



IT SOUNDED *Better* IN MY HEAD



NINA KENWOOD

Patrick Swayze and Other People's Bathrooms

Mum pulls up across the road from Benny's house (whoever Benny is—I'm still not entirely sure). I can hear the thump of music coming from the party. It seems very loud. I wonder if the police will turn up. Could I be arrested? I'm still getting used to the idea of going to the house of someone who doesn't live with their parents.

'You sure you're okay?' Mum asks.

I'm obviously still extremely mad at her about the separation, and even more so for lying to me for a year, but my anger is on a temporary hold for tonight so she could drive me to the party.

I'm freaking out and I need my mother.

'Of course,' I say.

But I don't get out of the car. I'm so nervous I could throw up. I don't know if Owen is there yet, but I don't want to

message him and ask. He said he would be there at eight. He didn't say 'I'll meet you there' or anything. He just wrote *We'll be there at 8* and the address. It's 8.45. He must be in there. But he hasn't texted me to see where I am, so he's either not there or he's there and doesn't care that I'm not there. It's a lose—lose scenario.

'We can just go home, you know,' Mum says. She has pushed me to socialise since I was ten years old, and now here I am at a party and she's trying to sabotage me.

'No thanks.' I cross my arms, so she can't see that my hands are shaking.

'You can go to parties without going to *this* party,' she says.

'I'm going.'

'Okay.'

'In one minute.'

'Okay.'

We sit in silence for about thirty seconds and then I open the door, but I'm still not quite ready to get out of the car.

'Bye, Mum.'

'Call me to pick you up.'

'I'll get an Uber.'

'I can pick you up.'

'I might...stay at Owen's.' I haven't actually considered this possibility until the words come out of my mouth. Am I seriously planning on hooking up with Owen? Am I planning on having *sex* tonight? No. The idea is preposterous. Owen and I have had one conversation in our lives. We're unlikely to make eye contact, let alone bodily contact, let alone kiss, let alone have sex. I don't even want to have sex with

him. But it feels important that Mum believes it could happen. That's the first step towards it one day actually happening—that other people look at me and think *this person could feasibly have sex with someone*.

Also, I want to test Mum a little.

'Oh, Natalie, no, I don't think that's a good idea.'

'Do I need your permission?' I'm not being snarky or rude with this question. I genuinely don't know. I turned eighteen seven weeks ago. I'm an adult. I. Am. An. Adult. I do not feel like an adult. I feel light years away from being an adult. I mean, I'm also still a teenager, which is a relief. I always had this vision of myself doing something important during my teen years. I didn't think I would be a child prodigy, but I thought I would be something *very* close to it, and now I'm almost out of time. Before I know it, I'll be twenty-one and no one will be impressed by anything I do.

Mum purses her lips. 'I suppose not. I mean, I like to know where you are. But you're eighteen, so you can technically go wherever you want.'

'Technically?'

'Legally. Officially. In the eyes of the law.'

'But?'

'I don't want my baby to stay at some boy's house.'

'Don't call me your baby. That is gross and infantilising.'

'You get a boyfriend and now you're too good to be called baby. You'll never have Patrick Swayze with that attitude.'

'Patrick Swayze is dead.'

'I know, sweetie. It was a *Dirty Dancing* reference.' Mum made me watch *Dirty Dancing*, *The Bodyguard* and *Muriel's*

Wedding when I was fourteen, in order to, as she put it, 'understand her emotional landscape'.

'I get the reference. But it was weird to mention him.'

'If I can't make *Dirty Dancing* references, then end my life now because it isn't worth living.'

'He's not my boyfriend.'

'What?'

'Owen. Just in case you somehow meet him and call him my boyfriend. It's not like that. At all. We're not even friends. We barely know each other. I don't think he'd recognise me if we passed each other on the street.'

'Well, why on earth are you thinking about spending the night with him?' Mum says, her voice jumping about five octaves.

'Because that's what people do. Boyfriends and girlfriends aren't really a big thing anymore. People are more casual now. They just hook up whenever.' One of my superpowers is pretending I know a lot more about something than I actually do.

'If boyfriends and girlfriends aren't a thing any more, then what are Zach and Lucy doing?'

'Being old-fashioned.'

'Well, there's nothing wrong with old-fashioned.'

'I'm going now.'

'I think you should at least wait until you know his surname.'

'It's Sinclair.'

'Owen Sinclair? Didn't he do something with a girl on a park bench once?'

I need to stop having these conversations in front of my parents. My mother retains far too much information.

‘No, you’re thinking of someone else.’ I turn to get out of the car.

Mum reaches out and puts her hand on my arm.

‘You’ve scared me. I don’t want to let you go now.’

‘Mum, probably nothing is going to happen. I just wanted to clear a path in your mind in case it does.’

‘Clear a path in my mind?’ She’s smiling.

I frown at her. ‘Yes.’

She pulls me back into the car and kisses my cheek. ‘Okay. Consider the path cleared.’

‘Bye, Mum.’ I shut the car door and start crossing the road. I can hear the buzz of her window rolling down.

‘Bye, hon. Text me, too. I’ll be waiting up. And don’t do anything you don’t want to do. Don’t let anyone put anything in your drink. And don’t take drugs—you’re not ready for that. Have fun!’

Oh my god. I hurry away before she can think of another stream of mortifying things to call out. She hasn’t driven off yet, which means she’s going to sit there and watch me go in.

I slow down as I approach the house, trying to look a lot more confident than I feel. There are two guys I don’t know, sitting on the steps leading up to front door. They glance up as I open the gate and walk towards them but continue their conversation. Should I say hi? I should say hi. I imagine myself saying hello in my nervous, too-formal voice and I imagine them raising their eyebrows at each other and then mimicking me behind my back as I walk in. I won’t say anything.

That's safer. I should pretend to be on my phone. But it's too late for that now. I'm right beside them. Oh god, is one of them Benny?

I pause at the steps and maneuver awkwardly around them. They don't even look at me or stop their conversation as I brush past.

The front door is open. There's a long hallway with a stained carpet that could be grey or brown or blue, it's impossible to tell, and music. I follow the hallway, peering into empty rooms as I pass them (a messy bedroom with an unmade bed and three guitars propped against it, another bedroom with posters of people I don't know on the walls and a stack of dirty dishes on the bedside table) until I find a big lounge room where a bunch of people are sitting on couches and beanbags. The lounge room has double doors thrown open to a courtyard, and I can see more people out there, smoking and vaping. I can't see Owen. Everyone looks so much older, even though I know most of them are only a year or two ahead of me.

I hover in the doorway to the lounge room, feeling like an idiot. I spend ten agonising seconds trying to look relaxed and normal, scanning every face desperately for Owen or Alex, and then I turn around and walk into the bathroom and lock the door.

I sit on the toilet for a while, and play on my phone until the battery goes down to 40% (I somehow forgot to fully charge it this afternoon, an amateur mistake) and then I stop, because getting through the rest of this night without a phone is an unbearable thought. I should just text Owen. He might even

be here and I just didn't see him, but I can't bring myself to go back out there. How do people do it? How do they walk into a room of strangers and join conversations? And even pretending I was comfortable doing that, I'm not sure this is the kind of party where that can happen. I don't have the first clue of how to interact with these people, who all know each other and go to university together and are utterly comfortable in each other's presence. I'm some weird high-school kid who's spent her whole life reading about parties rather than going to them.

I'm nervous-sweating now. I put bunches of toilet paper under my armpits to stop myself from getting sweat marks on my clothes. I'm wearing a cheap patterned dress I bought from a chain store that's designed to look like it might be a 90s vintage dress from an op-shop. I bought it because it looked soft and floaty on the mannequin, and because it has cute buttons on the front, but it's not quite soft and floaty on me. It's itchy and doesn't sit straight over my left boob. But the buttons do look cute.

Someone knocks on the bathroom door and I say nothing. They turn the handle, find it locked and knock again. I call out, 'I'm in here. Sorry'. I hear footsteps walking away.

I really, really want to call Mum to pick me up but, no matter how grim this night gets, I won't do that.

I start looking through the bathroom cabinets, because I have nothing else to do. Panadol. Fungal cream. Birth-control pills. Toothpaste, with the cap off and a thick gloop of it on the shelf. Multivitamins. Mouthwash. Condoms. Lots of condoms. Medication that looks like antidepressants. I close the cabinet door, feeling bad for snooping.

They have a big, grungy bathtub that looks like it hasn't been cleaned in months. I put down an already damp towel in the bottom and sit in the bathtub, because it seems less gross than sitting on the toilet. I can see several dark hairs clinging to the side of the bath. There's nothing more disgusting than other people's bathrooms. I sit there for what feels like a long time, but is probably two minutes, waiting for something to happen. I imagine standing up, slipping over, hitting my head on the edge of the tub, and no one finding me until the next day, when it's too late to save me. That would be a very sad way to die, in the dirty bathtub of a stranger.

There's a chorus of loud shouting and laughter as a new group of people arrive, clomping down the hallway, carrying bags of clicking bottles and shouting.

'Heeeeeeyyyyyyy!'

'Yo!'

'You're finally here!'

'Bro!'

I recognise Owen's voice and I feel so much relief my body actually sags back against the side of the tub.

There's more noise and then someone tries to open the bathroom door and rattles the handle.

'I hate to be rude, but there's a line of people needing to piss out here,' a voice says from the other side of the door.

'Some chick has been in there for, like, half an hour,' says another voice.

'We're about to start peeing in sinks out here!' A third voice chimes in.

Surely they would pee in the garden before they used the kitchen sink. People just don't think sometimes.

I stand up, not knowing what to do. I pull the toilet paper out from my armpits and flush it down the toilet. I immediately regret doing that, because now they'll think I've been *on* the toilet all this time.

I walk to the door and unlock it, opening it a crack. Six faces stare back at me. One of them is Owen, another is Alex, and the rest I don't know.

'Natalie!' Owen says. He looks like he is very pleased with himself for remembering my name.

Alex leans forward. 'Are you okay?' he asks.

I don't think I've ever seen him look concerned before.

'Yes, I'm fine. I haven't been in here for half an hour. It's been ten minutes. I needed somewhere quiet to make a phone call. Sorry.' I'm babbling, and I can feel that my face is red.

All six of them continue staring at me. I need to walk away now but that means walking back out into the party. I am frozen, unwilling to give up the safe oasis of the bathroom.

Owen steps forward, pushes the door open and walks into the bathroom.

'Turn around,' he says.

'Why?'

'I'm about to pee.'

He's already standing over the toilet and unzipping his fly. I am a prudish only child who grew up with a bathroom to herself and no brothers, so there's no way I can remain in the room with a guy peeing. Also, it's not a thing a guy would do in front of a girl he wants to maybe kiss at some point, so my

fantasy of hooking up with Owen Sinclair takes a further step away from the realm of possibility. Or maybe Owen is so self-assured, has lived a life of such untouchable male privilege, that he can pee in front of someone with full confidence that he could still kiss them later.

I leave the bathroom and walk about five steps before I'm at a loss where to go, again. This time, there is a familiar face to bail me out. Alex is putting beers in the fridge in the kitchen. I hover nearby, forgetting all my past concerns about him. No longer is he somebody I don't trust. Now he's my lifejacket, my safety net, my I-will-hang-on-to-you-like-grim-death fellow party goer.

'What were you doing in the bathroom,' he asks when he sees me.

What kind of outrageous question is that?

'I told you. Making a phone call.'

'Not hiding?'

'Definitely not hiding.'

'Okay. Just seemed like you might be hiding.'

'I wasn't.'

'Good.' He finishes putting the beers in the fridge and waves to someone across the room.

Owen walks out of the bathroom, running his hand through his hair in a way that makes it obvious he knows how great his hair is. It's weird to look at someone and know they are probably very vain and they just peed in front of you but still be attracted to them.

'Hey, having fun?' he asks me.

'Yes,' I reply.

‘Cool,’ he says, very clearly looking over my shoulder for someone better.

My heart is pounding. What happens now? Do we keep talking? Owen walks out of the kitchen and into the lounge room.

I follow him, and hover in the background. There’s a free chair in the far corner, and I sit in it and smile at people, trying to catch someone’s eye, trying to see an opening to say something. There’s none, in part because the chair has been pushed off to the side and wedged half behind a shelf, so I’m out of view of the people chatting on the other chairs and couches.

I pull out my phone and pretend I am texting someone. I google ‘top ten tips for talking to people at parties’ and scroll through suggestions about introducing myself with a firm-but-not-too-firm handshake (I don’t know much but this party really does not seem like the kind of party where you would shake hands with someone), asking engaging questions (it does not explain how to know if a question is engaging or not), and smiling and laughing when appropriate (which sends me into a spiral of realising *maybe I’ve never smiled or laughed at an appropriate time in my entire life and I just didn’t realise until this moment.*)

My phone battery drops to 30% and I reluctantly put it away. I have to keep it for emergency moments only now. Or maybe I can find a charger in the house. That could be a conversation opener, if I can figure out who Benny is and then ask if I can borrow a charger, and then maybe we keep talking and I ask a bunch of really engaging questions and we hit it off. Maybe Benny and I will fall in love.

I walk back into the kitchen. Someone has spilled Coke all over the bench, so I grab a nearby cloth and clean it up. I throw a few empty beer bottles in the bin and I'm contemplating the dirty dishes when Alex walks in.

'Are you cleaning? Why are you cleaning?' He's laughing.

'Just wiping up a spill,' I say.

He stops laughing. 'Are you sure you're okay?'

'Yes.'

'You don't have to stay here, you know.' Alex sits on the bench I just wiped, and I try not to be annoyed by this.

'What does that mean?'

'Parties aren't your thing.'

'Who told you that?'

'You did.'

'No, I didn't.'

'Yeah, you did. About six months ago. You said you can't stand parties and you hate most people.'

That definitely sounds like something I would say. I mean, it's kind of true, but it's also a great line for someone who is looking for an excuse not to leave her house. It's such a relief when every internet quiz I do says I'm an introvert, like I've been given written permission to avoid everyone and everything. You don't have to try now because you're an introvert, is what I take it to mean.

'I've changed my mind,' I say.

'Really?'

'Yes. I love parties now. And people.' I'm using my most upbeat tone.

'What brought on this turnaround?'

'I'm trying to be more open-minded. It's my New Year's resolution,' I say. This is a lie. My real New Year's resolutions are to learn how to do my own eyeliner, read 100 books, and fix all my issues (emotional, physical, mental) before I start uni.

'But it's not New Year's Eve for another four days,' he says, smiling and making what I think my 'top ten tips for talking to people at parties' article would call 'warm eye contact'.

'I'm starting early,' I say, trying to maintain the eye contact which is difficult because my heart is racing.

'Smart,' he says.

Alex stops smiling, and his eyes go to someone behind me. I turn, and see that it's Vanessa Nguyen, his ex. She went to my school, a year ahead of me. Now she studies fine arts at the Victorian College of the Arts and she has a nose piercing and a tattoo of a bird on her wrist and she's cooler than I can ever dream of being. She and Alex were on-and-off again all through high-school.

'Hey, Ness,' Alex says, and his face is all tight and tense. He's still in love with her, I assume.

'Hi Vanessa,' I say, because I am trying to show Alex that I don't hate people.

'Hi,' she says to me with a hint of uncertainty. I can tell she vaguely recognises me but has no idea from where.

'How are you?' Vanessa says to Alex.

I should leave, so they can have their awkward conversation in private, but I have nowhere to go and, also, I was here first.

'I'm good, how are you?'

‘Busy. You know.’

‘Yeah. Are you still working at that bar?’

‘Nah, I quit.’

‘I’m glad. That manager was sleazy.’

‘He was the worst. How do you two know each other?’

It takes me several seconds to realise Vanessa is referring to Alex and me. It’s such an odd question—as if Alex and I are here together, as if how I know Alex matters at all. I laugh nervously.

‘Natalie is friends with Zach. You would have seen her at my house,’ Alex says.

‘Oh yeah, I thought you looked familiar.’

I don’t know what to say to that—I want to point out we also went to school together—but I stick with my trademark move and say nothing.

‘Well, I’ve got to go say hi to Jacqui. I’ll talk to you later,’ Vanessa says, and she touches his arm and then walks off.

Alex sighs after she’s out of earshot.

I hitch myself up onto the kitchen bench beside him.

‘Are you two still friends?’ I ask.

‘Not really. Or, yes, we are but in a weird way,’ he says.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say.

‘About what?’

‘Seeing her makes you sad.’

‘No, it doesn’t. I’m not sad. I’m...’ But he doesn’t finish the sentence. I raise my eyebrows.

He folds his arms as if he’s not going to say anything, then says, ‘Fine, seeing her makes me feel teeny, tiny bit sad.’

‘That sucks.’

‘But it’s not like I still want to be with her. I don’t. I just... I don’t know. It’s weird.’

Alex is jiggling his leg and I reach out and stop him. Only after I remove my hand from his leg does it occur to me that I’ve never touched him before. I’m suddenly self-conscious about the intimate gesture.

He looks at me, as if he’s thinking the same thing about us never having touched before.

‘Zach does that leg jiggling too. It drives me nuts,’ I say, filled with the sudden need to explain.

‘Must be genetic,’ Alex says, smiling now.

‘Or he learned it from you.’

‘That’s scary. To think of all the things he might have learned from me.’

‘What’s the best thing about having three brothers?’ I ask, partly because it seems like an engaging question, but also because I am paranoid about what things I might have missed out on not having siblings. Like could there have been a whole other Natalie, a better Natalie, who would have existed if she’d had a cool older sibling to show her the way in life, or a younger sibling who looked up to her.

Alex makes a face at my question.

‘Humour me. I’m an only child,’ I say.

‘Never feeling alone.’

‘And what’s the worst thing?’ I’m getting good at these questions now.

‘Never feeling alone.’

‘Ha.’

‘It’s like...sometimes they take up so much room in my life

I'm afraid I'll never have room for all the other people I want to fit in. And I worry about them. Zach's okay, he's so smart, and he's got you and Lucy, but I think Anthony gets bullied a bit, and Glenn thinks he's invincible and he's going to grow up and be a bit too wild.' He stops, and seems surprised at himself for saying so much.

I've never heard him talk like this. And I've never looked at him this close before. His eyes go all crinkly when he smiles. He has messy eyebrows, like Zach used to before Lucy started plucking them.

'My parents broke up,' I say.

I have no idea why I just blurted this out.

'I know. I heard Zach and Lucy talking about it. I'm sorry. I always thought your parents seemed like a nice couple.'

'You've met my parents?'

'No. But Mum talks about you, and them, so much that I feel like I have.'

'It's not like a bad break up, with yelling and fighting over money or anything like that. It's all very relaxed,' I say.

'That's good.'

'I mean, I'm eighteen, so there's not a child anyone needs to have a custody battle over or anything.'

'That makes things easier, I guess.'

'And I feel completely and totally fine about it all.'

'Sounds ideal.'

'Yes. It is ideal. They'll have a perfect divorce.' I plan to laugh in a mature and ironic way but what comes out is a kind of hiccupped sob. I put my hand to my mouth, more out of shock than anything, and tears start burning my eyes.

The thing is, I'm not a crier. *Never* a public crier. Not even when a guy on a train said 'you've got something on your face' very loudly to me, and everyone around us looked at me and when I touched my face, thinking it was a smear of peanut butter, he said, 'Oh, it's a pimple, it looked like something else for a minute,' and I had spent thirty-seven minutes and missed my usual train that morning getting my foundation to a point where I thought my skin looked pretty good for a change.

I'm not about to start public crying now, at this party.

'Hey,' Alex puts his hand on my arm. He looks a bit scared. Probably he's worried he's going to be stuck looking after his little brother's pathetic, blubbing friend all night.

Now I truly am crying. I put my hands over my face to catch the tears that are slipping out of my eyes.

'I'm fine,' I say, trying desperately to sound it.

What is happening? I didn't even cry when they told me. It must be the word divorce. I haven't said that word out loud until this moment, even though I've been thinking it since they told me. I know it's coming.

I keep my head in my hands. I should go to the bathroom and hide but I can't face the idea of being caught in there again.

Alex keeps his hand on my arm and leans in. He whispers, 'You probably don't know this yet, but you're not supposed to cry at parties.'

I give a small laugh.

'I'm not crying.' I wipe my cheeks and take deep breaths. *Get it together.* My nose gets red and swollen when I cry, and it runs like a tap. My eyes go bloodshot. I get an instant headache. Crying is not therapeutic for me.

‘Oh, I know you’re not crying. I was telling you just in case.’

His hand is still on my arm. I don’t want him to take it away. Focusing on that thought helps me to stop crying, because it’s a brand new, of-this-very-moment feeling.

I’ve known Alex for years and never felt a flicker of attraction. Or at least I don’t think I have. He has chest hair (I’ve seen him in a towel walking from the bathroom to his bedroom). He is obsessed with soccer. He has a heavy five-o’clock shadow and sometimes a scruffy beard. He’s a year older than me. He’s not tall. He likes partying. I’ve never seen him read or hold a book. He is nothing like Zach. These are things I would have previously said were problematic for me.

I look at the wall until I’ve pulled myself together and I’ve not only stopped crying but the urge to cry has completely disappeared, and then I lift my face. Alex takes his hand off my arm, and it almost seems worth crying again to see if he’ll put it back.

‘Do I have mascara running down my face?’ I ask him. As much as I hate to tell anyone to look directly at my face, I urgently need to know how bad things are.

‘No.’

‘You didn’t even look properly.’

He leans close to my face. ‘No mascara running.’

We hold eye contact for a long time (okay, a second or two, which is ages for me) and I feel embarrassed and ridiculously vulnerable because of my probably red post-crying nose and my bumpy skin, but I don’t want to look away.

‘So what other party wisdom do you have?’ I ask.

‘Well, every party has a guy that gets really drunk before everyone else and embarrasses himself. And a couple who get into an awkward, public argument. And an opinionated know-it-all who never shuts up and gets on everyone’s nerves.’

‘So who are all those people tonight?’

‘The drunk guy who embarrasses himself is—’ Alex pauses and looks outside the kitchen window for a minute.

‘Benny...In the red T-shirt.’

The guy he’s pointing to is balancing a plastic bucket on his head, yelling ‘now fill it with water’ with a look of total delight on his face. So that’s Benny. We’re almost definitely not going to fall in love.

‘Yes, that seems right,’ I say.

‘And the couple who argue—’ Alex scans the backyard and shakes his head.

‘They must be in the lounge room. You’ll know them when you see them. Annika has red hair, and Jes is wearing skinny black jeans, and they’re both very loud.’

‘Oh yeah, I think I saw them before, arguing about returning a Christmas present one of them bought the other.’

‘That’s where the argument will start, but it will spiral into the fact they both cheated on each other earlier this year, on the same night.’

‘Oh, wow.’

‘With the same person,’ Alex says.

‘That sounds complicated.’

‘And the opinionated guy, that one is easy.’

‘Let me guess.’ I look out the kitchen window into the backyard.

‘Him,’ I say, pointing to a guy with beer in one hand and wildly gesturing with the other. He’s wearing a T-shirt that says ‘anarchy’.

‘Bingo. He loves conspiracy theories, arguing about politics and telling people why the music they like is crap.’

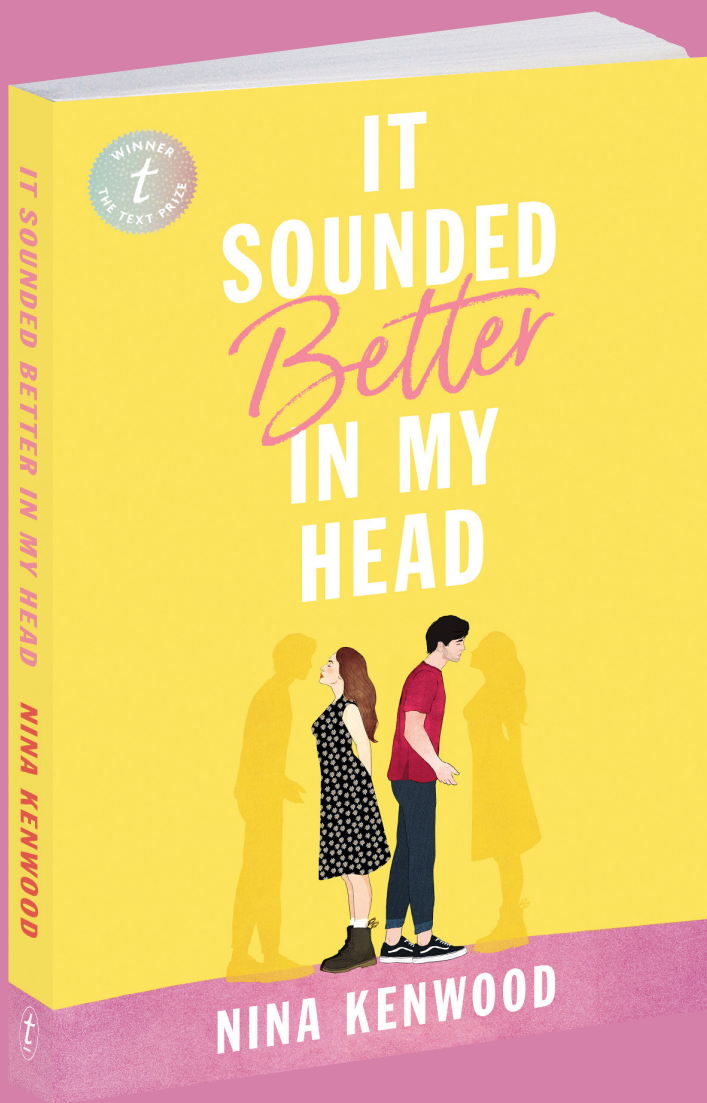
‘He sounds...charming,’ I say. I turn away from the window and we smile at each other, and Alex looks like he’s going to say something when Owen yells at us from outside.

‘Hey, Alex and Natalie!’

We look away from each other, and I jump down from the bench. My legs feel a little shaky.

‘Come outside,’ Owen says. And just like that, I feel like I’m part of the party.

We go outside and sit on crappy folding camping chairs. A bunch of people are arguing about the existence of aliens and the best way to way to eat a croissant. After a while, I feel myself unclenching. It seems almost strange that I was hiding in the bathroom at the beginning of the night. I feel nostalgically sad for my pathetic self of an hour ago—what a loser. I am goddess on a rickety camping chair pretending to drink a beer now.



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