

The Perfect Exit Plan.

“Rule Number One: *A smooth exit is 80% confidence, 20% knowing where your knickers are.*”

I crouched by the door, one hand gripping my bra, the other scrambling for my heels, hoping to avoid the minefield of squeaky floorboards. In theory, this should’ve been a flawless escape. I’d timed it perfectly—post-snuggle, pre-morning breath—but, as always, I’d underestimated the hazards. Specifically, the enormous, judgmental tabby cat perched on the armrest, eyeing me like I’d just insulted his mother.

“Shh,” I whispered, trying to sidestep the empty pizza box on the floor.

The cat hissed.

Brilliant.

I clutched my phone to my chest and tiptoed backwards, only to catch my heel on the corner of a rug. The trip was silent, but the landing wasn’t. A loud *thud* echoed through the tiny flat as I landed on my arse, bra still dangling from my hand like a white flag.

From the bedroom, a groggy voice mumbled, “Kirsty?”

I froze, sprawled across the carpet like some tragic modern art installation. Think *Woman Defeated by IKEA Rug*.

“Erm... just grabbing water!” I called back, wincing at the sheer desperation in my voice.

No response. I lay there for a moment, debating whether to fake sleepwalking or simply evaporate into thin air. Eventually, I scrambled to my feet, found my balance, and bolted for the door, leaving behind my favourite lipstick—Rule Number Seven: Always leave something behind. It gives them a reason to remember you.

Outside, the morning sun was offensively bright. I adjusted my dress, which now felt far too short for 8 a.m., and exhaled deeply.

Another successful exit. Well, minus the near-death experience by rug and the feline humiliation.

I got home twenty minutes later, still mildly traumatized but oddly triumphant, clutching an overpriced oat milk latte. My flat smelled of last night’s Chinese takeaway, and my laptop screen glowed, waiting for me.

“The Morning After Manual – Final Edits” blinked up at me from the screen. I slumped onto the sofa, pushing aside a stack of magazines and an empty wine glass. Perfect setting for a self-help author, right?

I skimmed over the last few chapters, biting my lip. Was “Always keep mints in your handbag” groundbreaking advice? Or just sad? I wasn’t sure anymore. I glanced at the draft’s word count—57,892—and sighed. That was enough, wasn’t it?

The cursor blinked back, smug.

I saved the file and hit *send*, firing it off to Harper, my publicist-slash-life-coach-slash-professional-whirlwind. A pang of nerves fluttered in my chest. This was it. My magnum opus on gracefully exiting awkward one-night stands. A self-help guide for the modern dater, written by someone who could execute the perfect Irish goodbye in her sleep.

And yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that this was either my greatest accomplishment or the nail in my dating coffin.

My phone buzzed. Speak of the devil.

"Kirsty! It's bloody brilliant," Harper's voice crackled through the speaker. "I'm in love."

I snorted. "With the manual or the concept of avoiding emotional intimacy altogether?"

"Both," she replied. "This book is going to be massive. Like, viral massive. We're talking think pieces, memes, the lot."

I flopped back on the sofa. "Great. I've always wanted to be the poster child for commitment-phobes."

Harper ignored my sarcasm. "The launch party is next Friday—rooftop bar, fabulous views, even better cocktails. You'll be there, right?"

"Wouldn't miss it," I replied, though the thought made my stomach twist.

"You're going to be famous, Kirsty," she continued. "Trust me."

Famous. For teaching people how to ghost politely. My parents were going to love this.

A few hours later, I met Claire for brunch at our usual spot—a tiny café that served overpriced avocado toast but made up for it with free mimosas. She was already there, her toddler in one arm and her phone in the other, multitasking like a pro.

"You're late," she said, not looking up.

"Sorry. Had to make a sneaky exit this morning."

She raised an eyebrow. "Another one? Kirsty, at some point, you're going to have to go on an actual date."

I shrugged. "Why? One-night stands are efficient. Like fast food—quick, satisfying, no strings attached."

Claire rolled her eyes. "You're literally writing a book about how to avoid commitment."

"I like to think of it as... relationship etiquette."

She handed me a mimosa. "You're hopeless."

We clinked glasses. Despite her teasing, Claire was my biggest cheerleader. Well, when she wasn't gently nudging me towards adulthood and monogamy.

"You're coming to the launch party, right?" I asked.

"Obviously. Someone has to keep you from drinking too much and accidentally hooking up with a journalist."

I grinned. "That happened one time."

"And now it's Rule Number Fourteen."

We laughed, and for a moment, everything felt easy. Normal. Like I wasn't about to put my entire dating life on display for the world to dissect.

Later that evening, I found myself at my parents' house for dinner—a bi-weekly ritual that involved equal parts food, love, and unsolicited life advice.

"So, this book," my mum started, passing me a bowl of potatoes. "It's really about avoiding relationships?"

I sighed. "It's about navigating modern dating with grace."

She pursed her lips. "Back in my day, you just found a nice bloke, got married, and had kids. No manuals needed."

"Times have changed, Mum."

My dad chimed in, ever the peacemaker. "We're proud of you, love. Even if we don't entirely understand what ghosting is."

I smiled, but the familiar pang of guilt surfaced. Was I promoting something shallow? Or was I just being honest about how dating worked now?

I wasn't sure.

As I left their house that night, Harper's words echoed in my head.

This book is going to be massive.

Fame. Attention. Success.

But at what cost?

I had a feeling I was about to find out.

The week leading up to the book launch passed in a blur of nerves and logistical chaos. Harper had gone full PR-mode, which meant I was fielding emails with subject lines like "Must-Have Outfits for Viral Success" and "Do NOT Mention That Awful Podcast Again."

Apparently, my offhand comment on a dating podcast about preferring dogs over men had caused quite the stir.

“People love controversy,” Harper had said, waving it off like it was the most natural thing in the world. “But let’s keep it cute and quirky for the launch, okay? No canine comparisons.”

I spent most of the week holed up in my flat, alternating between excitement and panic. I’d never been particularly good at being the centre of attention, despite the fact I’d willingly written a book destined to thrust me into the spotlight. The irony wasn’t lost on me.

On Thursday evening, Harper called again.

“Kirsty, darling, we need to talk about the guest list.”

I groaned, flopping onto my bed. “Please tell me you didn’t invite my ex.”

A pause.

“Only because he writes for *The Daily Post*, and we want coverage.”

I sighed. “Fine, but if he corners me with another ‘We should catch up’ line, I’m faking an urgent call from my mum.”

“Noted. Also, there’s someone I want you to meet at the party—Theo Sinclair.”

“Theo Sinclair?” I repeated, trying to place the name.

“You know, the relationship guru. Writes those nauseatingly sweet columns about finding your soulmate. He’s basically the antithesis of your brand.”

“Sounds delightful,” I said, my sarcasm palpable.

Harper ignored me. “His agent’s keen on getting you two in the same room. Sparks fly, headlines happen—it’s PR gold.”

I cringed. The idea of being paraded around as part of some strategic publicity stunt made my skin itch. “Do I have to?”

“Yes. And wear something that says ‘approachable but clever.’”

“Right. Because my wardrobe’s just bursting with those options.”

We hung up, and I glanced at my closet. Approachable but clever? Did that translate to floral wrap dresses or jeans with a blazer? I had no clue.

The night before the launch, Claire came over with a bottle of wine and a bag of crisps—our pre-event tradition.

“Tell me you’ve picked out an outfit,” she said, toeing off her shoes.

“I have... sort of.”

She raised an eyebrow, the one she used when she knew I was lying. “Show me.”

I reluctantly opened my wardrobe and gestured vaguely at the collection of dresses and jumpsuits. Claire sighed, pulled out a simple black midi dress, and held it up.

“This. It’s chic, flattering, and you can dress it up with statement earrings. Done.”

I stared at it. “Isn’t black too serious for a book about awkward one-night stands?”

She grinned. “Nothing says ‘I know what I’m doing’ like a little black dress. Trust me.”

I did. Claire had an unspoken authority when it came to looking put together.

We sat on the floor, wine glasses in hand, crisps scattered between us.

“Are you excited?” she asked, chewing thoughtfully.

“Excited? Petrified? Both?” I sipped my wine. “I mean, what if everyone hates it? Or worse, they love it for all the wrong reasons.”

She tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

“What if people think I’m endorsing... I don’t know, emotional detachment? Like I’m telling people not to care about anyone.”

Claire was quiet for a moment, then said, “You wrote it to help people, right? To give them a way to navigate modern dating without feeling like absolute garbage?”

I nodded.

“Then that’s what matters. People will interpret it however they want, but you know your intentions.”

I smiled, grateful for her grounding wisdom.

“Besides,” she added with a grin, “if it all goes horribly wrong, you can always fake your own death and start fresh in Bali.”

“Tempting,” I laughed.

The next morning, I woke up with a slight wine headache and a growing sense of dread. Tonight was the night.

I spent the afternoon at the salon, letting a stylist transform my hair into soft waves that would undoubtedly flatten the moment I stepped outside. Makeup was kept simple but polished—just enough to make me look like I had my life together.

By the time I arrived at the venue, the rooftop bar was already buzzing with guests—PR people, influencers, journalists, and a handful of familiar faces from the dating scene. Fairy lights crisscrossed above us, and a live band played soft jazz in the background. It was the perfect blend of classy and casual.

Harper greeted me at the entrance, clipboard in hand, headset firmly in place.

“You look incredible!” she gushed, giving me air kisses. “Everyone’s talking about you already.”

“That good or bad?”

“Good, darling. Very good.” She grabbed my elbow and steered me inside. “Now, mingle. Smile. Drink. But not too much.”

I did my best, floating from group to group, shaking hands, answering polite questions about the book. Most people seemed genuinely interested, though there was an undercurrent of amusement—like they weren’t sure whether to take me seriously or not.

I was mid-conversation with a lifestyle blogger when Harper appeared at my side.

“He’s here,” she whispered.

“Who?”

“Theo Sinclair.”

I followed her gaze across the rooftop, where a tall man in a tailored navy suit stood by the bar, chatting with a small group. Even from a distance, he radiated confidence—the kind of man who probably had an alphabetised spice rack and never forgot to floss.

Harper nudged me. “Go say hi. Or better yet, let him come to you. Builds tension.”

I sighed, grabbing a glass of prosecco from a passing tray. “This is ridiculous.”

But, of course, moments later, Theo approached. Up close, he was even more annoyingly handsome—perfectly styled dark hair, sharp cheekbones, and a warm smile that probably melted hearts on a daily basis.

“Kirsty Bennett,” he said, offering his hand.

“Theo Sinclair,” I replied, shaking it. His grip was firm but not overpowering. A practiced handshake.

“I’ve heard a lot about your book.”

“Let me guess. You think it’s a travesty against meaningful human connection?”

He chuckled. “Not in so many words. But I do think it’s... provocative.”

“Provocative. That’s polite.”

“I try.”

There was a beat of silence, not awkward, but charged with something I couldn’t quite place.

He gestured to my glass. “Can I get you another?”

“I’m fine, thanks.” I tilted my head. “So, do you really believe in all that soulmate stuff? The perfect person, destiny, all that jazz?”

He smiled, but there was a flicker of something else in his eyes—maybe a hint of defensiveness.

“I believe in connection. Real, lasting connection. Not just... exits.”

I arched a brow. “Well, sometimes an exit is exactly what someone needs.”

His smile widened. “I suppose we’ll have to agree to disagree.”

I took a sip of my drink, the bubbles fizzing on my tongue. This man was going to be trouble—I could feel it.

But I couldn’t help but think... maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing.

The tension between us was palpable—not the awkward kind, but the sort that buzzed beneath your skin, the type that made you hyper-aware of every glance, every smile, every barely-there brush of fingertips. Theo radiated a calm confidence, the kind you couldn’t buy or fake. And, worse, he seemed utterly unfazed by me.

I hated that.

“So,” he began, swirling the dark amber liquid in his glass, “what inspired *The Morning After Manual*? A series of particularly bad dates?”

I snorted. “That obvious?”

He chuckled, the sound smooth but genuine. “I’m just trying to understand how someone turns one-night stands into an art form.”

“I prefer ‘an etiquette guide for the modern dater,’ thank you very much.”

He tilted his head, amused. “Right. Because sneaking out before sunrise with your shoes in hand is the pinnacle of social grace.”

I sipped my prosecco, feeling the buzz from both the alcohol and the conversation. “You’re one to talk. You literally built your career on fairy-tale endings. Isn’t that setting people up for inevitable disappointment?”

His jaw tensed for half a second, just enough for me to notice. Gotcha.

“I like to think I offer hope,” he replied smoothly. “People want to believe in connection, that there’s someone out there who really *gets* them.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Or maybe they’re terrified of being alone and will buy into anything that tells them they won’t end up with fifty cats.”

He laughed—an actual, deep laugh that made his eyes crinkle at the corners. “You’re feistier than I expected.”

I smirked. “Most men find that out too late.”

He leaned in, lowering his voice. “I bet.”

The air shifted. That spark I’d felt when he first walked over wasn’t going away. In fact, it was growing stronger, more charged. This was dangerous territory.

I cleared my throat, trying to steer us back to safer ground. “So, what exactly did Harper promise you for showing up tonight? A feature in *Modern Love Weekly*? A lifetime supply of matcha lattes?”

He grinned. “Nothing like that. I was curious. I wanted to meet the woman who’s making waves by teaching people how to perfect the art of the exit.”

I hesitated. “And now that you’ve met me?”

He paused, considering. “You’re not what I expected.”

I hated how that made my heart flutter.

Before I could come up with a witty comeback, Harper appeared at my side, practically vibrating with excitement.

“There you two are! The photographers are dying for a shot.” She gestured toward the far end of the rooftop, where a makeshift photo area had been set up—soft lighting, branded backdrops, the works.

I groaned inwardly. “Of course they are.”

Theo offered me his arm, all charm and smiles. “Shall we give them what they want?”

I hesitated for a beat before slipping my hand through his arm. “Fine. But if anyone suggests a ‘spontaneous’ kiss, I’m out.”

He smirked. “Noted.”

As we made our way over to the photographers, I caught glimpses of people whispering, watching. I knew the game—publicity, buzz, headlines—but something about this felt... off. Or maybe it was just the way Theo’s arm felt solid beneath my hand, the way he glanced down at me every so often, as if genuinely curious.

We posed, standing side by side at first—standard smiles, nothing too intimate. But then one of the photographers called out, “Get a little closer! Show us some chemistry!”

Theo didn’t even flinch. He slipped an arm around my waist, pulling me in, his body warm against mine. I stiffened for half a second before forcing a relaxed smile.

“Relax,” he murmured in my ear, his breath warm against my cheek.

I tilted my head up toward him, flashing my most convincing grin. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

His chuckle rumbled through his chest. “You’re good at this.”

“Years of practice,” I replied, my heart racing for reasons I wasn’t ready to unpack.

After what felt like a million flashes, Harper finally stepped in. “Perfect! Those shots are gold.”

I stepped back from Theo, suddenly hyper-aware of the distance—or the lack of it—between us.

“Thanks for the... photo op,” I said, brushing imaginary lint off my dress.

He offered me that maddeningly charming smile again. “Anytime.”

Before I could respond, Claire appeared, her eyes wide and filled with excitement. “Oh my God, Kirsty. You and Mr. Relationship Goals over there? Total fire.”

I groaned. “Please don’t call him that.”

She linked her arm through mine. “I’m serious! The chemistry is off the charts. I mean, I thought the whole opposites-attract thing was a cliché, but you two... wow.”

I sipped my drink, trying to shake off the lingering buzz from Theo’s touch. “It’s all PR. Nothing more.”

Claire raised an eyebrow. “Sure it is.”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help the small smile tugging at my lips.

By the end of the night, my face hurt from all the forced smiles, and my feet were killing me. The party had been a success—Harper was already planning follow-up interviews and media appearances—but all I wanted was to crawl into bed with a pint of ice cream and forget the whole thing.

As I waited for my cab outside, the cool evening air brushing against my skin, I heard a voice behind me.

“Escaping already? I thought you’d be the last one to leave.”

I turned to find Theo, his jacket draped over one arm, his tie loosened. He looked annoyingly good in the dim streetlight.

“Trust me, I’ve overstayed my welcome,” I replied. “Besides, I have a strict no-lingering policy.”

He chuckled. “Of course you do.”

A comfortable silence settled between us, broken only by the occasional hum of passing cars.

“I meant what I said earlier,” he finally said, his gaze steady. “You’re not what I expected.”

I crossed my arms. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

He smiled. “I haven’t decided yet.”

Before I could respond, my cab pulled up. Theo opened the door for me, ever the gentleman, and as I slid in, he leaned down slightly.

“Maybe we’ll figure it out.”

And with that, he shut the door, leaving me with a racing heart and a million questions I wasn’t ready to answer.

The cab ride home felt like an odd sort of debrief—just me, my scattered thoughts, and a driver who hummed along to 90s ballads on the radio. I stared out of the window, watching the city lights blur past, but my mind kept replaying the evening like a badly edited montage.

Theo Sinclair. Relationship guru. Prince of monogamy. And, somehow, the most irritatingly charming man I’d ever met.

“Maybe we’ll figure it out.”

His words echoed in my head, annoyingly smooth, like they belonged in one of his own columns about meaningful connections and finding your perfect match.

I shook my head, trying to snap out of it. I wasn’t here for meaningful connections. I was here for witty one-liners, awkward exits, and a glass of prosecco—or three. And yet, I couldn’t deny it: there’d been something there. A spark. A pull. Something inconvenient.

When the cab finally pulled up outside my flat, I paid the driver, offering a half-hearted smile as I stepped out into the cool night air. My heels clicked against the pavement as I climbed the steps to my door, digging through my handbag for my keys.

I barely made it inside before I kicked off my shoes, sighing in relief. I tossed my clutch onto the sofa, peeled off the black dress Claire had chosen, and threw on my comfiest pyjamas—an oversized T-shirt that read *“Professional Overthinker”* and a pair of fluffy socks.

I padded into the kitchen, poured myself a generous glass of wine, and grabbed a packet of crisps from the cupboard. Launch parties might look glamorous on social media, but they were emotionally exhausting. And tonight had been a masterclass in social gymnastics.

Flopping onto the sofa, I pulled out my phone, fully expecting to scroll through Instagram in peace, but my notifications were already blowing up.

Claire: *Girl. The photos from tonight. You and Theo? Fire emoji x100.*

Harper: *You and Theo are trending. PEOPLE ARE OBSESSED. Will call in the morning.*

Mum: *Saw you on the news! That man you were with seems nice. Should I set an extra place for Sunday dinner?*

I groaned, setting my phone face-down on the coffee table.

Trending? Already? It hadn't even been four hours.

Curiosity got the better of me, and I picked my phone back up, navigating to Twitter. Sure enough, #TheoAndKirsty was trending under the lifestyle section. There were already dozens of memes, ranging from "*Enemies-to-lovers vibes, anyone?*" to a gif of fireworks with the caption "*The chemistry we didn't know we needed.*"

I snorted into my wine glass. This was ridiculous.

Scrolling further, I stumbled upon a short video clip someone had taken at the party. It was me and Theo during the photoshoot, standing close, smiling for the camera. But the video had caught something I hadn't noticed at the time—the way Theo glanced down at me when I wasn't looking, the slight smirk on his face, the casual way his hand had settled on my waist like it belonged there.

My stomach did a weird little flip. Probably the wine.

I closed the app and tossed my phone aside. None of this was real. It was PR. Publicity. A perfectly staged moment meant to stir up buzz and sell books. That was the whole point.

But that look... that wasn't staged. Was it?

I shook my head, pushing the thought away. This was exactly the kind of thing Theo thrived on—creating illusions of intimacy, spinning fairy-tale connections for the masses. I wasn't going to fall for it. I was Kirsty Bennett, the queen of exits, the woman who literally wrote the book on how to leave before things got messy.

I took another sip of wine and opened my laptop, determined to distract myself. But the blinking cursor on the screen felt accusatory, like it knew I was spiralling.

My email pinged—a message from Harper.

Subject: *This. Is. Gold.*

Body: *Kirsty, the internet is obsessed. We NEED to capitalise on this. Think more events, more appearances. Maybe even a joint interview with Theo? Call me in the morning. xx H*

A joint interview? I could already imagine it—Theo flashing his charming smile, spouting poetic nonsense about soulmates, while I rolled my eyes and made sarcastic quips. It would be the ultimate opposites-attract spectacle. People would eat it up.

I sighed, closing my laptop. I should've felt excited—this was good for the book, for my career. But instead, all I felt was an odd sort of restlessness, like I was teetering on the edge of something I hadn't signed up for.

My phone buzzed again, and I picked it up without thinking.

Theo: *Hope you got home safe. Fun night. We clean up well, don't we?*

I stared at the message, surprised. It was casual, but... personal. He didn't have to text me. Harper hadn't told him to. At least, I didn't think she had.

After a moment's hesitation, I typed back.

Me: *I survived. No one tripped over any rugs this time.*

Theo: *Shame. That would've made a great headline.*

Me: *"Etiquette Coach Faceplants at Her Own Book Launch"? Yeah, super on-brand.*

Theo: *Exactly.*

I smiled despite myself, feeling the tension in my chest ease just a little. Maybe he wasn't so bad. Infuriating, sure, but not entirely unbearable.

I set my phone down again and curled deeper into the sofa, the wine warming me from the inside out. It was all a game—a PR stunt, a fleeting moment of internet fame—but part of me couldn't help wondering... what if there was more to it?

What if I was already breaking my own rules?

The next morning, I woke up to the blaring sound of my phone ringing. I fumbled around, knocking over an empty wine glass before finally grabbing it.

"Hello?" I croaked, my voice thick with sleep.

"Kirsty! You're awake. Thank God," Harper's voice came through, chipper and alarmingly energetic for what was clearly too early.

I groaned, squinting at the clock. "It's 7:30, Harper. What could possibly be this urgent?"

She barely paused. "We've had interview requests all night. *Good Morning London* wants you and Theo for a live segment tomorrow. *The Times* is writing a feature. Oh! And *Love & Life* magazine wants a joint cover shoot."

I rubbed my temples. "That escalated quickly."

"This is *huge*, Kirsty. The chemistry between you two? It's gold. People love it. We're talking serious exposure here."

I hesitated, still half-asleep. “You’re sure this isn’t... I don’t know, too much? We’re faking it, remember?”

Harper huffed. “No one’s asking you to marry the man. Just play along. Milk it for all it’s worth.”

I sighed, knowing she was right. This was the opportunity I’d been working towards. It didn’t matter if Theo’s smile had been a little too warm or if his text had made me feel something I couldn’t quite place. This was business. Nothing more.

“Fine,” I said, finally. “Set it up.”

Harper squealed. “I knew you’d come around! You’re going to be a star.”

I hung up and flopped back onto my pillow, staring at the ceiling.

A star. Right.

I just hoped I wouldn’t end up burning out before the whole thing was over.

I stayed in bed longer than I should have, staring at the ceiling, Harper’s words swirling around in my head. *Good Morning London*. A feature in *The Times*. A joint cover shoot.

This was it—the moment I’d dreamed about when I first started scribbling down ideas for *The Morning After Manual*. But now that it was happening, it didn’t feel how I’d imagined. I thought I’d feel excitement. Accomplishment. Pride.

Instead, I felt... unease.

Maybe it’s just the wine hangover, I told myself, pushing the covers off and heading to the kitchen. Coffee first, existential crisis later.

As the kettle boiled, I scrolled through my phone again. More mentions. More tags. Photos from the party, memes about me and Theo. Someone had even photoshopped a fake rom-com poster titled “*The Exit Plan*” with me and Theo front and centre, mid-argument, with the tagline “*She plans the exits. He wants forever.*”

I groaned, half-laughing, half-mortified.

This is what I signed up for. It’s working.

But that flicker of unease remained, gnawing at the edges.

I took my coffee to the sofa and pulled my laptop onto my lap, opening up my notes. There was a file titled “*Potential Next Book Ideas*”. I clicked on it, reading over the bullet points I’d jotted down weeks ago.

- 1. The Commitment Conundrum – Navigating long-term relationships with grace.**
- 2. Texting Etiquette – What to say (and not say) when dating.**
- 3. Modern Dating Myths – What we get wrong about love.**

I stared at the third idea, my mind drifting back to Theo. To the way he'd smiled when he said, *"I believe in connection. Real, lasting connection."*

It was easy to mock him. Easy to roll my eyes at his idealism. But there was something in the way he said it—a conviction I couldn't shake.

Why does it bother me so much?

My phone buzzed again, pulling me from my thoughts.

Claire: *Saw the memes. You're famous now. Are you freaking out?*

Me: *Mildly. Also, apparently, I'm doing Good Morning London with Theo tomorrow.*

Claire: *Omg! You two are killing it. The chemistry is insane.*

Me: *It's PR. You know that, right?*

Claire: *Sure. But... do you?*

I stared at her message for a while, not sure how to respond.

Before I could overthink it too much, Harper's name flashed on my screen again. I answered on the second ring.

"Just confirming," she said, all business, "you and Theo are set for the live segment tomorrow at 9 AM. They want you to talk about the book, obviously, but also about your 'philosophies on dating.'"

I rubbed my forehead. "Right. So, me advocating for graceful exits, and Theo pushing the 'soulmate' agenda."

"Exactly. Sparks will fly. The audience will love it."

I sighed. "What if we actually end up murdering each other on live TV?"

"Then I'll pitch it as a murder-mystery rom-com. Think of the headlines."

I laughed despite myself. "You're evil."

"That's why you hired me. Now, get some rest tonight. Big day tomorrow."

We hung up, and I closed my laptop, sinking deeper into the sofa cushions.

The truth was, I wasn't worried about the interview. I could hold my own. Banter was my comfort zone.

What worried me was how easily Theo got under my skin.

Because despite the staged smiles and witty comebacks, I felt something—a tension I couldn't ignore.

And I wasn't sure if I wanted to run from it... or dive straight in.

The next morning, I stood in front of my mirror, curling the last section of my hair. My nerves hummed beneath my skin, but I kept telling myself it was just another PR gig. Another step in the plan.

But when my phone buzzed again, I wasn't surprised to see his name this time.

Theo: *Hope you're ready to argue on national TV.*

Me: *Born ready.*

Theo: *Good. Because I'm not holding back.*

I smirked at the screen, my heart racing in a way I didn't want to admit.

Me: *Neither am I.*

I dropped my phone into my bag, took one last look at my reflection, and whispered to myself, "Stick to the plan, Kirsty. Stick to the plan."

But deep down, I had a sinking feeling that the plan?

It was about to go completely off the rails.