but not quite loud enough for us to make out what they're saying.

I know that I should try and be friendly toward Todd; he's probably nervous about making new friends here, about fitting in, because friendships have already been forged long ago, cliques have been set in place, and he's the new guy. I know I'd be terrified. Being friendly would be the right thing to do, and I know my mom would want me to be nice to him. But he's a big boy, I'm sure he can make his own friends.

My cellphone sounds again in my pocket. I'd forgotten I had a text earlier. I catch Todd looking at me, but I ignore him and take out my cell.

Both texts are from Josh.

*Good thanks, want to come over later for dinner? XXXXX* is the reply to my earlier 'Hey, how are you?' text.

*Babe? Hello? XXXXX*

I type a reply to say that sure, dinner sounds great, and sorry for the late response - we're visiting the new neighbors.

'Boyfriend?' Todd says, startling me.

'Yeah.'

He nods. 'How long have you guys been together?'

'Year and a half.'

'That's nice.'

'What about you?' I blurt before I can stop myself. 'Any broken hearts left back in . . . Where'd you live before, anyway?'

'Idaho. And no, no broken hearts left behind.' There's a note of laughter in his voice, and the corner of his mouth tweaks up like he finds the idea amusing. I wonder if maybe he's a player, not into serious commitment in a relationship. Because a guy who looks as attractive as he does must have had girlfriends. Or maybe it's that someone broke up with him instead.

After that, conversation dies out pretty quickly. So he sits there fiddling with the guitar pick, and I sit there texting Josh, until we hear my mom and Callum saying goodbye to each other, at which point there seems to be an unspoken mutual decision between Todd and I to move to the front door.

There's the usual kind of thing: *thanks for the cookies and the wine, if you need anything don't hesitate to ask, we should have dinner sometime - and, finally, goodbye.*

We walk through our own front door and my mom starts asking me what Todd and I had spoken about, and how we'd gotten along.

'I don't know. He doesn't talk much.'

'Callum said he's quite shy.'

I snort dubiously. 'I don't know about shy. Standoffish, maybe. It was like he thought he was too good to talk to me, you know?'

'Ashley . . .'

'I'm going over Josh's for dinner tonight, I need to jump in the shower.'

And that's all we say about the new neighbors at thirty-one Maple Drive.



## Chapter Two

'No.'

No way. No. No! I refuse. I am not doing this. No. She can't make me.

I cross my arms and narrow my eyes at my mom to make my point. Not in a million years will I agree to this.

'Oh, come on, Ashley. Do the poor kid a favor; it'll be his first day at a new school, the least you can do is—'

'No way! I'm sure he can handle himself. He's not *twelve*.'

'Did I ask you to be his new best friend? Look, I'm not saying you should walk him to all his classes and be—'

'Mom. What part of "no" didn't you understand? Was it the *N* or the *O*?'

Her retort to that is a cutting look, and she plants her hands on her hips. 'Just give him a ride to school. That's all I'm asking. Besides, he lives next door, it makes sense that you two carpool.'

'I'm not driving to school tomorrow though, Josh is. I'm doing the kid a favor by not giving him a ride - he'll only feel like a total third wheel.'

'I'm sure Josh will understand.'

I snort cynically.

Mom's voice then takes on a pleading tone - 'I'll give you gas money to fill up the tank if you take him to school. Just for this first week. Five days. Then he can make his own way there if you're going to be so stupid as to insist on not carpooling.'

My ears have pricked up at hearing the first sentence. Gas money to fill the whole tank . . . And my fuel gauge is

looking pretty low at the moment . . .

I am sorely tempted.

‘Maybe he doesn’t want a ride with me, did you think about that?’

‘Ask him, then, no harm in trying. If he says no, then you don’t have to drive him.’

‘Fine, fine,’ I sigh heavily, glaring still, but caving in at last. ‘But only - *only* - for the gas money.’

‘Sure,’ Mom agrees, trying hard not to laugh. ‘Not because under all that cynicism is a lovely girl, or anything.’

‘Exactly.’

She lets out a laugh then and shakes her head at me. I huff and stomp back up to my room, although by the time I slam my door shut, I only do it for the sake of it. The initial irritation has ebbed away and now I’m just dreading having to walk over later and speak to Todd.

The thing about houses on Maple Drive is that they are all pretty much identical in design, but someone thought it would be a nice idea to build them in sort of symmetrical pairs. My bedroom has a large window on the side of the house with a window seat (which is a feature I absolutely adore). And the house next door, which my bedroom faces has an identically constructed bedroom facing mine.

Which has never been a problem before.

This morning, I got out of the shower and walked back to my room with my towel wrapped around me. I ran a brush through my damp hair, singing to myself, and picked out some underwear from a drawer. I was about to drop the towel and get dressed when I heard a loud, ‘Hey!’

Frowning, I looked around, before realizing it had come from outside my open window. Clutching my towel tightly around me, I moved to the window seat to see Todd leaning out of his window.

'You might want to shut the drapes or something,' he yelled over, with a pointed look at my towel.

'Pervert!' I shouted back.

'Protecting your modesty!' he retorted, then sat back in the window seat, closing the window behind him and pointedly turning his head away. With a huff of anger, I yanked the rope on the shutters and they clattered down to cover the open window.

Now, I find myself walking over to next door and really hoping that Todd won't want a ride to school tomorrow. I just feel completely humiliated after this morning.

I ring the doorbell and bounce on the balls of my feet, my stomach twisting into knots. Maybe Callum will answer, and he'll say, 'No, don't worry about it, I'll drive Todd to school tomorrow,' and I won't have to be subjected to this ordeal.

Todd opens the door. His eyebrows go up, surprised to see me.

'Oh, hi.'

'Look, my mom told me I should offer you a ride to school tomorrow, so if you want a ride that's fine, I guess, but don't expect me to be all buddy-buddy with you, got that?'

I don't mean to sound so horrible, but I want to get out of here as quickly and painlessly as possible. He saw me in nothing but a towel this morning and I'm worried that image might still be in his head. Not in a vain way, but seeing your neighbor almost naked probably isn't the kind of thing you easily forget. And I'm still cringing over it, hours later.

'Uh . . . sure, yeah, a ride would be great. I don't know my way to the school yet.'

'Fine. I'll be outside at eight, school starts at eight thirty.'

'Thanks.'

I nod briskly. I turn on my heel and start walking down the path because I really don't want to hang around there

any longer - but then he calls out to me. I stop and turn back.

'For the record, I don't expect you to help me try to fit in. I'm a big boy, I can handle myself.'

I give him a small smile. 'Good. Glad to hear we're in agreement on that.'

He returns my smile with one of his own, and then steps back and pushes the door shut; I take that as my cue to leave.

*Beeeeeeeeep, beeeeeeeeeep!*

I slam my hand on the snooze button and bury my face in my pillow. When the alarm goes again five minutes later, I'm tempted to shut it off and go back to sleep - then I remember why my alarm is going off: it's the first day of school.

Dragging myself out of bed and into the shower, I try to plan out what to wear today. Everyone makes an effort on the first day, even if they end up wearing sweatpants the next week.

I tease my curly hair back into a ponytail and stand in front of my wardrobe, eyeing everything as critically as other people will today. I settle on denim cut-offs that give my butt some lift, and a sleeveless, pale blue blouse with a black Peter Pan collar, and I grab a sweater to toss in the car, in case it gets colder later.

Cute, but not too over the top, I think with a smile as I look myself over in the mirror.

I put some eyeliner on, and cover up my freckles with concealer and powder. I hate my freckles. I don't have a couple of cute ones over the bridge of my nose like some people; my face and even my shoulders are covered in freckles. I hate it.

It's three minutes to eight, so I grab my satchel and head downstairs, tossing my book in my bag at the last minute in case I'm lucky enough to have a free period today. I

swallow a piece of toast Dad has made for me as quickly as is humanly possible and call goodbye to my mom, who's in her office upstairs. Dad's sitting at the breakfast bar reading the biography of some footballer I've never heard of, and I give him a kiss on the cheek.

'Have a good first day back,' he says.

'Thanks.'

My car, the old red Buick with the bad paint job, grumbles to life as I turn the key in the ignition, my keychains jangling together noisily. The exhaust sputters when I stop outside Todd's house. I honk the horn in two short bursts to get his attention, and a moment later he wanders down the path and climbs in the passenger seat, his legs splayed awkwardly in the tight space. He reaches behind him to try and find the lever to move the seat back, and it jerks back a whole foot and a half in one go.

'Nice car.'

'Is that sarcasm?' I ask sharply, scowling a little as I drive down the street. I know it's not the best car - but I bought it with my own money, from Old Man Davies down the street, and I've got to save up for college, so unless this old thing catches fire, I'm not paying out to have it fixed up while it still gets me from A to B.

'No,' he says. 'It's a nice car.'

'Oh. Well. Okay, then.' I feel a blush creeping over my face for snapping at him.

He smiles a little - I see it out of the corner of my eye, and realize that's the first time I've seen him smile. It makes him look so much warmer, and less sulky.

I turn on the stereo and the Imagine Dragons disc whirs to life and starts to play from where it left off mid-song. I don't care what he thinks about the music, I just can't bear a whole car ride in awkward silence.

'You have good taste in music,' Todd comments.

'Duh.'

He chuckles, but it's very quiet, and he stops himself, fighting away the smile on his face.

It's pretty busy when we get to school. People are buzzing with excitement at seeing their friends after the summer, gossiping and chattering like they've been somewhere with no Wi-Fi, no social networks or cellphones. I roll my eyes as some girl squeals to someone she probably saw just last week that it's been 'way too long', and I carry on walking past. I know where my friends will be hanging out.

I don't know what to do about Todd though. Should I introduce him to my friends, or stay here with him for the next seven minutes until the bell rings?

'Um . . .' I hesitate, gnawing on my lip.

'Could you at least tell me where to find my homeroom? They mailed me a bunch of papers - like the school rules, dress code, map - and told me which homeroom I'm in. It's okay, you don't have to babysit me, but . . .'

'If you have a map, why do you need me to tell you where it is?' I smile though, so he knows I'm not being mean.

'Because the map looks like something a five-year-old drew. It's impossible to decipher.'

I laugh, deciding not to argue, so he tells me where his homeroom is and I lead him there down a few corridors, through the throngs of people.

'Thanks.'

'That's okay.'

He's fiddling with that guitar pick again. He puts it back in the pocket of his jeans but then takes it out again after a second or two.

'Look,' I sigh, and grab his hand. I dig into the side pocket of my satchel and pull out a pen. I bite the lid between my teeth and scribble my number on his hand. 'If you need someone to eat lunch with, I guess, send me a text. Only to be used in case of emergency, though, got that?'

I can't help it! I feel bad for the guy. I've never really been the new kid, never been ostracized or anything like he might be. I can't imagine what he feels like. He'll make friends, I'm sure, and I don't doubt that there will be girls queued up trying to talk to him by the end of the week, especially with those cheekbones and those eyes. But I feel for him.

There's that reluctant smile again, and for once he looks me right in the eyes. 'Thanks, Ashley.'

I smile back and shrug. Then I remember to let go of his hand, which falls back to his side.

'Hey! Ashley!'

I turn at the familiar voice and see the hulking form of my boyfriend making his way down the corridor toward us. I smile and as he reaches us I go on my tiptoes to give him a quick kiss. 'Hey.'

'You didn't come to meet us. One of the football guys said he saw you come this way.'

'Yeah, I was showing Todd to his homeroom. This is Todd, by the way,' I say, pointing between them. Todd scuffs the toe of his shoe against the floor, head down. 'My new neighbor, you know I told you about him? Todd, this is my boyfriend, Josh.'

They both nod their heads in acknowledgement of each other with a blunt, 'Hey, what's up,' and the bell rings. Relief washes over me that we can get out of here before things have chance to get awkward. I slip my hand into Josh's and say, 'See you,' to Todd, and we head off down the corridor to our own homeroom.

'Were you giving him your number?' Josh mumbles, bending to speak in my ear.

'Yeah, just in case he needs some help. It's his first day. I was just trying to be nice.'

He grunts. I stop walking and step to the side of the corridor, tugging at Josh so that he steps beside me. I rub my hand up and down his forearm, over the muscles there.

'You're not jealous?'

He lets out a sigh and smiles. 'I love you.'

'I love you too,' I say back. Smiling, Josh tilts my face up so he can kiss me.

A throat clears loudly, followed by, 'Miss Bennett, Mr Parker. I think you ought to be on your way to homeroom now.'

'Yes, sir,' Josh drawls at the geography teacher, who carries on down the corridor. I'm blushing furiously. Then Josh gives me another kiss, and we walk on to our first class.



## Chapter Three

Todd O'Connor isn't the only new kid, of course, but he's by far the most talked about. I don't see him for the rest of the morning, but I hear snatches of gossip about him. Although nobody seems to know that much about him at all, not really.

'Where did he even come from?'

'Someone told me he used to go to boarding school in New York. Apparently, they caught him smoking pot in the library. Can you believe it?'

'Well *I* heard he used to live in California. Got kicked out for selling drugs on the football pitch, you know?'

'No, he moved from a juvie centre in North Dakota, I heard someone telling Olivia Riley.'

Not that I know much about him - but come on, people really believe all the rumors that are spilling around the school? I don't pay them any attention. The bell finally rings for lunch, and I make my way to the cafeteria and over to my usual table.

Josh and Austin are already there with Naomi. Then the twins, Sam and Neil, turn up just as I get there. I glance around the rest of the room, looking at the cliques and the groups of friends joking about, or having playful, yet still heated, debates about something.

I look back at my usual table as I draw closer, and there's the usual feeling of disappointment in the pit of my stomach. It's not that they're bad people, or anything, it's just . . . we don't exactly have much in common. I never have much to say to them.