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**Down the Isle**

by *loversinfiniteness*

**Summary**

Down the Isle, a reality dating show, is roommates Jane and Tom's guilty pleasure. Under the sun of an indeterminate hot country, millions watch the contestants in their search for love. The weird twist? They're all characters from P&P, Emma, Mansfield Park and Persuasion. But this isn't a butchering of Austen: love, whether it's in bikinis or bonnets, is ever the same thing...

(A slightly unhinged Love Island AU featuring many of Austen's characters. Everyone is Wittier and less eager for romance than the real contestants on the show. NOW COMPLETE!)
Title from High School Musical, Start of Something New.

Mary is Mary Crawford, not Bennet. George is George Knightley, not Wickham, and Elliot is Mr (William) Elliot from Persuasion. Apparently Mr Elton's first name is Philip but I'm not doing that; here, he's Elton.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tom put his beer on the table, threw himself on the sofa and gave the TV an accusing look.

"I hate that we're watching this," he said. He sighed dramatically as he scrolled through Twitter. "Look, the hashtag is a horrible place."

"Don't be prejudiced," said Jane primly. "It hasn't even started yet."

He made a dubious face. "You really think I'm going to enjoy a show about the love lives of people I don't know?"

"You like Grey's Anatomy," said Jane.

"Slander," said Tom. "Grey's is a deep and thoughtful exploration of strength, suffering, tragedy, hope —"

"Nevertheless," said Jane, "Down the Isle isn't like other reality shows. The people on here aren't the dating show type. And there are psychologists and relationship experts on the production team. Anyway, stop talking. It's starting."

"I wasn't the one talking," Tom protested, but did as she said.

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Everyone loves a holiday romance. The sun is shining, you look beautiful every day, and it's the easiest thing in the world to fall in love. With that logic, it shouldn't be too hard for some lucky singles to do the same, should it? For those chosen few, it's goodbye to the office, and hello to the isle.

This is: Down the Isle.

"Hello, darlings!" screamed Yvonne Leblanc-Wu, presenter of Down the Isle. She ruffled her rose gold hair and dimpled at the camera. "Less than two hours ago, five gorgeous gents and five lovely ladies were whipped — I mean, shipped, whoops, HR is going to have my head for that — onto a gorgeous villa on a secluded isle. They have one month to win each other's hearts — and yours! — if they want to be awarded a prize of up to £50,000. So, when this is all over, who'll be walking down the aisle? Run the tape, darlings!"

"I sort of love it when she says that," said Tom.
"It does go to show how old she is," agreed Jane.

Tom snorted. "Like four ex-husbands doesn't already?"

Jane huffed. "OK, here we go. That's Charlotte."

"I'm Charlotte, I'm twenty-seven, and I work in an art gallery."

"Classy," said Tom. "She's in the wrong place."

The second intro video flashed on the screen.

"I'm Emma, I'm twenty-four, and I work in PR."

"Do we like her?" asked Tom.

Jane had watched the brief intro videos of all the contestants, and had already formed strong opinions. "Me and no one else," she said.

"My friends tell me I'm too picky. But I know I deserve the best."

Jane eyed Tom as he finished his beer. "If you can't handle this, you might as well leave now."

"It'll be easier if I'm tipsy," said Tom. Then his phone rang. "It's Pauline. I'll be back."

Jane watched "I'm Harriet, I'm twenty, and I'm a student", "Mary, twenty-seven, classical musician" and "Anne, twenty-six, doctor" without Tom, who was on the phone with his girlfriend. He came back with a bag of chocolate pinched from Jane's stash.

"What did I miss?" he asked, swinging an arm around her shoulders as he sat down and offered her an M&M.

She eyed his arm warily. "Harriet's at uni, Mary's a harpist and Anne's an doctor."

Tom whistled. "Maybe I should go on this show."

"So, what kind of guys are you into?" Charlotte asked the girls at large, when they were all settled on the patio chairs with glasses of champagne.

Emma shrugged. "Successful ones."

"Hear, hear," said Mary. "But it's so hard to find someone when you travel all the time."

"Oh? What do you do?"

"I'm the harpist at the Philharmonia," she said.

Everyone nodded and waited for someone to ask what the Philharmonia was.

Emma took up the gauntlet. "That's in London, right?"

"Technically, but God knows we don't spend much time there," said Mary. She smiled brightly. "Anyway, I'm sure I'm not as busy as Anne."

Anne blushed. "Oh, well, it's not that bad."
"Are you kidding?" said Harriet. "Being a doctor? It looks so hard on that show 24 Hours in A&E!"

Anne was about to reply when something much more exciting arrived.

"It's the boys!"

---

"I'm Will, I'm twenty-nine, and I'm a lawyer."

"He acts like one of us too," said Tom. "But if he has time to go on reality TV…"

Jane rolled her eyes. "And you have time to text me hourly updates of the pigeons outside your window."

"... Elton, twenty-five, personal trainer."

"The duality of man," said Tom.

It took the time for them to meet "George, thirty-two, accountant", "Edmund, twenty-four, civil servant" and "Elliot, twenty-three, writer, but I think of myself more as channelling creative energy out into the world" for Tom to work up the courage to finally say, during an ad break, "Pauline and I just broke up."

"Oh," said Jane. There was a silence, interrupted by an advert; she rushed to mute the TV. "I'm sorry. I know you really liked her."

Tom shrugged. "It's fine."

"Are you sure? Do you want to talk about it?"

"Nah," he said. "I knew it was going to happen."

She waited for him to say more, but he didn't. "OK," she said. "You know I'm always here if you need me."

---

The boys made their way over to the kitchen where the girls were sat, and the girls stood up for hugs and cheek kisses. Elton could be heard introducing herself to everyone; Harriet couldn't be heard at all.

George, having circled the room enough times, finally made his way towards the Chinese girl in the green dress.

"Emma? Hi, I'm George."

"George," repeated Emma, with considerably less enthusiasm. She leaned up to kiss his cheek anyway. "It's nice to meet you."

On the other side of the room, Mary introduced herself to Edmund.

"I like your necklace," he said.

Mary touched the expensive chain and wondered if she should tell him where she'd got it.

He looked as if he could handle it. "Thanks, it was from my ex-girlfriend."
To Edmund's credit, he recovered from his look of surprise quickly.

"Women are better at gifting than men," Mary continued. "But in their defence, men know they're bad."

"I know I do," said Edmund. He paused, and said in a rush of words: "You'll have to help me get better."

Mary smiled.

Then came the amplified sound of Yvonne Leblanc-Wu's high heels clattering across the patio floor.

"Darlings!" she said, striding towards the front. The contestants formed a semi-circle around her. "I'm terribly sorry, but I'm afraid I must interrupt your getting to know each other. It's time."

She paused.

"Time for the first coupling of this year's Down the Isle!" she announced, and spread her arms to the heavens. She lowered them before continuing. "Now, boys, if you'll line up on the places behind you."

"Girls!" she said. "It's time for you to choose. We all know that to be successful on Down the Isle, you need to win the public's love… and the easiest way to do that is to win someone else's. Trust me, I've done it four times. Now, one by one, I'll ask each of you to choose which boy you'd like to start your journey with. You can choose a boy who's already been chosen, but beware! There's only space for two in the bed — " She paused, raised her Greta Garbo eyebrows and said in a stage whisper: "I know where I've heard that before." With a dazzling smile, she continued. "Any boy with more than one girl will have to choose between them, and the castoffs will be left to pair together. Capiche?"

In the end, it was simple. Mary chose Edmund, Charlotte chose Will, Anne chose Elliot, Emma chose Elton, and Harriet chose George.

"You all look very comfortable," said Yvonne, once they had all sat down in their respective couples. She zeroed her gaze on Mary, whose hand was on Edmund's thigh. "Especially Mary."

Mary's response was to kiss Edmund in front of the whole villa. Everybody laughed, and when Edmund's face emerged with a sheepish smile the laughter bubbled up. The atmosphere was comfortable; there hadn't been any conflict over the couples; and Yvonne's double entendres and suggestive humour were familiar to everyone. They all felt relaxed and excited. It was going to be an unforgettable summer.

"What's everyone laughing about?" came a new voice.

Yvonne looked smug as a tall, olive-skinned brunette strode into the villa.

"You all look very comfortable," she repeated, "so I brought in something to spice things up. That didn't work with my last husband, but anyway — everyone, meet Caroline. By the end of tomorrow, she'll be choosing a boy to steal from one of you. Good luck!"

And then she left in a blaze of white sequined pantsuit and purple feather boa.

Mary was the first girl to make nice to Caroline, but by this point Caroline had already spoken to all
of the boys, so the damage had effectively already started.

"Caroline? Hi, I'm Mary. I'm coupled up with Edmund."

"Edmund…" she made an exaggerated motion of trying to remember who he was. "Oh, right."

Mary laughed. "Not the guy you're interested in?"

Caroline smiled. "Not yet," she said.

"Not ever," Mary agreed, still smiling.

Caroline's smile wavered.

Mary tilted her head. "So, tell me who you're into, and I'll tell you all about them."

"Oh, thanks so much. I like the look of the tall one in the grey shirt… Will, I think…"

"So," said Jane, as the credits rolled. "George is crushed, Edmund's delighted — "

"What the hell was Emma thinking in choosing Elton?" demanded Tom.

Jane snorted and folded her throw neatly. "Yes, what was she thinking by picking a hot personal trainer over a stuffy accountant?"

"I like George," said Tom. "What is he, thirty? He's like the Ken Clarke of the group."

"MPs on Down the Isle?"

"You'd call it Down the Isle: Politician Edition."

Jane smiled triumphantly. "I knew you'd like this show."

Chapter End Notes

Now that you've made it this far, here's some background and some reassurances...
- Where's Lizzy? Trust me, she's on her way.
- This was a weird chapter because of merging the TV frame into text. But the ones from here on out should be less choppy and have less of Jane and Tom. Unless of course you want them.
- Yvonne is inspired by four YouTube clips of Joan Rivers, Julia Quinn's Lady Danbury and James's mum on The Next Step. If you knew those two last references, you're my soulmate.
- Hopefully you're prepared for this to significantly deviate from respective canons, though it follows the general romantic progression for the main ships.

Please do leave a comment if you'd like, hit me up on Tumblr, and badger me with questions! I think I'm going to update a few times a week so keep your eyes peeled!
I Think You Need a New One

Chapter Notes

I should explain that they all sleep in the same room but each couple shares a bed, like on Love Island. Anyway, I'm glad you're back for more, and enjoy this frequent upload schedule while it lasts - because it won't. Title from Avril Lavigne, 'Girlfriend'.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Previously on Down the Isle…

Yesterday, eleven sexy singles arrived on the isle to pair up together… all except one. Gentlemanly George is with shy girl Harriet, go-getter Emma is with fitness-freak Elton, sophisticated Mary is with straight-laced Edmund, Doctor Anne is with energy-channeling Elliot, and art-lover Charlotte is with lawyer Will. But last night's new arrival, Caroline, is about to make things much more exciting…

"It's not that I like it," lied Tom, who had spent two hours that day absent-mindedly wondering whether Will would choose Charlotte or Caroline. "It just gets in your head. Like a parasite."

"A parasite," repeated Jane, motioning for Tom to scoot along the sofa. She sat down and made herself comfortable. "Admit it, Lefroy. You're a Down the Isle fanatic."

"I am not."

"Oh, really?" Jane snatched up the remote. "All right, let's see what else is on tonight… ooh, a documentary about Napoleon… a generic American sitcom… forty-five minutes of Clueless…"

"You're bluffing," said Tom.

"Does it look like I'm bluffing?" she asked as she watched Cher Horowitz descend the stairs in Calvin Klein.

Tom decided to dismount his high horse. "Fine. I'm a Down the Isle fanatic."

Jane smiled and switched channels.

As the sun settled high in the sky, different groups clustered together to discuss last night's events. Over in the kitchen, Emma sipped her avocado smoothie and leaned forward to whisper to Harriet.

"So?" she said. "How's George?"

Harriet blushed. "Oh! He's really nice."

"Nice," repeated Emma. "You two were up for ages. Don't tell me you were just talking."

"We were!" protested Harriet. She giggled into her pancakes. "We do like each other, but we're
taking it slow. He's a lot older than me."

"Oh, yeah, sure," said Emma breezily.

"How about you and Elton?" asked Harriet. "He seems really into you."

"I guess," said Emma. They looked over to the outdoor gym. He was doing weights as he talked to Elliot and Will, who were not. He saw Emma and Harriet look his way, and waved.

Emma sighed and waved back.

"She hates him," said Tom.

Edmund adjusted the collar of his shirt one last time before making his way downstairs, to the room where he saw Mary just ten minutes ago. He stopped in the doorway disappointed, when he saw she wasn't there. Elton was, though, towelling off after his workout.

"Elton! Have you seen Mary?"

A slow smile spread across Elton's face and he punched Edmund in the shoulder. "Good on you, mate."

"What?"

"We all heard you last night," he said, shit-eating grin still present. He cleared his throat. "Ohhh — mmm — " He adjusted his pitch to that of a woman's — "Shh, do you want everyone to hear — "

Edmund blushed fiercely. "Does everyone know?"

"Mate," said Elton, clapping him on the back. "Embrace it. You hooked up!"

"Well, we didn't exactly do it," mumbled Edmund.

"There's always tonight — oh, hey!" Elton squeaked. Edmund turned to see who'd just walked in.

"Mary," he said warmly.

"I'll just go," said Elton, and ran out.

"Good morning," said Mary, moving into the room.

"Good morning," said Edmund.

She stopped in front of him and smiled. "Talking about me?"

"Um," said Edmund. "Yes, but not in an unflattering way — that was all Elton — "

She laughed and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Edmund, stop thinking so much." She shrugged. "It's simple. I like you."

Then she walked out as gracefully as she walked in, and left Edmund's mind boggling even more than before.
"Good morning!" came the screeching tones of Yvonne Leblanc-Wu. Gathered by the pool chairs were all eleven contestants. "I hope you had a comfortable first night. Did you, Edmund?"

Edmund stammered out a reply, and George clapped his shoulder.

"Well done, Mary!" said Yvonne. Someone whistled; probably Elton. "But anyway: Caroline, as the only contestant not in a couple, your time on the isle is in jeopardy."

Intakes of breath.

"This afternoon, you'll be able to go on dates with any two boys you pick. This evening, you will choose a boy to steal from another girl. But it's not as simple as that — whichever boy you choose must agree to be stolen. We can't have the men acting helpless, now, can we? He'll choose between you and the girl he's already with. Whichever one he doesn't choose will, unfortunately, be leaving the isle. Capiche?"

"So that already rules out Edmund and Elton," said Jane. She batted Tom's hand away from her bowl of crisps. "Get your own."

"You're so cruel. I'm going through a break up, you know. You should be nicer."

Jane studied him. "You don't seem very sad."

"I have a lot going on inside," said Tom airily. "But anyway."

"Yes, anyway," said Jane. "So there's Will, Elliot and George."

"Who's Elliot?"

"The hipster," said Jane.

"Is he? He doesn't wear glasses."

"No," said Jane, "but he's a writer who works in a coffee shop, and he said that hipster thing about Radiohead."

"You're a writer," Tom pointed out.

Jane sighed heavily. "And I'd be so much happier if I weren't."

"So, Caroline, who are you going to pick for your dates?"

Caroline was sitting on the patio with Mary and Emma, who felt safe enough in their couples to fraternise with her. Further away were Anne, Harriet and Charlotte, who did not.

"Mm, I like the look of Elton," said Caroline.

Emma froze.

"Kidding!" said Caroline. "Babe, he's stunning, but you can keep him."

Emma smiled acidly. "Thanks."
"So, there's definitely Will," said Caroline. "He's fucking hot, and always acts like he's in control. I like that in a man."

No one said anything, because both Mary and Emma recalled the awkwardness at breakfast when Caroline had tried to tease Will, and he'd responded by smiling thinly and talking to George.

"What about George?" said Mary. "He's very nice. And successful," she added.

Caroline began replaiting her hair. "He's probably my second choice, but I don't know. I get a bit of a boring vibe."

"He isn't boring," said Mary. "Oh, come on," she said, when both Emma and Caroline gave her doubtful looks. "Just because he's an accountant."

Caroline wasn't really paying attention, because at that moment she spied that Will was alone. She stood up. "Here's my chance, ladies."

"Good luck!" they said. Once she was gone, Mary leaned over to whisper to Emma. "The poor man."

Will knew Caroline would be coming over the second George left him, and wondered if solidarity meant anything to these people.

"Hi, Will," she said. "Care to go on a date with me?"

"Of course," he said politely. Half an hour later, they were taking their seats at a low-effort picnic spread a few minutes away from the main villa.

"So how are you finding it here?" he asked.

"Good, good," said Caroline. "Only… I've got a hard decision to make and I have to step on people's toes." She shrugged. "I feel like everyone hates me, you know?"

Will did know. "You're in a tricky position," he said.

"So you'll help me?" said Caroline. She laughed at the shocked look on his face. "Or… just think about it," she said, and patted his hand.

Charlotte found him after Will returned from his date. It had gone a lot better than he'd expected, and now he was in the awkward position of having to plan for contingencies whilst pretending that everything was still the same.

"Hey," she said, sitting down.

"Hey."

"So… Caroline, huh?"

"Caroline."

Charlotte shrugged. "I guess you just have to go with your heart."

Will looked uneasy even behind his expensive sunglasses. "Two days isn't a lot of time to get to know a person."
Charlotte smiled levelly. "So you're on a deadline. Think fast." She gave him a condescending pat on the shoulder as she left — which probably wasn't helping her already low chances of staying on the isle, she thought, but she didn't care.

She went over to where Emma and Anne were sat on a corner of the lawn.

"He's going to pick her," she said, flopping down on a bean bag.

"Don't say that," said Emma fiercely. "She's got nothing on you."

"Emma's right," agreed Anne. "You don't know what Will's thinking."

"Oh, I have a feeling," said Charlotte. "But I guess it's the right thing for him to do. She likes him, and I... don't."

Emma looked furious. "That's so selfish."

"This is kind of a selfish game," said Charlotte.

Emma drew a breath and sighed. "I know."

"You alright there?"

Emma looked up from her position, which was an unfortunate crouch in front of the fridge.

She straightened up. "Oh, hi, George."

"Hi," he said. "Do you want some help with dinner?"

"Sure," said Emma, even though she really didn't and would've preferred to do it alone. "Can you chop the onions?"

"You're going to make me cry," he deadpanned, but he reached for a chopping board anyway.

"Maybe," said Emma nonchalantly.

He laughed and started peeling off the layers.

"So how are you finding all of this?" he asked politely.

"Well," Emma began, "I'm pissed off on someone else's behalf, but..."

He nodded. "But for you personally?"

"A bit boring," she confessed.

He seemed delighted that she'd said that.

"It's because you've picked the wrong person," he said.

They looked over to where Elton was talking to Anne, and had been for the last fifteen minutes. Anne, bless her, was still listening.

Emma gave George an unimpressed look. "Thanks, as if I hadn't already figured that out."

"But he likes you," said George. "I talked to him earlier and he was full of compliments."
Emma sighed and sliced tomatoes with an unnecessary vigour. "You probably think I'm a bitch."

"Not at all," said George. "You can't help how you feel."

He leaned over to see what she was doing. "What are we making?"

"Egg and tomato soup," she said. "It's a Chinese staple."

"Sounds lovely," said George.

She whisked the eggs, again with probably too much vigour, and that blocked off conversation for a while.

"So how are you and Harriet?" she asked. "Oh! And how was your date with Caroline?"

"Caroline's not going to pick me," said George. "And Harriet... er, yeah. She's very sweet."

Emma was turned away from him, so he didn't see the surprised face she made. "I think she really likes you," she said, reaching for a saucepan. She turned round to put it on the hob. "Seriously," she added emphatically.

"It's only been two days," he said.

"Don't give me that shit," said Emma, with full knowledge that she had no right to be so outspoken. "I mean," she said, brandishing chopsticks and tempering her tone, "it's taken me less than two days to realise Elton and I won't work. You either have feelings for someone or you don't."

George laughed. "I should come to you for advice more often."

"You should," agreed Emma, relieved at his good humour in the face of her prickliness. "I always know what to do."

Jane lowered her wine glass. "He loves her," she declared.

"Already?" asked Tom.

She waved a hand. "Alright, he will," she said with confidence. "But he's going to play the long game."

At dinner, Will accepted another helping of Emma's egg and tomato soup, which was ladled out by an enthusiastic George.

"You're really going to pick her?" George asked Will, when both Charlotte and Caroline were stuck in conversations of their own.

Will shrugged. "Neither of them are the one. It doesn't really matter."

"To you," said George, not without some severity. "To them, it's their future on this show."

Everyone stood in their pairs around the fire pit and waited for Yvonne to swan in, which she did, wearing a fearfully constructed lime green dress and a diamante tiara.
"Darlings!" she said. "How was your second day in paradise? Anne?"

Anne looked unprepared to have been asked a question. "Er, fine," she said. "Good. I mean, great!"

Yvonne's laugh was an ear-splitting trill. "What a shame it might not be for much longer! Caroline, darling, come stand next to me."

Caroline stood up, patted her hair, and strode towards Yvonne.

"So," said Yvonne. "Which one of these lucky men are you going to grace with your presence in their bed?" She raised a significant eyebrow. "Not to pre-empt anything, of course."

Caroline smiled. "Well, Yvonne, it's really an easy choice."

"Dangerous words, darling. That's what I said about my second marriage, and what a mistake that was."

Caroline smiled, and slowly walked over to Will.

The other couples breathed a sigh of relief and took their seats around the fire pit.

Yvonne smiled. "Will, you heartbreaker. Now you must decide which of these lovely ladies to send home." She tilted her head. "You could stick with Charlotte, or hop beds over to Caroline. Which will it be?"

"Charlotte is obviously the better person," said Tom.

"Not that Will cares," said Jane. "Caroline likes him more, so it's the smart thing to pick her. And she's more attractive. Any other man would do the same."

"Not all guys are like that," protested Tom.

"No?" said Jane. "Then how do you explain half your exes?"

Tom stopped talking.

"I choose Caroline," said Will, and the camera zoomed in on Charlotte's brave smile. Yvonne made pitying sounds and hugged her, careful not to crush the folds of her dress.

"So sorry, Charlotte," said Yvonne. "Everyone here will miss you dreadfully."

Harriet was crying as well. Anne was hugging Charlotte, George was hugging Harriet, and Emma looked almost angry.

"Emma, don't," said Mary, who saw that Emma was glaring daggers at Will. She grabbed her arm to hold her back. "It wasn't your decision to make."

"I'd have made it better if it was," said Emma, but at least she held back from marching over and yelling at Will on national TV. "Can't he see how wonderful Charlotte is? And how much of a pill Caroline is?"

Mary was about to give a reasonable response when she saw Elton coming over, and decided that reason was not going to flourish in this conversation.
"Hey, what's going on here?" asked Elton. "Emma, babe, you alright?"

"Fine," Emma gritted out. "If you want to comfort someone, Charlotte probably needs it more than I do."

Elton looked confused, as anyone would be when faced with Emma in a mood. "But I'm in a couple with you," he said.

Mary intervened before Emma truly lost her temper and said something regrettable. "Elton, I think she needs some girl time. You understand."

"Oh, sure," said Elton. "I'm here if you need me, Emma."

"God," said Emma, when he left. "No, I can't think about what a terrible person I am right now. Let's just focus on Charlotte."

"Will's giving lawyers a bad name," said Tom, as Jane dug under the sofa for the remote to turn the TV off.

Jane snorted. "Like you don't have one already."

"Dumping Charlotte for Caroline? I mean, she is hot…"

"You've just proved my point."

"But," said Tom loudly, "Charlotte has the better personality, Caroline seems like a lot to handle, and men are pigs."

Jane patted his shoulder. "Not all of them."

"I'm the exception, right?"

"Not you," she said serenely. "My brother Henry."

Chapter End Notes

WHERE'S LIZZY? I hear you scream. Well, hear me scream back: JUST WAIT. Meanwhile, let's celebrate the screen time of Mary Crawford, criminally underrated Austen character and innuendo extraordinaire. I have a lot to say about Mansfield Park and boy am I going to get it all out in this fic.
Walk Into the Club Like

Chapter Notes

If you don't know where the title's from, you're about to look it up and have the best 3 minutes 52 seconds of your life.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Previously on Down the Isle…

We said goodbye to Charlotte when Will chose new girl Caroline over her. Elsewhere, Emma's in a couple with Elton, but it's pretty clear he likes her a lot more than she likes him. Mary and Edmund, on the other hand, are getting to know each other very well. Welcome to another day in paradise…

"Made it," said Tom, skidding into the doorway of their living room, wearing Hello Kitty pyjamas and a rakish grin. He flopped onto the sofa and as her back was turned, stole a handful of Jane’s yogurt-covered raisins.

"I saw that," she said.

He popped one into his mouth. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You are a child," said Jane, and faced the TV.

"Good night?" asked Emma, accompanying Mary as she sat in front of the mirror and did her hair. Most of the group had gone outside for breakfast, but they’d lingered upstairs.

"I hate you," said Mary, but she was grinning. "I suppose it was pretty good."

Emma paused in adjusting her microphone to give Mary a soft kick. "Is that all? Come on. How do you feel?"

"Well, if you won't stop badgering me about it…" She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "It's odd because he isn't my type. At all."

"So why did you pick him?"

"I thought he was cute," said Mary helplessly. "And now I'm — ugh. Fine. I like him."

Anne walked in. "What's going on?"

"Mary's spilling her guts about Edmund," said Emma. "Come join us!"

"Oh, I'd love to," said Anne. "But I just came up to say that breakfast is ready."

Emma sighed and hauled Mary up. "Later," she said, narrowing her eyes.

"Later," grinned Mary.
Yvonne arrived after breakfast, postponing Emma's grilling of Mary on her situation with Edmund for another time.

"Yoo-hoo!" she said, and patted the top of her hair, done up in a pompadour. "I'm back! Today, two of you are getting a very nice surprise." She blinked owlishly and said, "Goodness, that sentence gives me déjà vu to a dinner party I hosted last week."

During the ensuing laughter, she turned to Edmund.

"Edmund, darling. How would you and Mary like to go on a first date? Outside the villa?"

"I can't wait to see what kind of hell the producers are going to cook up for them in the next few days," said Tom.

Jane rolled her eyes. "As if a relationship needs producers to fail. It can self-destruct all on its own."

Tom reached for more sour cream and chive dip. "You're so cynical," he said affectionately.

"Wary through experience," she corrected. "But I think you're right. Edmund and Mary are the only —"

"What's this? The great Jane Austen admitting that I, Tom Lefroy, am right? The skies will tremble, the gods will stare —"

"Shut it," said Jane, and elbowed him hard enough to make her point.

"So," said Edmund, once they were out of the villa.

"So," said Mary.

She said it like a challenge. Edmund was beginning to learn that almost everything with Mary was a challenge. And he found that he liked it.

"It's nice to be away from everyone," he said.

"It is," she agreed. She leaned in closer. "So there's no need to talk as if everyone's listening."

Edmund almost choked on air. " Meaning?"

"Whatever you want it to," she said, and smiled teasingly. "How far away is this thing?"

"Five minutes," said Edmund quickly. Straightforward questions he could do. "Why? Do you need to go back?"

"No, it's just that these are definitely the wrong shoes for this hike." They looked down at the rocky dirt road, and at Mary's gold strappy sandals.

"You can borrow mine," said Edmund.

Mary raised an eyebrow. "And make you go in socks? No. I do want you to like me."

Edmund blushed. "I already do."
"That's sweet, darling."

They kept walking and Mary waited patiently for the seeds she'd planted to sprout.

"Wait," said Edmund. "I'll carry you."

Mary grinned and hopped on his back. "There's only three minutes left," she said into his ear.

"I'll walk slowly," said Edmund, and turned his head round to kiss her.

Harriet, who'd just had the most platonic night of her life despite spending it in bed with a very attractive man, needed advice. She would've asked Mary, who seemed the most knowledgeable and easy to talk to of the girls, but since she was on her date with Edmund, she settled for Emma. She found Emma with Anne… and George.

"Oh," she said. "Hi!" she added, with forced brightness. She met George's eye and blushed. "Sorry, I thought that…"

Anne — kind, intelligent Anne — immediately saw what was going on. "Harriet!" she said. "I was just about to come and find you. I told you, I'm a horrible diver, but if you say anyone can do it…"

"Diving? Oh! Right, of course. The pool! Let's go to the pool. I'll see you guys later!"

The pool was on the other side of the villa. George and Emma wouldn't even be able to see them. Harriet was a bit nervous leaving George with Emma, who was beautiful and confident and all the things Harriet was not, but she trusted that George wouldn't do anything to make her look stupid.

They stopped by the pool. "Did you want to talk about George?" Anne asked, dipping her feet in the water as she sat down.

"Are we not going to get in?" asked Harriet.

Anne cast an unenthusiastic glance at the water. "I didn't lie when I said I was a horrible diver," she said. "I hate swimming. But if you think our lie needs more bolstering…"

"No, it's fine!" said Harriet. She took a deep breath. "Yes, I wanted to talk about George."

"I thought so," said Anne kindly. "So what's going on?"

"Nothing," said Harriet, trying not to sound as miserable as she felt. "He hasn't even kissed me yet! Elliot's kissed you, right? I've seen Elton kiss Emma, and everyone knows Edmund and Mary have gone further, and I bet Will and Caroline have kissed even though they've only been together twelve hours — "

"Harriet. Slow down."


Anne was alarmed by this declaration, but told herself to approach it with reason.

"Do you think, perhaps," she said slowly, "that you two are in different stages of your life? Maybe George really wants to settle down, but you're looking for something more fun?"
"I think settling down would be fun if it was with the right person," said Harriet.

"I understand what you're saying," said Anne. "But I just mean maybe George thinks he's..." She stopped and decided there wasn't a gentle way to put it. "Basically, that he's too old for you."

"Oh," said Harriet. "He doesn't think I'm mature enough?"

Anne wondered if they were somehow related, since both Harriet and Anne's family possessed the knack of interpreting her words to give them the worst meaning possible. "No, of course not," she said smoothly. "But maybe it's just that he doesn't want you to tie yourself to something so long term."

"But that's why I'm here! I'm looking for something long term. The guys at uni are all about hookups, and I'm sick of it."

Anne wondered how the thought process began there and ended up at 'I'll sign up for a reality dating show'. Admittedly her thought process had also ended up in the same place, but in her case it had begun with 'I'm in a dating rut because I'm stuck in the past and I keep using life as an excuse against romantic possibilities, so I need to throw myself into something so intense I can't hide away any longer'.

Clearly, she and Harriet were both as insane as each other.

She fell back on the golden piece of dating advice. "I think you should talk to George about this," she said. "Only he can tell you what he's thinking, and you'll feel a lot better talking it out with him."

"Of course you're right," said Harriet. "I keep forgetting we're supposed to do that. It's so weird that everyone here is so honest with their feelings!"

Everyone except Anne, it seemed.

"I love lemon tarts," said Mary, leaning against Edmund's shoulder as she sipped tea. "They're the only thing I remember about Mum. Apparently she made them all the time."

"Oh," said Edmund. He swallowed thickly. "I'm sorry. What happened to her?"

"Car accident," said Mary, shrugging. "I was three. She was a single mother, so afterwards my brother and I went to live with our wild uncle."

Edmund felt he had to say something about his own family too: uninteresting, repressed middle class family though it was. "I have a brother too," he said. "Tom. He's older. And two sisters."

Mary smiled. "Would I like them?"

"Um," said Edmund. "Well, they'd definitely like you."

Mary laughed. "What about me?"

Edmund shrugged. "You're very sophisticated. Which is good, because Maria's always tried to act five years older than she really is." He paused, then said: "But now that she's almost thirty, she might start doing the opposite."

"Edmund Bertram!" exclaimed Mary, setting her teacup on the table. "That's the bitchiest thing I've ever heard you say."
He grinned self-consciously. "My family brings it out of me."

Mary continued to look at him in a new light. "I'd like to see you around them," she said daringly.

He blinked. "Is this a test?"

Mary laughed her bright, musical laugh. "Only if you want it to be." She checked her watch and laid her head on his shoulder. "But I've got bad news."

"Oh?"

"We have to go back."

"You're right, that is bad."

She laughed. "At least I get a piggyback ride."

"We're back!" said Mary, still clinging onto Edmund's back as they arrived in the villa. She jumped down and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "I'll find you later, darling."

Edmund wandered over to where the boys sat at the kitchen table.

"Edmund!" said Elton. "Dude, how was it?"

"Amazing," said Edmund, who was so far in the fields of happiness he'd abandoned any pre-planned pretence of acting cool. "You know when you're with someone and everything in the moment feels sharper? Like you're supposed to remember everything about it forever?"

"'tis richer than an argosy of pearls," said Elliot knowledgeably.

Edmund smiled ruefully.

"So you really like her?" said Elton.

"I think I do," said Edmund. "I've never — I don't know. I've never felt like this before."

"Aw, look at him," said Elton. "He's blushing!"

George intervened. "Alright, don't embarrass the guy."

Mary, who was with the girls, looked over at that moment and waved. Edmund's smile grew even wider as he waved back.

"I feel like I've always wanted to know her," he said softly.

"Jesus," said Will, but it wasn't quite with the acerbity one might've expected from him. He downed his glass of plum and blackberry juice. "What I'd do for something stronger."

"Enough about me," said Mary. The girls had broken off into smaller groups after she'd been persuaded to divulge all the details of her date with Edmund, and now she was inside with Anne, who had very strict rules about the application of suncream. "I want to hear how you are," she continued. "How's Elliot?"

"Oh," said Anne deflatedly. "Well, he's, er…"
"Niche musical opinions and unfinished screenplays masquerading as a personality?"

"Mary!" said Anne. "That's harsh."

"Maybe,\n" said Mary. "I don't know him well enough to say."

"Well, I think I do," said Anne. "And he's not awful. There just isn't a connection between us."

"Ah," said Mary.

"But he's trying really hard," added Anne. "I feel bad because I know I'm not trying as hard as he is."

Mary frowned. "No, don't think like that. Anne, love, no one deserves you just because they're trying."

"I know that," said Anne wearily. "It's just — it's a thing people have accused me of in the past, so I'm a little hypersensitive about it."

"Well, they were a bunch of dicks," said Mary dismissively, in the way of a friend giving unconditional support. She sighed. "Hasn't it been half an hour yet? How long does it really take for suncream to sink in?"

"Not yet," said Anne, checking her watch. She couldn't stop thinking about what Mary had said so confidently, that he was out of line for accusing her of not trying all those years ago. But Mary hadn't known Anne then. Anne could admit to herself, and had admitted to herself for years and years, that he was right. She should've tried harder.

"So, Will," said Caroline, languishing on a deckchair. "What made you sign up for this show?"

"My sister," said Will. "She thought it would be good for me and then it became a running joke, until it wasn't a joke any more."

"Arguably it still is," said George, piping up to remind Caroline that he was still there.

Caroline shot him a look, which he returned with a friendly smile. He knew she didn't want him here, but after an agonising morning of listening to Will toe the line between being an arsehole and being honest, George was quite sure that Will needed all the support he could get.

"I mean, for a whole week after I told him I was coming on here, my brother laughed whenever he saw me," said George. "I don't think he'll ever stop finding it funny."

Caroline smiled acidly. "Maybe he was just laughing at you."

George carried on, undaunted. "So what do you guys think of Edmund and Mary? Dream couple, right?"

Caroline rolled her eyes. "Yeah, right. It's been, what, three days? If you get handsy with a guy before even the first date — look, I'm sorry, but there's a word for that kind of girl."

"Sexually liberated?"

"You are funny," said Caroline. She cast another glance at Will, met George's pleasant smile with a false one of her own, and left.
Will breathed a sigh of relief.

"It's your fault, you know," said George. "I told you to pick Charlotte."

"Stop fucking saying that," said Will.

George sighed. "Remind us why you picked Caroline again?"

Will dropped his head over the back of the deckchair. "She was hot, liked me more than Charlotte did, and was more interesting than her."

George grinned. "Now your choice has come back to bite you in the arse. That's karma," he said sagely. "And I bet Charlotte met the love of her life on the plane journey back home."

"You think anyone is going to meet the love of their life in here?"

"Sure," said George, his amiable smile dropping slightly. "This show's statistics are very convincing."

"OK, numbers guy," said Will. "You can stick your optimism up your — "

Yvonne made yet another appearance after dinner, a whirlwind of rhinestones crashing into a calm atmosphere of people mingling and chatting about nothing in particular.

"Evening, darlings," she said. She walked through the crowd slowly, pausing to smile up at Elton, Elliot and Will, respectively. "You know, I've been thinking… this is such a big villa. Surely there's room for one more?"

Everyone turned to the villa entrance, where a long-haired Indian girl was approaching. The girl looked up and smiled. By divine coincidence, the camera moved to catch Will's face, and the very clearly enunciated four letter word that came from his mouth when he saw her walk in.

"Darlings," said Yvonne, "meet Lizzy."

Lizzy smiled until she saw Will. "You," she said, with a certain restrained anger. "You made my friend cry."

Tom imagined how smug the producers must have felt to edit the episode to end on that fucking bombshell of a cliffhanger, and wanted to punch something.

He tried to regain hold of both his feelings and dignity. "So," he said. "I wonder who the friend is?"

"Probably Charlotte," said Jane, who looked tired as she sat curled up next to him. She yawned. "Down the Isle has friends and family contestants all the time."

"Well, obviously he's taken by her," said Tom. He made a show of seeming bored. "So what's going to happen? He likes her, she doesn't like him until she does, they win the show?"

"As if," said Jane, who might have been tired, but still had enough energy to argue with him. "It's the getting to the love that's the exciting part."

"Only in the world of books, where the story ends whenever the author wants it to," said Tom. "In the real world, if someone likes someone, they should just say it. No dance, no complications."
"That wouldn't work if the other person doesn't feel the same way," said Jane. She yawned again and patted his arm. "Alright, I'm off to bed. Goodnight."

Tom watched her walk out of the room and frowned, before picking himself off the sofa and trudging down the hallway too.

Chapter End Notes

I told you to wait, didn't I? And the thing Elton says about Edmund is from one of John Keats's pining letters to Fanny Brawne.

PS I love comments! If you'd like to leave them please do! Predictions, speculation, rants, gossip — all welcome!
Previously on Down the Isle…

Lovebirds Mary and Edmund are getting closer and closer every day. But things aren't so hot for the rest of the contestants, especially Will, who two days ago chose Caroline and sent Charlotte packing. But has his wandering eye settled again on someone else? New girl Lizzy has just entered the villa and she has some serious words for Will.

"Maybe she secretly fancies Will," said Tom, cracking walnuts over the sound of the intro. "She has to, right? I'm a straight man and I'd go to town on him."

Jane rolled her eyes. "But women care about personality."

Tom assumed a shocked look. "Are you saying I'm shallow?"

"Yes, and so is the list of your ex-girlfriends."

"I've reformed," said Tom regally.

They settled into a comfortable silence as the episode began.

"You made my friend cry," said Lizzy, looking straight at Will. "So I don't like you."

Stunned silence hit the villa.

"Are you here just to fight her cause?" Will asked lazily.

"Will," said George, who was at his side. "Have a care."

Lizzy smiled at him. "Thank you, I'm fine." She turned back to Will. "Of course not. I just want you to know what I think of you."

Will nodded coolly. "So we understand each other."

And that was that, for now.

"Charlotte is probably really mad that I did that," said Lizzy later that evening. "But she can't text me here, so I'm free from her being reasonable."

"You won't be free from Anne being reasonable though," said Mary, grinning at their keeper. "She
"And healthy," added Emma. "She told us all about skin cancer and then said if we listened to her we could — what was it?"

"Reduce your chances of melanoma by up to 73%," said Anne, glaring good-naturedly at her friends. "It's really simple to do, but no one does it."

"I'll know to come to you about random aches and pains," said Lizzy smilingly. "All right, but I have to ask. What's really going on in here? Who actually likes who?"

Emma, Mary and Anne exchanged looks.

"Well," said Emma. "We're sitting here with you because we don't like the guys we're with."

"Speak for yourself," said Mary airily.

"Don't remind me," said Emma. She turned back to Lizzy. "Mary, on the other hand, is in the world's happiest quasi-relationship with Edmund."

"Oh, that's cute," said Lizzy. She wrinkled her nose. "And annoying."

Everyone laughed.

"So what's the deal with you and Elton?" asked Lizzy.

Emma sighed. "I mean… he's fine. But I'm not mad about him, and I think he's starting to clue up. If you want him you're welcome to him."

Lizzy laughed. "Ah, it's all beginning to make sense — the other girls aren't here because they're out there guarding their men from me?"

"Exactly," said Anne. "But like Emma, I wouldn't even mind my man being stolen. We're just not compatible."

"Right," said Lizzy. "Well, my type is emotionally unavailable boys whom I think I can help open up. Then obviously I can't… anyway, I'm here to force myself away from them."

"Oh, you won't want Elliot then," said Emma. "He's the kind of guy who thinks he can help you."

"Prick," said Mary cheerfully.

Tom had sunk to heckling the TV. "Stop delaying the Will/Lizzy drama, you cowards."

"I think it's the opposite of cowardly," said Jane sensibly. She sipped her wine and gave him an imperious look that might have been ironic. "They're provoking your wrath."

Tom took a long swig of his beer. "I can't be sensible when watching this goddamn show."

"Aren't you going to speak to Lizzy tonight?" asked George. He and Will were keeping a distance from the rest of the group so they could speak openly. "Privately, to clear the air?"

Will frowned. "And risk making Caroline so angry she cuts my throat in my sleep? No."
George looked almost hurt. "Don't you trust me to defend you against someone cutting your throat?"

"Not when you're asleep," said Will. "I've heard how loudly you snore. You'd sleep through an earthquake."

And so the sun rose the next morning well in time to see, early before breakfast, the first proper interaction between Lizzy and Will.

"What are you doing?" asked Will, appearing in the kitchen.

Lizzy looked up and found that she had to crane her head to speak to him. "Mixing orange and apple juice," she said, just to be annoying. Will's 'what are you doing' was very obviously a veiled 'why are you doing that'. But she didn't feel very kindly towards him. He hadn't spoken to her after their strained exchange when she arrived yesterday; evidently he didn't care enough to make her feel comfortable.

"I can see that," said Will tersely. "Why?"

"Tastes good," said Lizzy. She closed the fridge door and held out her glass to him. "Do you want to try?"

Will looked at it disdainfully. "You know I don't," he said.

"Then why did you ask?"

Will didn't relish confessing it was because he wanted to talk to her but hadn't had anything to say planned, thus he had blurted out the first thing in his head. So he settled for: "I don't know. I wish I hadn't."

Then he left.

"Good morning!" said Mary, sauntering into the kitchen.

Lizzy checked her watch as Anne laughed. "It's half past eleven," said Lizzy.

"Oh, who cares?" said Mary, dropping into the seat next to Lizzy. "Time is insignificant."

Lizzy and Anne exchanged glances.

"You seem happy," said Lizzy.

Mary smiled. "Who couldn't be on a day like this? The sun's shining, the sea is blue…"

"And you're seeing a guy you really like," finished Anne, with uncharacteristic bluntness.

Mary's smile grew wider. "Well, yes." She sensed the mood was low so she switched topics. "How about you, Lizzy? Anyone you've got your eye on? Dare I say… Will?"

"Oh, Jesus, no," said Lizzy. "Why would you even think that?"

Mary and Anne raised matching eyebrows.

Lizzy rolled her eyes. "Even if I ignore the fact that he was a dick about the Charlotte thing, this morning, he got all judgey about me mixing orange and apple juice. What's his problem? God." She
sighed. "We just rub each up the wrong way."

Mary resisted the temptation to ask what the right way was, and turned to Anne. "And how's it going with Elliot?"

"We mutually killed it off last night," said Anne. "I think he's already got his eye on someone else." She sighed. "At least one of us has prospects."

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Having been spoken of, the devil appeared on the other side of the villa.

"Guys," said Elliot, joining George, Will, Emma and Caroline. "I need your help."

Emma and George exchanged a glance, meaning that these words said by Elliot were likely to be the prelude to a very bad thing.

"Of course we'll help you," said Caroline, unilaterally volunteering the whole group. "Girl trouble?"

Elliot blinked at her. "Obviously," he said, and sat down in the seat between Will and Emma. "Hypothetically speaking, how strong would you say Mary and Edmund are?"

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"NO," shouted Tom.

"Pretty strong," said Emma, before anyone else had the chance to get a word in.

Elliot frowned when he didn't get the answer he wanted. "It has only been three days," he said reasonably.

"Brief hours and weeks," said George, which earned him a look of respect. "Time isn't the best measure of a relationship."

Elliot nodded thoughtfully. "You make a good point," he said. "But I think Mary and I had a connection from the beginning. So how do you reconcile that with another entanglement?"

"Jesus," muttered Will.

Elliot ignored him. "Don't you guys think I should pursue it? If I feel something?"

George stepped in. "Look, mate, I get where you're coming from. But it's all relative. How much do you like Mary, against the size of the mess you'll create if you blow up the strongest couple in here?"

Caroline bristled at that statement. Stroking Will's shoulder, she smiled condescendingly at George. "If all it takes is one person to ruin Edmund and Mary, then clearly they weren't meant to last."

Emma looked furious. "Oh, you'd know something about — "

George cut her off. "But ultimately," he said to Elliot, "you're here for yourself."

"Love bears it to the edge of doom," agreed Elliot.

"Right," said George.

"I think Caroline makes a good point," Elliot continued. "And with Mary, we share an artistic
sympathy, you know? Or maybe you don't; it's hard to explain if you've never felt it. Either way: I know we could have something." He sat up. "Good talk, guys."

Emma stood up as soon as he left. "I'm going to tell Mary."

"Bad idea, babe," said Caroline.

"Is it?" said Will. "I know I'd like a warning if someone with a hard-on for overplayed poetry decided we shared an 'artistic sympathy'."

George choked on his drink.

"Fuck, I'm too late," said Emma. They all turned to see Elliot steadily approaching Mary and Lizzy. After what seemed like a fairly awkward conversation, Lizzy stood up, leaving the two of them alone.

Lizzy saw Emma's look of doom and came towards their group. "Is what I think is happening, happening?"

"Elliot fancies Mary," said George flatly. "I gave him some bad advice and now he's gone after her."

"Dammit, George," said Lizzy lightly. "You've let the horse through the city gates."

"I heard you practising last night," said Elliot, after a terse silence. "You're really good."

"Thanks," said Mary unenthusiastically.

There was another silence. Unfortunately, Elliot seemed to be taking the long silences as mutual periods of reflection, instead of what they were: strong signals from Mary that she did not want to be having this conversation.

"Mary," said Elliot suddenly. "What do you think of me?"

Oh, Christ, thought Mary.

Aloud, she smiled and said, "I think you're someone I could be friends with."

"Friends," mused Elliot. "With the potential for something more?"

Mary knew the male ego, and knew that this was a delicate situation.

"Look," she said. "You're nice and really easy to talk to. But I'm really enjoying getting to know Edmund, and I don't think it's fair to have anyone else on my radar."

"Well, you two aren't technically exclusive," said Elliot.

Mary raised an eyebrow. "So?"

"I almost feel sorry for him," said Tom.

"Back to the thicket," said Jane.

That afternoon, Will ended up in a men's yoga class, led by Emma. It was the only place Caroline couldn't be around him, and even then, every few minutes she'd walk past, run a finger down his
back and tell him to keep his spine level.

Emma was occupied with helping Edmund engage his core, so George and Will were free to talk.

"Just tell me, man. What do you think of Lizzy?" asked George.

Will was quickly discovering that George, as well as having enviable financial stability, loved to gossip.

"We're on poor terms," said Will shortly.

"Right, right," said George, turning his head in an awkward position so he could continue to talk to (and annoy) Will. "But come on, I've seen you staring at her. Admit it, Darcy. You're not saying that there isn't anything there?"

"I'm not interested in finding out," said Will. He tried to mimic Emma's pose and found that he couldn't do it. "What kind of bullshit is this anyway?"

"If you did this bullshit more, your upper body wouldn't be so stiff," said George. "Stop taking your frustrations about Lizzy out on yoga."

"I don't have any frustrations about Lizzy," muttered Will. "She's not even attractive enough for all this fuss you're making."

There was a gasp.

It was simply one of life's worst moments. Walking by was Caroline, again, but this time Lizzy was with her. Lizzy had given a shocked gasp before clamping her jaw shut and excusing herself to go inside. Caroline looked as if she had no idea where to attack first. For his part, Will looked up from the yoga mat to see George, Emma, Edmund… hell, everyone in the bloody villa staring at him. All except Lizzy, who'd disappeared.

"Shit," said Will. "I didn't — I didn't even mean that."

"You've really fucked up this time, mate," said George. "Go after her."

"Of course I'm going to bloody go after her," said Will angrily, standing up and shoving his yoga mat to one side. "No one follow me," he said, and marched inside to find Lizzy.

She was in one of the upstairs rooms — one of the girls' dressing rooms. Will was quite sure it wasn't a place where he was welcome, so he stood at the threshold and hoped to God she'd talk to him.

"Lizzy?" he said.

He was relieved when he heard her reply from inside, "Jesus Christ, can't you take a hint?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "Really. I only said it because I was trying to…” He shook his head. "It doesn't matter," he said. "I was an arse."

"I don't think so," she said, coming out to face him. She folded her arms. "You are an arse."

"I know," he said. "I really am sorry."

There were footsteps coming up the stairs.

"You can go," she said.
He remained standing there. "I don't want you to think that you're not — "

She laughed scornfully, and the sound cut at his heart. "Oh, don't worry," she said. "You hurt my pride, but not my sense of myself."

He left.

"Well, obviously he's a dick," said Mary, minutes later.

"And blind," added Anne.

"A blind dick," mused Mary. "That's exactly what my first time with a guy was like."

"I wish only my first time was like that," said Emma wistfully. "Instead, it's nearly every other."

Lizzy laughed. "Thanks, girls," she said. "Now I really don't feel bad about it."

That evening, as the contestants milled around under the Spanish night sky, Will found Lizzy again.

"Haven't you said enough to me today?" she asked.

"Look," he said. "I know you probably hate me. But what I said earlier — I didn't mean it at all. George had been ragging me about you all day, and I didn't want to admit to him I thought you were — fuck, well, gorgeous, so that's why I said it."

He hadn't been looking at Lizzy as he made his speech, but now he was, and he saw that she looked furious.

"What kind of bullshit is that?" she gritted out. "Oh my god, do you think I care so much about your opinion that you've got to make up this story to make me feel validated by you? It's fine that you don't find me attractive! I'm not here to be judged by your bloody exacting standards! Jesus Christ, Will, can't you see that I don't care what you think of me?"

Will looked stunned.

"But I think you're — "

"I don't care!" she yelled. "For God's sake, leave me alone!"

Of course, the entire isle heard every word of their conversation, and when everyone was getting ready to go to sleep, Lizzy dragged her miserable self outside and onto the daybed.

"Caroline's making his life a misery in there," said Emma, coming out of the villa with enough pillows and duvets for a small army. She dumped them on the bed and wrapped Lizzy in a hug. "It serves him right," she added viciously.

Lizzy was glad that Emma had followed her: all the other girls had been infected with the daft idea that Will had actually been telling the truth. And maybe he was, but even so, it meant he didn't want to admit he found her attractive. And that was a whole other pile of rubbish she didn't want to deal with.

"The man has shocking taste," said Emma, arranging the pillows and throwing the duvet over them. "I feel sorry for the poor girl he actually falls for."
"A parting shot of irony," said Jane approvingly, tossing the remote away. She stood up and stretched. "Wasn't that the best episode yet?"

"You're so confident about Lizzy and Will," said Tom. "Personally I think he killed it off when he said she wasn't attractive."

Jane made a derisive noise and scrolled through her phone. "If the producers have any sense, they'll bring them together. If Will didn't like Lizzy, would he look at her like that?" And she showed Tom a screencap of Will looking, frankly, lovestruck.

"That's going to be a meme," he said. "Me when I look at pizza and other such mediocrity."

Jane smacked his arm and went to brush her teeth.

Chapter End Notes

Ooooooh! Finally the Will/Lizzy drama gets started! And I haven't forgotten about Harriet though it may look that way - and I trust you haven't either. I would delight in reading your predictions and speculations if you comment them below, and I shall see you with the next chapter very soon!
Previously on Down the Isle…

Lizzy arrived, but things between Will and her quickly deteriorated after a series of overheard insults and angry confrontations. After Elliot and Anne decided things between them weren't going anywhere, Elliot showed an interest in Mary... who's very happily coupled up with Edmund. Mary let Elliot down firmly, but is he the kind of guy who'll take no for an answer?

"Meaning," said Jane, "is he the kind of guy who thinks he's entitled to whatever he wants?"

Instinctively, Tom smiled.

"Why are you smiling?" she asked suspiciously. "Do you think toxic masculinity is funny?"

"Surely I'm not so horrid in your eyes," said Tom, laying a hand on his heart. "It's just nice that I know what you're about to say before you say it."

Jane looked slightly disgruntled. "I'll have to do something surprising soon."

Will froze when he arrived in the kitchen for breakfast. He was just debating whether or not to make a run for it when Lizzy turned around, saw him, and he admitted defeat.

"Good morning," he said cautiously.

She gave him a brief, assessing glance. "Right." Then she picked up her dual-flavoured juice and walked out.

Will banged his head against a cupboard.

Ten minutes later, Lizzy was still ranting. "I've had enough of talking about this," she said. She stalked around the room, aimlessly tidying her wardrobe and cabinets. Throwing a striped linen dress at an undeserving chair, she continued, "I came on this show to meet loads of guys, not be mercilessly tied to one, and for that to be one I don't even like."

"Hear, hear," said Anne, who looked slightly surprised that she'd said it out loud. "I mean — well, obviously I'm here to meet new people. I have got to meet new people."

"Small friend group?" asked Emma.

"Lingering ex," said Anne dolefully.
"Ah," said Mary. "I know a thing or two about that."

"We need new boys," declared Emma. "The turnover's so inequal. We've had five boys and seven girls."

"I don't know if you need new boys," said Anne slyly. "What about you and George?"

Emma laughed, oblivious to the unspoken agreement in the room. "What? No, we're just friends."

Jane and Tom gave identical snorts.

In another part of the villa, Elliot was still trying to cause havoc.

"Listen, mate," he was saying to a bewildered Edmund, as everyone nearby pretended to be doing something else. "I thought about it, and I decided I should just come clean to you, man to man."

"OK," said Edmund slowly, with no idea what was about to happen. "So?"

Elliot sighed. "How are things with Mary?"

Edmund looked around to see everyone avoiding his eye. He turned back to Elliot. "Good," he said.

Elliot didn't say anything.

"I heard you and Anne agreed to look elsewhere," Edmund added conversationally. "How's that?"

"Oh, well, you know, good," said Elliot. "But since you brought it up... I'm in a bit of an Arthurian situation. To tell you the truth, I'm kind of into Mary."

No one on the isle made a sound as they watched this information sink in for Edmund.

"Right," he said.

"She didn't tell you?" asked Elliot, feigning shock. "Shit, I thought she would've."

"No," said Edmund. "What is there to tell?"

Elliot shifted. "I mean, I told her I liked her, and she didn't tell you."

"About your feelings? Why should she?"

"Well, I don't know, I'd never assume — just, maybe she's hiding it for a reason."

"Probably to save your dignity," said Edmund.

Mary and Emma, the two people on the isle who hadn't witnessed the mild, unassuming Edmund Bertram absolutely slaughter Elliot Williams, were just coming outside and stopped in their tracks when they saw the scene before them.

"What the fuck is happening?" hissed Mary.

"Elliot just can't let it go," said Emma. "Oh, I cannot believe I missed this."

"Shit, he's turning around — oh, Christ, he's seen us."
"Seen you, more like."

"It doesn't matter… fuck, here he comes."

She was wrong. Elliot headed towards where George and Elton sat, leaving Edmund alone.

"Wish me luck," said Mary, and went up to Edmund.

Shameless as Emma was in her desire to know everything about everyone, it was quite clear that George, Elton and Elliot were engaged in some guys-only talk, so she went to sit by Anne and Harriet.

"What," she said, dropping onto a green bean bag, "just happened?"

Harriet exhaled slowly.

"I think," said Anne, "Edmund just dragged Elliot."

"Edmund? Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure," said Anne dazedly.

"Dear God," said Emma, with slight disgust. "Mary's really won the jackpot."

"Is everything alright?" said Mary as she approached.

Edmund looked at her and relaxed a bit. "Course it is," he said, somewhat tightly.

Mary's expression was dubious and she pecked his cheek before she sat down. "I didn't catch most of that, but I saw Elliot walking away. He really didn't say something to you?"

"He was trying to make me insecure about us," said Edmund.

Mary swallowed. "Oh."

"Something about him telling you he liked you, and I should be on alert because I didn't know. But I figured if there was anything to say, you'd tell me, right?"

"Of course," said Mary immediately. She was piecing together the story in her head, and it was looking like Edmund had told Elliot to, effectively, piss off. She looped her arms around his neck. "I appreciate that very much."

As soon as Elliot went off to lick his wounds in private, Emma dragged George over to where she was sitting with Harriet and Lizzy, and made him tell her everything.

"I'm not telling you everything," he said.

Emma actually pouted. "Seriously?"

"But we'll tell you what happened between Elliot and Edmund!" Harriet cut in. "Elliot tried to make Edmund think that Mary was hiding something from him —"

"Which she was," said Lizzy. "She probably should've told Edmund what Elliot said yesterday."
"Yes, of course," said Harriet. "Only… wouldn't that have been making a thing over nothing?"

"Nothing's ever nothing in here," said Lizzy dismissively.

"Right," said Harriet, looking uneasy.

Emma was about to say something when she saw George give Harriet an encouraging nod — what, like he was her confidence guru or something? — and then Harriet continued.

"So Elliot pointed out that Mary hadn't told Edmund about their chat yesterday, and Edmund said there wasn't any reason for her to. Then Elliot said that Mary didn't confide in him, Edmund, and Edmund said something like, *why should she? They're your feelings.* And Elliot said there was probably a reason why Mary didn't tell him, Edmund, and Edmund said — "

"*Probably to save your dignity,*" said Lizzy, cutting in. "You should've seen it, Em, it was amazing. It was like the soul of decency giving the middle finger to shitstirrers everywhere."

"I'm devastated that I missed it," said Emma, sinking into the bean bag. She looked at George pleadingly. "George, come on. What did Elliot say to you?"

He smiled indulgently at her and she narrowed her eyes.

"Nothing as interesting as you're imagining," he said. "He mostly just said how much he feels like a fool."

"As he bloody should," said Lizzy.

It was shaping up to be a relatively drama-free evening, given the events of the day. Elliot was staying far away from Mary and Edmund, as per George's advice. Since the afternoon, Caroline had laid off Will, and was currently dancing to late noughties pop with Mary. Lizzy and Anne were laughing with Harriet and George; Emma was talking to Will; Elton was still congratulating Edmund on his triumph over Elliot.

Then the faint sounds of a helicopter could be heard through the music, and everyone looked up to Yvonne Leblanc-Wu descending down on the isle.

"Darlings!" she said when she was on land. "Did you miss me? Of course you did. I can't stay for long — a *dear* friend has invited me to spend a night on his private island. I'm just stopping by to tell you that tomorrow, there'll be a shifting of people, some departures, you know. Ta!"

And then her helicopter spun her away.

"Obviously Will's going to pick Lizzy," said Jane, as the credits rolled.

Tom raised an eyebrow. "After not speaking to each other for a whole day? And how do you know it's a recoupling? What if the girls, and thus Lizzy, get to choose?"

"Oh, then God knows," said Jane, yawning and pulling her blanket around her. "But she won't. It's much more dramatic if the boys choose."

"Sometimes I think you're actually the puppet-master of these poor contestants," said Tom. "Own up, Jane. What secrets won't you tell me?"
"Don't be ridiculous," she said, refusing to look at him lest he saw that she was faintly pink. "As if I have any secrets."

Chapter End Notes

By now almost all the wheels are in motion! And we will ride this thing out until the bitter end.

Recoupling, as the name suggests, is a Love Island (and idk probably other shows have it too) ceremony in which the contestants decide who they want to couple up with. You can't pick someone who's already been picked and occasionally a recoupling will be followed by a dumping, whereby everyone who hasn't been chosen in the recoupling is booted off. I think I explain this in the next chapter, but it's here for reference anyway.

Please do leave a comment if you'd like, and I will of course reply with probably more enthusiasm than you want.
It's a Mighty Long Road But

Chapter Notes

Title from George Ezra, Paradise. All my titles are tenuously linked to the actual events of the chapter, but in this instance I think I've maybe picked something that works.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Previously on Down the Isle …

Edmund and Mary are stronger than ever after mild-mannered Edmund gave Elliot the set-down of the century. After a fiery confrontation between Lizzy and Will, they didn't speak for a whole day… but following Yvonne's announcement last night that a quote-unquote 'shifting of people' and 'departure' would be taking place, how will everyone react?

At 8:58 in the evening, Tom walked into the living room, placed his drink on a coaster and glared at the TV.

"If Anne goes," he said, dramatically throwing himself onto the sofa like a distressed heroine with a penchant for melodramatics, "I go too."

Jane, who was sitting sensibly beside him, snorted. "As if. You're invested in Lizzy and Will too."

Tom turned towards her with a look of pure affliction. "Not even a word of 'don't worry, Tom, Anne's not going to go'? You sure know how to make a guy feel better."

"They can do that by themselves," said Jane primly.

There was a beat of silence.

"Oh my god, Jane, never in a million years did I think — "

"Shut up," she said, trying to contain her blush. "It's starting."

Having reached a truce with Emma yesterday vis-à-vis the Charlotte situation, Caroline joined Emma and Mary for breakfast.

"So you're not worried about tonight," she said to Mary.

Mary smiled. "Not at all."

"Ugh, I'm jealous," said Caroline. "Like, I'm not an idiot. I know Will isn't into me, even if he's too much of a coward to say it. I've been getting to know Elton, and there's an attraction there, so I guess he's my safety net. Things between you and him are over, right?"

This was said to Emma. "Oh, yeah," she replied. "You're welcome to him."

"Thanks," said Caroline. "So what about you?"
Emma had spent the best part of last night scheming about what the hell to do if it was a recoupling and the boys got to pick. Eventually she had settled on a plan, but it wasn't one she was particularly happy with. At any rate, she was hardly going to broadcast that she had one.

"We don't know what it's even going to be yet," she said. "It might not be a recoupling — it could be a public vote. In which case, it's probably best not to look desperate."

"Oh, babe, some of us can't afford that," said Caroline.

"No, Emma's right," said Mary. "Maybe everyone hates Edmund and I, and tonight we'll be gone. We can't assume anything."

"Nevertheless," said Caroline, setting down her kale smoothie, "I'm going to find Elton."

"I'm screwed," said Anne cheerfully, flopping down onto her bed. It was approximately eight hours until this evening's departures, and the stage of acceptance had already begun to sink in. "If it's a recoupling, and the guys choose, I'm going to be booted off."

"Chin up," said Lizzy, sitting opposite her. "At least you'll get to see your friends and family."

"Oh, cripes, my family," said Anne, covering her face.

Lizzy waited for her to say more, but she didn't.

"So," Lizzy said brightly, "let's work this through. Worst case scenario: it's a recoupling and the boys get to choose. Mary's safe and probably Caroline too, but the rest of us are all…"

"Equally in danger," said Anne delicately.

"Right," said Lizzy. "I mean, I kind of think George likes Emma…"

"Oh my goodness, I thought that was just me!"

"Right? But I don't want to tell her because it's so obvious George doesn't want to go there yet. And who can blame him, because I love Em, but the girl's as blind as anything."

Anne sighed, then smiled. "Anyway, even if I don't have a husband, I've got you."

"You do," said Lizzy, hugging her friend. "And I'd rather you than one of these boys any day."

"Hey, guys," said Elliot, standing boldly in front of three people sat in the low patio chairs, as if he wasn't the newly-minted social pariah of the isle.

Emma, Harriet and Lizzy looked up, confused.

He assumed a serious expression. "Emma, can I talk to you?"

Lizzy, who wasn't facing Elliot, wiggled her eyebrows at Emma. Emma made sure to spill her water over her as she got up to have the chat with Elliot she'd seen coming.

"So, um," said Elliot, when they were seated on a swing far enough from everyone else to give them the pretence of privacy. "I have a proposal for you."

"Yes?" said Emma.
Elliot looked nervous, which was good.

"Obviously, word is going round that there might be a recoupling tonight," he began. "I was going to suggest we make a pact to choose each other."

Emma had once negotiated a deal with someone who had had their eye muscles reworked to negate the need to blink. Elliot, who had already shown his cards to the whole isle, was a breeze.

She frowned. "Why me?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Why me?" she repeated. "Why not Anne or Harriet?"

"I — well, er — I thought you and I might have a bit more of a connection."

Emma gave a long pause to communicate that she wasn't at all convinced by that, but after an appropriate time passed, she sighed. It really was going to have to be this way.

"Fine," she said. "You and me. I'm telling everyone about this pact, so if you break it, you're ruined."

"That's fair," he said.

"Poor George," said Tom, slurping his exotic yoghurt drink.

"George will get his time," said Jane serenely. She cast a sideways look at his drink. "I have to ask: what is that?"

He held it out to her. "It's got blueberries in it. Try some."

Jane sniffed. "I'm not sharing your straw," she said, dignified.

"Why not?"

"Hygiene."

Tom rolled his eyes. "You can ask the girls I've kissed. None of them have the plague."

"Not that you know of," said Jane darkly, very firmly not thinking about the concept of kissing Tom.

"I'm happy to prove it right now," he said casually, as if he wasn't talking about kissing his roommate and, when it came down to it, his best friend.

Neither knew how tense the other was. "No, thank you," said Jane calmly. "I'm watching TV."

Tom brushed it off. Anyway, the window for that had probably passed.

Emma came back to Anne and Lizzy — Harriet had apparently gone — and announced, "I've made a pact with Elliot. If it's a recoupling, we're safe."

"Well, there goes another hope," said Anne airily.

Lizzy snorted. "You and Elliot? Do you really want a repeat of your first days here?"
Anne sighed. "No, of course not."

"All I'm saying," said Emma, seating herself on a chair, "is that now is a time for action. Elton kind of has Caroline, but I'd say he's still fair game. God knows what's happening with George and Harriet too, but technically — "

"No! I can't do that to Harriet," said Anne.

Emma shrugged. "You're going to have to do it to someone at some point, or you'll be leaving."

"You make a good point," said Anne resignedly. "Lizzy, maybe we should be making pacts too."

"I'm not cosying up to any guy I'm not interested in," said Lizzy. In a mournful tone, she added: "But I do wish there was someone."

Anne and Emma exchanged a glance.

"Well," said Anne, breaching what had remained unspoken for a day, "there is Will…"

Lizzy was stony-faced. "We're not talking about that."

"But — "

"No."

"You wouldn't, even to stay on the isle?" asked Emma. "Someone might come in later who'll be worth it."

Lizzy made an unimpressed face.

"Anyway," said Emma, with an air of changing the subject, "maybe it will be a public vote, and your backbone will serve you well."

______________________________________________________________

"It isn't," said Jane crisply.

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"What would you do," said Mary, threading her fingers through Edmund's hair as they rocked softly on a hammock, "if Elliot picked me tonight?"

Edmund frowned. "What would you want me to do?"

"That's cheating," said Mary. "What would your instinct be?"

"To talk to you," said Edmund.

Mary sighed. "Fine. And what if I said I was interested in Elliot?"

Edmund sat up, which was rather difficult to do on a hammock. "Are you?"

"No, but this is hypothetically."

"Well, then," said Edmund. "It doesn't matter."

"But something like it could happen," Mary persisted. She knew she should probably drop it, but she had an uncontrollable streak of forcing good things to go sour. "My feelings could change. So could
yours! What if someone walked in tomorrow who was exactly what you were looking for?"

"I don't know why you're trying to create drama out of nothing," said Edmund testily.

"I'm not! I'm just saying…"

"I know everyone's really shocked and proud of me for saying what I said to Elliot yesterday," said Edmund, "but I hated it. I apologised to him afterwards. If you want the kind of guy who'll be possessive and get mad at the slightest whiff of someone else, Mary, I'm not that guy."

She was stunned. "Darling, I never said you were."

"No," he said, "but maybe you thought I was after yesterday." He sighed, and all the tension dissipated. "I just don't want you getting the wrong idea of me."

"OK," said Mary. "I won't, if we keep communicating."

Edmund raised their entwined hands and pressed a kiss to her wrist.

"And kissing," she amended.

"George, bro," said Elton, catching him as he came out of the bathroom. "Can I talk to you?"

George frowned and looked down the empty corridor. "Were you waiting for me out here?"

"Maybe," said Elton. "It was the only place I could think of where the girls wouldn't be around."

George had to give him credit for that reasoning. "Right. What did you want to talk about?"

"It's this recoupling business," said Elton. "Man, Caroline's been coming onto me all day and I just can't take it any more. I just wish she'd say she's doing it to stay on the isle, you know? Instead she just keeps laughing at everything I say, even when it's not funny."

"Maybe she really does like you," said George cautiously. "Maybe it isn't about the recoupling — which, by the way, is only a speculation."

Elton frowned. "If you were Caroline, would you like me?"

"Of course," said George. "You're a top bloke."

Elton still looked unconvinced. "I'm just not digging her vibe, you know? I mean, she's hot. Really hot. But I feel like she's not being honest with me."

George clapped him on the back. "That, mate, is a decision for you to make."

It was the most tense evening yet on the isle, as the boys and the girls lined up on either side of the fire pit and waited for Yvonne to enter. Tonight she walked in wearing a mirror-plated dress with ropes of Coco Chanel pearls.

She gave the contestants a dazzling smile. "Good evening! Any guesses on what I meant by shifting people last night?"

"A recoupling?" asked Elton.
"That's right, darling," she said, and winked at him before turning to face the whole group. "The rules of recoupling are so simple, even my first husband would get them. You pick someone to be in a couple with: so you share a bed, et cetera, though experience has taught me you don't even need to — anyway. You can't pick someone who's already been picked. You can't bribe me to change the order I ask people to pick." She paused as if to reconsider. "Ooh, except you, Elton."

Someone whistled, and George ruffled Elton's hair.

Yvonne lifted her prompt card. "This time, the boys will choose first."

Anne met Lizzy's gaze and made the sign of the cross.

"And first to choose tonight is Edmund. Edmund, which lovely lady would you like to couple up with?"

Edmund surprised absolutely no one when he said, "Mary," and they sat down together behind the fire pit.

"Marvellous," said Yvonne. "Elliot?"

Elliot chose Emma, as per their pact, and Emma rewarded his loyalty with a cheek kiss. George chose Harriet again, apparently to her surprise, and Anne and Lizzy both felt their chances of staying on the isle slipping through their fingers like fine grains of sand.

"Will," said Yvonne, clearly enjoying the growing suspense. "Which of these remaining ladies would you like to couple up with?"

The world held its breath as Will waited the customary five seconds before speaking. For the viewers, drum beats accompanied the silence.

"Yvonne?" said Will.

"Darling, I'm not in the running," said Yvonne. She tilted her head. "But if you want me that bad, I'm sure we can come to an arrangement."

"I'd like to say something," he said.

Lizzy looked at Anne, alarmed.

"Why, of course," said Yvonne. "Take it away."

Will cleared his throat. "I know this girl and I didn't get off to a good start." He smiled ruefully. "I don't even know if she likes me. But if she'd just hear me out, I think we should start over."

"But who is the girl?" asked Yvonne.

The camera turned to Lizzy, obviously the subject of Will's speech. She looked as if she was witnessing a volcanic eruption.

"Lizzy," said Will.

There was muted applause. Lizzy smiled brilliantly at the camera and walked to Will's side, and then they took their seats around the fire pit. She didn't look at anyone directly.

"So that leaves Elton!" said Yvonne. "Elton, my darling, which one of these two remaining ladies are you going to pick?"
Everyone looked at Elton, the Will/Lizzy drama temporarily forgotten. Caroline was smiling. Anne looked like a woman who was being led to the stake and had accepted her fate.

And then Elton said, "Anne."

"Fuck yes!" said Tom, tipping over his empty cup of yogurt. "She's my favourite contestant," he said with satisfaction, as Anne's expression crossed from confusion to shock and back again.

Jane sniffed. "Not Emma?"

To her credit, Caroline took the news that she was leaving very well. She smiled, hugged everyone and walked off with dignity. The real drama began when she left.

"So," said Will to Lizzy, once most people had dispersed, leaving them sitting alone around the fire pit. "What now?"

Lizzy turned to him. "What the fuck, Will?"

He blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"I mean it," she said fiercely. "I told you to leave me alone. To your credit, you did that yesterday. And, in fact, for the most of today. But now — what the fuck have you done?"

Will, who had been planning on confessing everything and making a plea to Lizzy to let them start over, immediately abandoned this plan upon seeing that she was not being receptive to any advances.

"I would've expected you to be less angry with me," he said testily. "After I just saved you."

"Saved me?" she asked dangerously. "Did I ask you to save me?"

"No, but — "

"Then why should I feel any fucking gratitude towards you?"

Will sounded very tired. "Look, can we just talk about this? I don't know what I did to make you hate me."

"You don't know? Oh, for the love of — you said I was unattractive!"

"Obviously I don't think that," he replied moodily, "or else I wouldn't have picked you tonight."

"Oh, gee, that makes me feel so much better," said Lizzy.

Will ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know why you're being sarcastic. Surely that's the only logical explanation."

Lizzy flared up again. "Explanation? Thank God you know what one is! You know, it would've been nice to have a heads-up from you that if it came to it you were going to pick, instead of concocting this huge plan where I was supposed to be so grateful that you saved my arse from being dumped off the isle that I — what? What did you want, Will? Me to fall into your arms? Well, it's not fucking happening!"

At some point during her tirade, Will lost his hold on his temper. Both of them were standing up
"Clearly not!" he shouted, so loudly that everyone could hear, involuntarily or no.

"Good!" she screamed back. "And don't ever try it again!"

And then she stormed off. Will, mostly angry and very confused, didn't know what to do except to sit back down. Then he realised that everyone had heard their argument, and sitting by himself around the fire pit was an image so sad even he didn't want to visualise it, so he went to find somewhere private to brood.

"Do you want to talk?" asked George, popping his head around the corner of the wall where Will had planned to sit alone for an hour.

"No," said Will.

"All right, then, I will," said George. And as they sat on the raised stone floor, George told Will a story about a family holiday with so many digressions that it took Will's mind entirely away from the utter shitstorm he'd just made of his love life, and made him feel a tiny bit better.

Lizzy was beginning to make a habit out of sleeping outside. Tonight, with the hidden motive of not sharing a bed with Elton, Anne was with her.

"Maybe you were too harsh on Will," Anne ventured.

"Anne," said Lizzy warningly.

Anne was not to be warned off. "He's obviously mad about you," she said. "Are you really not interested?"

The unspoken fact was that of Will's outstanding physical attractiveness.

"Well, let's see," said Lizzy, pulling herself into a sitting position. "He called me unattractive, he's stupidly judgemental about my breakfast choices, he thought he could swoop in and save me from leaving the isle with the hope that my panties would drop… how much of that is saying 'stand up guy'?"

Anne sighed. "I know, but are you sure you're not even a little bit interested?" She raised her eyebrows. "You talk about him a lot."

"That's because he's always involving himself in my life!" she said protestingly. "Anne, dear, I promise I don't have any feelings for Will Darcy."

"Except those of irritation," Anne reminded.

Lizzy could not help the feeling that her friend was secretly laughing at her. "Exactly," she said, waving a hand. She yawned. "Look, I'm tired of talking about it. Let's go to sleep."

It was with a dramatic sigh that Tom turned off the TV that night.

"Lizzy's mad," he said. "Hell, if I had a guy like Will after me, I would at very least be flattered."

Jane laughed, though now that the TV was off, there was nothing to distract her from what Tom had said earlier.
Friends did not ask friends to offhandedly kiss them. Jane was sure of that.

"So," said Tom.

"That's that," said Jane. Briskly, she tidied up the coffee table and gathered up her glasses and phone. "All right, I'm going to bed. Goodnight."

Chapter End Notes

Things are getting good, right? There's so much that's about to unfold, I can't wait for you to read it! And for your peace of mind, Lizzy doesn't actually call her underwear panties.

Also please do, you know, tell me if you like this. Austen fic is usually quite conservative and I've crossed it over with a TV show some might describe as vulgar. Are you reading this on the edge of your seat, with popcorn? Or with blatant disgust? Either way, let me know!
She Almost Lost Her Mind

Chapter Notes

Title from The Beatles, 'She Loves You'. Never say I don't have taste.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Previously on Down the Isle …

At the recoupling last night, there were plenty of surprises. Will picked Lizzy in an attempt to rekindle something between them, but Lizzy took it badly. Now it's looking like things are over before they ever got started. No one could've guessed that Elton would pick Anne, but he did, sending a clingy Caroline home. George picked Harriet again, but will it be a return to their platonic relationship, or is this the start of something more? Nothing's ever predictable on Down the Isle…

Tom scoffed. "It is so predictable. Will and Lizzy are endgame, though they're going to take their bloody time. Emma will suddenly realise one day that George was there all along. Mary and Edmund will date for a few months before breaking up; Harriet will meet a nice bloke her age; Anne will meet me."

"Why would Anne want you?" asked Jane, feigning disinterest.

Tom waggled his eyebrows. "Why wouldn't she?"

Jane pretended to think. "Well, you've never dated a girl for more than three months; you'd definitely forget her birthday; as far as I know you've never made a romantic gesture in your life… I could make you a list if you'd like."

There was a silence, more awkward than usual, during which Jane began to wonder if she shouldn't have so deftly laid out the reasons why Tom was not boyfriend material. Surely he knew it himself, though — she was just pointing out facts.

"You make a good case," said Tom, with a mouthful of crisps.

Jane smiled, partly with relief.

As much as she wished she could brush it off like it didn't matter and go about her life, Lizzy knew she couldn't.

It was this damned thing with Will — Lizzy wasn't so deep in the Nile that she couldn't acknowledge there was a thing with Will — that was driving her insane.

She would've rather died than confess it, but when she first walked into the villa and saw Will, something inside her turned over.

Which was only to be expected, because no one could deny that he was horribly attractive.
She tried to trace back the reasons why she disliked him so much. At the beginning she'd been angry on Charlotte's behalf, then angry because he was snobby, then angry because he'd said she wasn't attractive, then angry because... why was she angry last night? Because he'd suddenly turned around and said that he *did* want her?

It was all too messy and confusing. And Lizzy wasn't superficial: she didn't care how attractive he was, when it was obvious that their personalities clashed horribly and they couldn't even be around each other without arguing.

She was satisfied with that conclusion, at least.

"I don't want to talk about me," said Lizzy, when everyone turned to look at her during a lull in the conversation over breakfast. "Can we just — Harriet, you say something. How's it going with George?"

Harriet blushed. "Oh, yikes, I don't really know."

"You don't — what?" said Emma. "He must like you, right, otherwise why would he pick you again? That makes no sense. Do you want me to talk to him for you?"

"Um," said Harriet. "Actually, I think it'd be better if I did it."

"Oh! Right," said Emma, as Lizzy and Anne exchanged glances. "Of course. It's your relationship."

"Thanks though!" chirped Harriet. "It's really nice of you to offer."

Emma went to find Mary for a workout, leaving Lizzy, Anne and Harriet by themselves.

"Actually," Harriet began, "I was thinking of asking Mary and Edmund for some advice. They're the only ones here who are — well, you know."

"Happy," said Lizzy, and took a drink of water.

Harriet looked sheepish. "Yes. Do you think that's a good idea?"

"If you don't mind everyone's nose in your business," said Lizzy, "sure."

"It's going to get out anyway," said Harriet. "I just really need some advice about the whole situation." She took a deep breath. "Basically, we — George and I — talked a few days ago and decided just to be friends, but then he picked me again last night — that has to mean something, right?"

Lizzy told herself it would be rude to sigh dramatically. Everyone could see that the oldest person in the villa being paired with the youngest was probably not a good idea, but they'd apparently all decided not to say anything about it. And now it was coming to its inevitable head.

"Enough about me," said Harriet, smiling modestly. "What about you, Anne?"

Anne shrugged. "Elton? Oh, I don't know. I slept out here with Lizzy last night, so I avoided all that first night in bed stuff."

"Coward," said Lizzy affectionately.

"I could say the same to you," was Anne's rejoinder. "But, I at least am going to try and get to know my partner today."
Lizzy wrinkled her nose. "That was a low blow, Anne."

Harriet had it all planned out. Earlier, she'd asked Mary and Edmund separately if they'd be willing to give her advice. Where Mary was flattered, Edmund was surprised that she'd come to him, but they'd both agreed to help. Now, she saw them sitting around the kitchen table and decided to approach, ignoring her nerves.

"Harriet!" said Mary, waving at her. She patted the space next to her. "Look, we saved you a seat."

Harriet sat down.

"Um," she said. "I thought you guys could help because you're the only couple who are…" She trailed off.

"Doing well," Mary filled in.

"Doing great," Edmund corrected.

Mary rolled her eyes affectionately and turned back to Harriet. "So, you were saying?"

"I want your advice about me and George," said Harriet. "I really like him, but a few days ago we agreed to be friends. I was fine with that, but then last night he picked me again. We haven't properly kissed or anything and nothing happened in bed last night, but… come on, he picked me! That has to mean something, right? What do you think that means?"

"Edmund, you're up," said Mary. "You have the insight into the male psyche."

"There isn't one," said Edmund. "Guys just say what they mean."

"But he hasn't said anything," persisted Harriet. "What does that mean?"

Edmund made a face. "Then he doesn't want to say what he means."

Mary sighed. Even before this conversation took place she knew at some point she'd have to step in, but she hadn't thought it would be so early on. "Harriet, men are awful."

"Edmund's right," said Mary. She patted Edmund's knee. "With some exceptions, of course. But the bottom line is that they won't talk about their feelings until you force them. So my advice to you is that you need to find George, drag him to a room with only one exit, and keep him there until he explains himself."

"You've basically just described torture," said Edmund.

"See what I mean?" said Mary triumphantly. "Men think talking about their feelings is torture."

"She manipulated that conversation so well," said Jane admiringly.

Tom shot her a concerned look. "Is that something to be proud of?"

In another part of the villa, Anne was talking to Elton, and it was not exactly going well.

She told herself to soldier on. Sure, this might be dull, but she owed it to Elton to try. He'd chosen her over Caroline and kept her on the isle, and for that she was genuinely grateful. Her time here hadn't been romantically fruitful yet, but she'd found wonderful friends, and she wasn't ready to
She tried again. "So what kind of films do you like?"

She wasn't exactly expecting him to reply 'art house', but 'action movies' was something she could not work with.

"How about you?" he said.

"Oh," she said. "I like French New Wave cinema. Sixties films, mostly."

"That's not that black and white stuff, right?"

"Er, yeah. Some of it is."

Elton frowned. "Can't be that good then."

Anne didn't know what to say.

Harriet was a woman on a mission. Empowered by Mary's reasoning, she marched into the room where George was talking to Will, with a script laid out in her head. She knew exactly what she was going to say, and she wasn't going to let him get away with blowing her off. She'd been with him for a week! She deserved an explanation.

She entered in the middle of a rant by Will.

"She thinks I'm trying to push her into something? Doesn't she know that literally no one would take up the fucking challenge of forcing her to do something she didn't want to do? For God's sake, she's — " Will stopped, mid-sentence, at the sight of Harriet.

"Hello, Harriet," said George civilly.

Will grunted.

"Hi!" she said brightly, pushing aside her curiosity over the Will and Lizzy situation. "George, can I talk to you?"

"Of course," said George.

Will raised his eyebrows. "I'll go, then."

Harriet sat down. She reminded herself that she was going to be firm and direct.

"Why did you pick me last night?"

George blinked. "Sorry?"

"Why did you pick me last night?" she repeated. "I thought we said we'd keep things friendly, and it was really nice of you to pick me, but I was totally ready to go home, and you could've picked Anne or Caroline or Lizzy… all right, probably not Lizzy, because Will has a thing for her and if you picked her that would be breaking bro code… and maybe," she said, her voice weakening, "maybe I'm reading too much into this and everyone's been too nice to tell me that. But I don't want to be a pity pick, George. So if I am… just tell me."

George didn't know what possessed him in that moment. It might've been that Harriet, mid-ramble,
looked sweet and charming; or maybe that Will and Lizzy's and everyone's drama was hurting his head and he'd gone mad; or maybe that anything with Emma seemed hopeless now and for the next eight years. But he found himself staring at Harriet, moving closer, dipping his head, and kissing her.

"WHAT?" screamed Tom. He looked at Jane. "WHAT?"

Even Jane looked perturbed. "That… was unexpected," she said.

"Do you think?" said Tom. His voice was still thin and high-pitched. "Jesus fucking Christ, George, you're supposed to be the mature and responsible one."

"Poor Harriet," said Jane. "She's had a rocky ride."

"She looks quite happy now," said Tom testily. He had a horrified expression on his face as George and Harriet continued to kiss. "Are they just going to go forever? Christ, this isn't — oh, thank God."

"I never knew you were such a prude," said Jane.

"Don't mock me," said Tom. "I'm in an emotional state."

George pulled back. "I'm sorry," he said immediately. "That wasn't —"

"I'm not," said Harriet, her hands still on his arms. She leaned in again and he ducked away.

"No, really, I'm sorry," he said. "I wasn't planning for this to happen."

"Neither was I," said Harriet dreamily.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I mean — Harriet, I don't know what to say."

"So don't say anything…"

He stood up and took some steps back. "I'm sorry, it's just complicated," he said, hating himself as he said it. "I just — I don't know what came over me, but I didn't mean for that to happen — I need some time to figure this — " he made a limp gesture meaning himself — "out. You can understand, can't you?"

Harriet smiled. "Yes, of course."

"Right," he said. "I know it's — Harriet, can you just give me some time to think?"

"Sure," she said. "Whatever you need."

"Thank you," he said, and left.

"You're enjoying this," George said accusingly, minutes later. He'd found Will brooding on the terrace alone, and cheered him up with the account of what had just happened between him and Harriet.

"Absolutely," said Will, who was happier than George had seen him in days. "Now you've screwed up too. Oh how the mighty have fallen. I'll be crowing for days."
"It wasn't intentional," said George. "I just lost my head for a second."

Will tsked. "A bit more than a second, if it was a full-on kiss."

George stared bleakly at the sunset. "Can we not be pedantic?"

"Who's being pedantic?" asked a new voice — Emma, of course it was Emma, because the universe was having a field day with ruining George's life. "Dinner's ready. Fair warning: Elliot and Edmund cooked."

"Fantastic," said George morosely.

Will clapped him on the back. "Chin up, big guy."

After dinner, Mary found Harriet upstairs in front of the mirror.

"How did it go with George?" she asked, moving to help Harriet undo her plaits.

Harriet grinned.

Mary's hands stilled. "Harriet Smith!"

"He kissed me!" said Harriet giddily.

"Oh, that's great! And what did he say?"

Harriet's smile faltered. "Well… then he apologised a lot and said he needed some time to figure this out. But that's not important, right? Because he kissed me, so he is attracted to me!"

Mary sensed it was probably important and Harriet would be very hurt later, if she continued now on this trip in the clouds. "Did he say that before or after he kissed you?"

"After," said Harriet slowly. "You don't think — you don't think he regrets it, do you?"

"Oh, no, I couldn't say," said Mary. "You should really talk to him."

"He said he needed some time to figure this out," said Harriet, with accompanying air quotes. Mary felt a burst of pity as the realisation dawned over Harriet's face. "Oh, God. I've been so stupid. He doesn't like me!"

"No, let's slow down," said Mary. "You said it yourself: he kissed you, so that must mean something. And you're not being stupid at all. It's his fault for being damned clumsy with his feelings. Give him some time to figure out what he wants."

"Right," said Harriet. "Yes, of course. He's the confused one. I know exactly what I feel."

Mary knew she wasn't responsible for this situation, but couldn't shake the feeling that she'd had some hand in it, and hadn't helped.

Apparently Harriet had confided in everyone about her situation, because by the time they were getting ready for bed, everyone in the villa knew that they'd kissed, and George wanted nothing more than to go back in time five hours and clock himself on the head.

Getting into bed was awkward, to say the least. By a stroke of luck, or more likely Mary — because
George knew damn well that luck had been denied to him that day — Harriet came to bed late and he had enough time to get in and feasibly pull off being sleepy. But after the lights were off, Harriet, probably inspired by Mary and Edmund's displays of affection, tentatively leaned over and kissed his temple.

Because he was a terrible person and a coward, George faked a yawn. "Sorry, I'm really tired."

"Oh, OK," she said.

Another yawn. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

She probably didn't believe him, but he would deal with all that tomorrow.

"Did they drug him?" asked Tom, turning the TV off. "Who is this George? I don't recognise him."

"I don't know why you're so shaken by this," said Jane, calmly sealing her bag of dried apricots. "Everyone knows men do stupid things."

"George was one of the good ones," said Tom mournfully.

"It's the good ones who do stupid things," said Jane. "The bad ones do horrible things."

"Is that so," said Tom. He perked up. "Which one am I?"

Jane sniffed. "Amoral."

Tom gave a hoot of laughter. "Jane," he proclaimed, "you are the light of my life."

"I thought that was just because I proofread your drafts," said Jane.

He gave her a scandalised look. "Are you saying I take advantage of your love for me?"

"I don't love you," Jane lied as she pretended to rearrange the cushions. She made her way to the door. "Don't forget to switch off the lamp!"

"Yes, ma'am," said Tom, smiling.

Chapter End Notes

Which one of these many idiots will be the first to confess their love and live happily ever after? Find out in fifteen chapters' time! If you love me please leave a comment, hit me up on Tumblr and I'll see you with the next chapter tomorrow!
Title from I've Grown Accustomed to her Face, the Dean Martin version.
As author I'm exercising my dictatorial rights to decide that the Down the Isle editing team sometimes leaves stuff out, and more often than not it's the sexy times, which is why they don't appear in the text.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Previously on Down the Isle…

Will and Lizzy, despite being coupled up, haven't spoken for an entire day. But maybe talking is overrated! New couple Anne and Elton didn't hit it off during their chat yesterday, but things looked pretty comfortable in bed last night. And when Harriet went to ask George where his head was with their relationship, George ended up kissing her, but afterwards told her it was 'complicated'. And tonight, things are going to happen that complicate everything much more…

"Pretty comfortable?" said Tom in a high, squeaky voice. He cleared his throat and continued, speaking lower and inadvertently throatier, "What does that mean?"

"I'd have thought you'd know exactly what that means," said Jane snippily. "Do you need a glass of water?"

A cough. "No."

"I was just asking."

"And I said no."

Jane rolled her eyes. "I think you're being too prudish about this. People don't come on this show to curtsey and brush fingers. We're not living two hundred years ago."

"Can you imagine if Will and Lizzy had met two hundred years ago?" asked Tom. "Wow, I'd read that book."

Jane snorted. "Yes, I'm sure it would become a beloved classic."

George knew that he had to talk to Harriet today, but he hadn't exactly expected for the opportunity to be dropped into his hands.

Yvonne was waiting for everyone by the pool after breakfast.

"Darlings, I've missed you!" she exclaimed, after one day of not seeing them. "So I'm going to give you two presents. The first: one lucky couple gets to go on a private date this morning."

"I vote for George and Harriet," said Mary.
Yvonne looked at George, then looked at Harriet. They were standing at opposite ends of the group.

"It sure looks like they need one," she said. "All right, so George and Harriet it is. Present number two: you'll all be receiving guests tonight." She smoothed down her skirt and prepared to for her dramatic exit. "Make them welcome, won't you?"

"It has to be new boys," said Emma minutes later, as she warmed up for her workout. "We haven't had any new boys. And there have to be two, at least. Yvonne said 'guests'."

Lizzy, who was sitting on a bean bag and eating crisps, laughed. "Getting bored of Elliot, are we?"

"Hey," said Emma. "That was a cold-blooded tactical pact, and we both knew it. Unlike you and Will," she added, with a complete disregard for subtlety. "Seriously, you're going to have to confront it at some point. What's happening there?"

"Nothing," said Lizzy, but it wasn't as firmly as she'd said it yesterday. She sighed. "I'm just tired of it all. Since I first got here it's just been following me around like a really dedicated mosquito, and I'm ready for it to be over. I just want us to be civil." She swallowed. "And I will admit that I might have been… harsh at times."

"Completely irrational and unreasonable, yes." This was from Mary, who was just walking by.

"Thank you, Mary," said Lizzy stiffly. "But my pride was hurt! Here was this hot guy saying that I wasn't attractive enough to make a fuss about — "

"Aha!" Emma pounced. "So you admit that he's hot!"

"The prophet Tiresias would admit that he's hot," said Lizzy testily. "I'm too tired of it all to be angry any more. I just want to exchange apologies and move on."

Emma lifted a brow. "Move on… in your relationship?"

"No!" said Lizzy. "I just said — no, it's not happening. We have nothing in common. He might be hot, but I am not attracted to him. No way."

It was impossible for Emma to look any less impressed. "Seriously? The guy tans like a Greek god and has a face like Alain Delon."

"That means nothing to me," said Lizzy. "Go and be film snobs with Anne."

"Look," George was saying, sat on a picnic bench surrounded by wildflowers and facing the gorgeous, glittering blue sea, "I like you, but I really think we should take things slow."

"I like you too," said Harriet. "But technically we've been coupled up over a week. That's loads of time, right? We're already taking it slow."

George looked at her as she sat opposite him in a light blue dress, with her hair done up in an elaborate plait thing. He couldn't deny that he did like her: she was kind and pretty and fun, but until yesterday he'd had no idea she could work up a temper. He was probably twisted in the head, but seeing her rant at him yesterday had made him change his mind; he'd begun rethinking his idea of her as innocent and slightly uninteresting, and starting to think of her as… well. Someone to kiss.

"I owe it to you to be honest," he said. "It's only quite recently that I've started really being interested
"That was the worst stringing together of words I've ever heard," said Jane.

"I mean — obviously anyone would be interested, because you're beautiful, but until recently I didn't think it could ever work between us because... well, I guess it took me so long because I kept thinking about the age difference. But I'm sorry if it looked like I was stringing you along at the beginning."

George felt quite pleased with himself for that recovery.

"I don't mind," said Harriet. "As long as you're interested now."

George thought about being thirty-two and habitually single, and how there was always an excuse for why things couldn't work.

He smiled and let his eyes go all crinkly. "I definitely am," he said, and leaned in to kiss her.

Lizzy saw her chance when Will left the group clustered on the patio, and forced herself to take it.

"Will?" she said, approaching from the villa. "Um, can we talk?"

He looked a bit surprised that she was talking to him — there had, after all, been a day of avoiding one another only yesterday — but he nodded. "Do you want to go inside?"

"Great!" she said chirpily. "Inside is great."

They sat opposite each other on those plush sofa chairs.

"I'm sorry," said Lizzy, leaning forward. "It would probably take too long to apologise for everything, so I'll just say: I've been acting like a child. And I was really unfair to you about the recoupling. I am thankful you saved me. I'm having a really fantastic time here, and I know you weren't doing it to... well, you know."

Will smiled ruefully. "For [you] to fall into [my] arms."

She laughed stupidly. "Right," she said. "Anyway. So that's it. I hope we can be friends?"

"Wait," he said, grabbing her by the hand as she made to stand up and leave. "I'm sorry too. For a lot of things, but especially for saying — you know."

"Yeah," said Lizzy, looking uncomfortable.

Will let go of her hand.

"You are," he said, with force. "I don't want you to think I don't think you are."

She blinked. "What?"

"Attractive. Worth making a fuss about."

It took Lizzy a moment of effort to find her voice. Will was looking at her very intensely, and
dazedly Lizzy told herself the first thing she was doing once she had an Internet connection would be to Google Alain Delon's eyes.

She shook her head and the moment passed. What was she thinking? She wanted someone funny and sweet and thoughtful. No matter how deep and mesmerising his stupid eyes were, Will was not that guy.

"Thank you," she said. "But you know you don't have to say that — we're obviously not, you know, after the mess of everything — ever going to go there."

The corners of his mouth turned upwards. "Can't a guy platonically tell the girl he's technically supposed to be sharing a bed with that she's attractive?"

There was a touch of nervousness in Lizzy's laugh that nobody heard but her. "I guess he can. Um. See you later, Will."

Tom blew a raspberry.

"Use your words," said Jane primly.

Tom stuck his tongue out at her. "He's just agreed to be friends with someone he's attracted to."

"It's not like he has much choice," said Jane. "This must be the third time she's rejected him."

"He's not going to be friends with her," continued Tom. "You shouldn't be friends with someone you have feelings for."

He would know.

"Let me help you get that."

Anne looked up to see Elton standing over her. "Oh! Hi. Thanks."

She moved aside to let him in front of the cupboard. He reached the jar of strawberry jam with ease and handed it to her. She pried open the lid and waited for her toast to pop up; he busied himself with rearranging the other jars in the cupboard so fellow short people like Anne could reach them.

"I felt like having an afternoon snack," Anne broke out, when she couldn't take the silence any more. It was the best she could do.

This was ridiculous. They'd kissed for at least ten minutes in bed last night, and now she couldn't even talk to him.

"My mum makes jam," said Elton. "She comes up with new flavours and enters them in competitions."

"Has she won any?" asked Anne.

"Not yet," said Elton. "It's been eight years, but she doesn't give up."

Elton's words had more of an effect than he could ever have dreamed. Anne took them to heart. She would take a leaf out of Elton's mum's book. She, too, wouldn't give up.
"What sort of flavours does she come up with?" she asked.

Elton sat down next to her. "Er, so let me think… she's done gin and strawberry, gooseberry and pineapple…"

"That sounds interesting," said Anne. "What did it taste like?"

Elton made a face. "Sour."

Anne laughed, which made him laugh too.

The toast popped up and Elton stood.

"I'll get it for you," he said. "I'm great at spreading jam."

"Lots of practice?"

"Years," said Elton.

Anne laughed again. As she sat at the kitchen watching Elton prepare for her jam on toast, she smiled, and thought to herself that this could maybe be something.

It passed quickly into evening, with still no sign of any newcomers. Some of the contestants had drifted away from their seats around the fire pit. Others, like Emma, remained.

Emma was the most disgruntled of all the girls.

"It's rude to keep people waiting," she said, sipping cranberry juice and making a weak effort not to sulk.

"I'm sure it's not their fault," said George good-naturedly. "Don't take it out on them when they arrive."

"If they ever do," said Emma darkly.

"Anyway, they might be girls," said Harriet, who was sitting between them.

Emma shot her a look that was almost a glare.

But finally, the moment came. Two boys — thank God they were boys — came through the door: both good-looking, both dressed acceptably, and Emma began to feel that taking over a month away from work wasn't such a hopeless venture after all.

The taller one was called Frank: half-French, half-Nigerian, very charming. Emma didn't pay attention to the other one; she was too busy talking to Frank, whom she'd quickly stolen away from the group at large.

"I have a confession to make," said Frank, once they were seated together on the smaller swing set, away from everyone else.

"I love confessions," said Emma.

He grinned. "So I hope you love this one." He leaned in to whisper: "I didn't want you and Elton to work out."
"Really?" said Emma, much more interested than she was offended. "And why was that?"

He smiled and looked away, as if he was embarrassed.

"Come on," she wheedled.

He gave up the pretence. "All right. It was so I wouldn't have to fight over anyone to get to you."

Emma laughed. "Believe me, there isn't exactly a queue."

"But there should be," said Frank, actually kissing her hand. "You're beautiful."

She rolled her eyes good-naturedly, but she was flattered. "Sweet-talker."

"Truth-talker," he corrected. "So has my confession paid off?"

Emma tsked. "Patience, mister. All good things come to those who wait."

Anne and Lizzy were hiding out in the kitchen to talk.

"Oh, he's hot," said Lizzy, glancing over at one of the new guys: the one who hadn't been claimed by Emma. She paused. "What did he say his name was?"

"Wickham," said Anne. She grinned. "Don't tell me you're moving off Will so soon."

"I was never on him," said Lizzy. She'd told Anne about her conversation with Will and how they'd agreed to just be friends. "Of course, I'll talk to Will about it, but damn. I've got this weakness for pretty white boys."

"Don't we all," said Anne, draining her glass. She looked at Elton. "Though Elton isn't exactly pretty. More — "

"Fit," supplied Lizzy.

Anne blushed. "Yes."

Lizzy nudged her shoulder. "And have I said congratulations yet?"

Whilst Emma and Lizzy in particular were delighted with the new boys, every action has an equal and opposite reaction, and this one was supplied by the three people sat on the massive swing set: George, Elliot and Will.

"I don't trust him," said Elliot, nursing his cranberry vodka.

"Me neither," said George and Will.

Elliot frowned. "Are you talking about Frank too?"

"Yes," (George); "no," (Will).

Mary and Edmund appeared: an aberration of happily coupled-up bliss amidst the majority of bitter singledom.

"Whatcha talking about?" asked Mary, perching on Edmund's lap as he took the space next to George.
"There's enough space for both of you," observed Will.

"Don't be bitter," said Mary, but she had the courtesy to hop off Edmund anyway. "Is that what's going on? Are the three of you forming a miserable singles boyband?"

"I'm serious about Harriet," said George. "I know I wasn't very honest at the beginning, but I really do feel differently about her now. We're seeing where things go."

Mary did not hide her surprise. "Hey! Good for you, George!" She turned to Will and Elliot. "How about you two?"

"Mary, is an interrogation really necessary?" asked Edmund mildly.

"They don't have to answer," she said.

"Oh, excellent," said Will. "Then I won't be."

Elliot looked in agreement.

"Look at that," said Edmund, motioning to where Lizzy and Anne were being approached by Elton and Wickham. "The new guy's got guts."

Something that sounded suspiciously like 'he won't when I'm done with him' came from Will's corner of the swing.

"What was that?" asked Mary sweetly.

Glaring helped alleviate the pain. "Buzz off, Crawford."

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"So," prompted Jane, switching off the TV and looking over at Tom. He hadn't spoken since he'd made the dramatic statement about having feelings for your friend. "What did you think?"

"Hmm? Oh, right. That new guy Frank seems decent."

She nodded slowly. "You've moved on from Emma and George, then."

"Jumped off the sinking ship, yeah. They're hopeless."

Jane nodded. "I guess."

"So," said Tom, standing up and making his way out the room. He paused at the doorway. "Goodnight, then."

"Goodnight."

He nodded and disappeared down the hall.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I'm not loving this chapter but you can't win them all. Thanks so much for reading, please leave a comment if you'd like (I realised that saying 'leave a comment if
you love me' was going to drastically reduce the chances of any comments), find me on Tumblr and I'll see you soon.
Then Suddenly I Bump Into You

Chapter Notes

Some people have asked me about my upload schedule: frankly I don't have one because I did for some say and the consequences were disastrous, but it's approx three to five times a week (usually on Wednesdays, Saturdays, and some other day). It's probably best to subscribe, or you could follow my Tumblr (loversinfiniteness), where I always post updates, and obsessively track the tag 'down the isle'.

Not sponsored by Doritos. Title from Frozen's Love is an Open Door.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Previously on Down the Isle...

Love's giving itself a second chance on the isle, as both George and Harriet and Anne and Elton discover a newfound connection with their other half. But more importantly, two new boys came on the isle last evening, by the names of Frank and Wickham. Have Emma and Lizzy finally found their Prince Charmings?

"I have high hopes for Frank," said Tom, loudly popping open a bag of Doritos, Cool Original.

Jane made a face, directed at both his comment and choice of Dorito flavour. "He seems shady."

"Shady," repeated Tom doubtfully. "Why?"

"There's just something about him," said Jane. She shook her head. "Oh well. All will be revealed, I suppose."

Will was enjoying his breakfast alone on the terrace with absolutely no chance of anyone talking to him, when he heard a throat clear from behind the door.

He turned around to see Anne, which was not an entirely unpleasant surprise. If he made a list ranking everyone on the isle, Anne would be probably in the upper half. Which he hadn't. Yet.

"Can I sit here?" she asked, holding her breakfast, which was a muffin and a glass of orange juice.

"Sure," said Will gruffly, scooting over to one side of the bench.

"Thanks," said Anne, and sat down. "This is my favourite spot in the villa."

Will shrugged. "It's OK."

Anne laughed. They ate in a comfortable silence, watching the other contestants who were in the kitchen below. Anne winced when she saw Wickham cozy up to Lizzy. She glanced at Will to catch his reaction, but he remained interested in his weird breakfast salad.
Anne finished her muffin and stood up.

"Lizzy and I are pretty close," she said off-handedly, as if Will wasn't there. "So I know that sometimes, you have to be patient with her."

Then she left.

"So's anyone, like, caught your eye? You know, for your date."

In Yvonne's absence, Wickham and Frank had been informed by Brian the tech liaison that today, both of them were allowed to go on one date with anyone in the villa.

Wickham frowned and lay back on the day bed with his hands behind his head. "Emma's pretty hot," he said. "But I talked to Frank this morning and he said he's into her."

Elton made a face. "Damn, that sucks. Sorry, man."

Wickham shrugged. "Nah, it's chill. Onto the next, right? What about that Indian chick?"

"Lizzy?" said Elton. "Yeah, I think... hey, Anne!" he called, as Anne wandered past.

"Hey," she said, coming over to them. She pecked Elton on the cheek and turned to Wickham. "Wickham."

"Anne," he nodded.

Elton tugged Anne down to sit next to him. "Babe, what's the situation with Lizzy and Will?"

Anne looked at Wickham but said nothing.

"There isn't one," she said eventually. "She told him she didn't have feelings for him and just wanted to be friends."

"So they're over?"

"I suppose," said Anne.

Wickham slapped his thigh. "Fuck yes, that means I don't have to talk to another guy. I can get straight to the action."

And apparently he did mean straight to it, because seconds later he was striding away from Elton and Anne, and towards Lizzy, who was at that moment sat with Mary. Mary looked delighted to vacate her seat; Lizzy looked delighted that Wickham was taking it.

"Oh, no," muttered Anne, looking at the kitchen tables at which currently sat George, Will, Edmund and now Mary. "The poor guy gets a front seat."

Emma was not at all surprised when Frank chose to go on a date with her — in fact, she’d expected it, and would’ve fumed if he’d asked someone else. But he hadn't. Now, as they sat drinking sangria in the Italian sunshine, talking about old movies, Emma was almost tempted to use the word 'perfect'.

"I can't believe you've never seen Casablanca," Emma was saying. "Can you even call yourself a film connoisseur? Even my dad's seen Casablanca, and he thinks a good film is one with a happy ending. Not that I don't love him," she added quickly. "But seriously?"
"I've just never been in the right mood," said Frank. "And now that I'm old and jaded, I can't approach it in the way great love stories ought to be. I'll almost definitely hate it."

"But that's the point!" said Emma. "That's exactly what happens in the film. Rick — Humphrey Bogart — is old and jaded, and then his love for Isla leads him to be reinvigorated."

Frank sat back in his chair. "Are you calling me old and jaded?"

She smiled teasingly. "You said it, baby, not me."

"I suppose I did," said Frank, grinning. "Baby."

Wickham, on advice from Elton, had chosen Lizzy for his date instead of Emma, and he was currently congratulating himself on that choice.

"So what do you do?" asked Wickham, pouring out more sangria.

Lizzy, for her part, was feeling pretty good about this date. He was attractive, funny, actually interested in what she was saying… which was sadly more than what she'd got from anyone else.

"Oh, not nearly as crazy as being a model," she said pointedly. Wickham flashed his preppy high street fashion smile. "I'm going to be an academic. I'll specialise in nineteenth century British literature."

Wickham looked as excited as most people did when she told them about her job.

"But it isn't just reading old books," she added. "I spend a lot of time teaching undergrads."

"Oh, wow," said Wickham. He leaned forward and said, like it was a secret, "I hated school."

"Really? I would've thought you were one of the popular kids."

"Not with the teachers," he said, grinning. "But if I'd had you as a teacher… I would've tried harder."

Lizzy smiled in spite of herself. "If I taught you, you'd hate me."

"Someone as beautiful as you? Never."

"Don't give me that," said Lizzy, narrowing her eyes. But she was flattered all the same.

Tom squinted. "You know, I think maybe I saw his face on an ad once."

Jane had his Instagram open in seconds. After three seconds of scrolling, she showed Tom one of his posts. "Hmm, was it this one?"

He squinted. "Yes! You're amazing," he said admiringly. He frowned slightly. "And terrifying."

"I bet you tell all the girls that," said Jane.

Emma came back from her date with Frank feeling cautiously hopeful. It had gone very well for a first date, and Emma had gone on enough first dates to be an excellent judge. But all the same, she
was unfailingly cautious about her feelings. One date did not two soulmates make.

"How was it?" asked Mary, as she helped Emma undo her hair up in the girls' dressing room.

Emma made a noncommittal noise. "Oh, you know."

Mary pulled out pins with a terrifying efficiency. "Do I?"

They made eye contact through the mirror.

"Fine," said Emma, folding like a bad hand. "It went well. We definitely have chemistry, and… well…"

"Did you kiss?" asked Mary.

Emma glared at her in the mirror. "Yes," she said primly.

"Good?"

"Not bad."

Mary laughed. "OK, so great."

"I hate you."

Mary laughed again. "No, seriously, that's wonderful," she said sincerely. "You deserve something good."

Emma sighed. "I do, don't I? Like what you have with Edmund."

Mary smiled. "Yeah, that's pretty good."

George bumped into Emma just as she was coming out the main room and he was going inside.

"Oh, hi," he said. "How did your date with Frank go?"

"Pretty good," said Emma, nodding. "We have a lot in common. But can you believe he's never seen Casablanca?"

"That's criminal," said George, having seen it himself and feeling that it gave him good reason to share in the malignity towards Frank.

"It is," said Emma, and he wasn't entirely sure that she was joking.

"Oh, um, do you know which sun cream is Harriet's?" he asked. "I said I'd get it for her."

Emma raised her eyebrows a fraction, before reminding herself of how rude she was being. Harriet had every right to ask George to fetch her sun cream. Belatedly, Emma realised she didn't know that George and Harriet were doing so well, and it was probably because she'd been so preoccupied with Frank. She made a mental note to catch up with Harriet later.

"Of course," she said. "I'll show you."

George smiled at her. "Thanks."

"So," said Emma conversationally, as they went up the stairs. "How are you and Harriet?"
"Good," said George. "We're still taking things slow, but I'm glad I — " He caught himself, then shook his head. "No, I'm being ridiculous; everyone probably knows what happened. I'm glad I kissed her and started things up, even though at the time I thought it was a huge mistake. But I'm really enjoying getting to know her."

"Oh," said Emma, who did not know the details up to the kiss. She knew George and Harriet were no longer the one-sided couple they had been in the first week, but she didn't know that it was George who'd initiated it. "Well, that's great! Harriet's a great girl." Emma cringed at the alliteration. "You couldn't be with anyone better."

"I think she's easy to overlook," said George thoughtfully. "I know I'm guilty of that. But she's funny and smart and sweet, once you get to know her."

Emma knew Harriet very well; she was one of her best friends on the isle. But funny and smart were not the words that would've come to mind if she had to describe Harriet. It was odd that they were to George.

"It's this one," said Emma, holding out Harriet's sun cream.

George took it. "Thanks." He turned it over aimlessly in his hands. "OK, confession. She told me it was cerulean blue, but I didn't want to ask if that meant it was light or dark. Now I know it's… neither." He smiled at her. "Thanks, Emma."

"No problem," she said, and went back inside the bathroom. She told herself she was absolutely not avoiding a walk back outside with him. "I'll see you later."

"So you like him," said Anne, eating a strawberry yogurt and listening to Lizzy's analysis of her date with Wickham with a grave heart.

"I think so," said Lizzy. "He's very smooth, which usually puts me off, but he's got a kind of boyish charm, you know? I can't help but smile."

"Right," said Anne hollowly.

Lizzy eyed her friend. "You don't sound convinced."

"No, I am! If you are, then I am too."


"Even if it isn't positive?"

"Especially if it isn't positive."

"Well," said Anne. "It's nothing big. I just… don't get a great vibe from him."

"You don't get a great vibe from him," repeated Lizzy.

"I said it wasn't really a big thing," said Anne. "Just a dumb gut thing."

Lizzy looked sceptical, but nodded. "OK," she said. "But I still like him."

Some DJ had been flown in this evening, so dance music was blaring over every inch of the villa, including the secluded spot Will had picked out for himself.
"It looks like we're both having a solitary time of it," said Elliot, coming over to join Will on the steps.

"Looks like it," said Will.

They watched the dancing couples and nursed their beers.

"How's it going?" asked Will, out of necessity. "Since now Emma's going somewhere with Frank. Are you looking anywhere in particular?"

Elliot frowned. "Those are two different questions."

"Answer the second one," said Will.

"Oh," said Elliot. "Well, no. I don't know if I connect to anyone, you know? And everyone here's so oppressively monogamous, even though no one's exclusive... when I went after Mary, you know, everybody was so enraged. For no reason."

"Because she'd already turned you down, and you tried to manipulate Edmund into ending things with her," said Will.

Elliot didn't say anything for a while.

"So," Elliot began, moments later. "What do you think of the newcomers?"

"I don't," lied Will.

"Seriously, man? Not even Wickham?"

"What do you want to say, Elliot?"

Elliot sucked in a breath. "You know, I don't dig your negative vibes."

"Well, neither do I," said Will.

Elliot seemed encouraged. "The first step to positivity is expressing that you're open to it."

"I'm open to throwing Wickham out of here," said Will, but he immediately sighed. "No, I know that's not fair. Even without him in the picture, I still wouldn't be..."

"With Lizzy," Eliot supplied.

Will rolled his eyes. "Yes."

Elliot surprised Will by clapping him on the back. "Just believe," he said. "Believe in the power of the isle."

Will sighed.

"Poor guy," said Tom, stretching his arms above his head, as if he'd just completed a workout instead of an hour of TV. "He wants someone who won't even look at him."

Jane shrugged. "He could whine less. Anyway, I don't think Lizzy and Wickham are going to work out."
"I miss Yvonne," said Tom. "I hope her crack-up with that restaurant guy blows over. This show is suffering without her."

"And it sounds as if restaurant guy is suffering with," said Jane. "An unfortunate irony."

"All irony is unfortunate for someone," said Tom.

Jane looked impressed, but countered with the reliably dismissive: "Everything is unfortunate for someone."

"Ugh," said Tom. "I'm too tired for ethics." He forced himself to stand up and dragged himself to the door. "Goodnight, Austen."

"Night, Lefroy."

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter with lots of pining and no action. This will all pay off, guys. I'd be so interested to know your favourite couple (or non-couple, in the case of Emma and George, Will and Lizzy, Jane and Tom, basically everyone… yep). Please leave a comment if you so desire, hit me up on Tumblr and another chapter much the same in terms of resolution will be up soon!
Previously on Down the Isle…

Both Wickham and Lizzy's and Frank and Emma's dates seem to have gone well. But was it jealousy that Emma felt, on hearing that George and Harriet were enjoying getting to know each other better? Are cracks beginning to show in the unlikely pairing of Anne and Elton? And what about Mary and Edmund — has what they got up to last night changed their relationship?

"Who are you texting?" When she didn't immediately reply, Tom leaned over to peek at Jane's phone. "Harris? Who the hell is Harris?"

"You don't know him," said Jane, moving away from Tom.

"You're right; I don't bloody know him. For all I know, he could be a serial killer."

Jane didn't reply.

"Care to tell me who he is?"

"No one important," said Jane, continuing to text.

"No one important? You're missing the Down the Isle intro for him!"

Jane put her phone face-down on the coffee table. "Happy now?"

"Ecstatic," snapped Tom.

Edmund wasn't there when Mary woke at what was a godawful early hour, but as she blearily fumbled for her watch, she found a piece of paper on his pillow.

She smiled and reached for it.

Last night was amazing. I didn't want to wake you, but if you're up now, I'll be on the terrace until breakfast. Come and find me?

Mary berated herself for feeling almost giddy as she washed, dressed and fixed her hair. With a final glance at the rest of the room, and satisfied that no one else was awake, she made her way up the stairs to the terrace.

She knocked on the open door. "Good morning."

Edmund, who was standing at the side looking out at the rest of the villa, almost jumped at the
sound. He turned around to see her standing by the door.

"I got your note," said Mary conversationally, as she walked towards him. "You know, it better be for a good reason that you left our very warm bed and dragged me out here to talk to you, because now that we're up here we can hardly —"

"Mary," interrupted Edmund, and she stopped talking because he almost never did that. He looked excited and nervous — his cheeks were flushed with spots of red and his eyes were practically glowing — "I have to tell you something."

"OK," said Mary slowly.

Edmund sucked in a breath. "Mary. I should've told you this before we, um —"

"Slept together," Mary put in.

"Right," said Edmund, and turned even more red. Mary could feel her formerly stone-cold heart soften at the sight. "But I have to tell you, that what you mean to me — you're special. And I really hope we're on the same page — I mean, obviously you wouldn't have slept with me if you didn't feel at least slightly the same way — " he frowned — "not that there's anything wrong with women having casual sex, or anyone, that's not the point — " He let out a breath. "I've never felt like this about anyone, ever. And I just wanted to know — if you want to tell me — do you? As well?"

"Edmund," said Mary. She wrapped her arms around his neck as if to steady him. "Of course I feel the same way."

"You do?"

"Yes. Don't worry. That was the least casual sex I've ever had."

He laughed and tucked her head into the crook of his neck. She nodded towards the door. "Now, can we go into the lounge and make out until someone comes in?"

"So, Mary," said Lizzy, later that morning, when everyone was awake. The girls had formed a circle of judgement on the lawn, and Mary was on the stand. "Methinks you have some good news for us."

"Oh, Christ," said Mary. She sipped her blueberry smoothie. "I told Edmund to be quiet."

No one said anything for a moment, and then Harriet, Anne and Lizzy burst into giggles.

"Wait, what's going on?" asked Emma impatiently.

Lizzy raised her eyebrows. "You don't know? Maybe you and Frank were preoccupied last night too."

"By the sounds of it, so was Mary," Emma shot back. She turned to Mary. "Did you have sex?"

"Yes," said Mary simply.

"Mary!" "Seriously?" "Oh my god!"

Mary grinned and looked at her watch. "All right, you have one minute to ask anything you want, and then I'm done talking about this. Starting... now."

Emma asked the most important question first. "How was it?"
"Excellent," said Mary. She put on a 1960s screen siren voice. "Edmund's a very generous lover."

"Gross," said Lizzy cheerfully. "How many times did you do it?"

"Lizzy!" said Anne.

"Twice," said Mary. "Lizzy, you've just forfeited your right to talk."

"Do you really like him?" asked Harriet, just as Anne asked, "So is it pretty serious between you two?"

Mary blushed.

"That's the question that makes you blush?" said Emma.

Lizzy mouthed her disapproval.

"I'm weird about feelings," grumbled Mary. "Yes, it is serious. This morning he left a note telling me to come to the terrace, and then I went, and he rambled a lot and said that he'd never felt this way about someone."

"You're smiling!" said Emma. "Mary, you're mad about him."

"I definitely feel mad," she muttered. "Ugh." She pressed her hat to her face so nobody could see her blush. Her voice came out in a muffle. "I think I know why I've never dated anyone like him. I was waiting for the right time."

"Aww." This from everyone, Lizzy excepted.

Emma removed Mary's hat. "Stop cheating. Do you see yourself staying with him after we leave this place?" she asked.

Mary looked more uncomfortable than any of them had ever seen her, including last night when she accidentally ate a chili.

"Yes," she said, after a few moments' thought. "Is that stupid? I mean, God only knows what's about to happen — someone perfect for him could walk in, or someone perfect for me, and it could all go wrong."

"What if someone did?" asked Anne.

Mary knew what her answer was.

"It wouldn't matter," she said softly. "I'm only interested in him."

All anyone was talking about for the next half an hour was the fact that last night, Mary and Edmund became the first couple on the isle to sleep together.

Over by the pool, Wickham and Lizzy lounged on deck chairs.

"Pretty wild, huh?" said Wickham. "About Mary and Edmund going all the way."

"Pretty wild," agreed Lizzy. "But it was bound to happen. They've been together since the start, and they're obviously really into each other."

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Wickham scooted over and looked into her eyes. "Are they? I know he is, but she's kind of difficult to read."

"Is she?" asked Lizzy.

"Mm-hmm. But I think I'm getting the right signals."

Lizzy swallowed. "We're not talking about Edmund and Mary any more, are we?"

"Do you want to be?"

Lizzy smiled. "No."

"Ugh," said Jane feelingly.

Anne, Elton, George and Harriet were spread around the living room furniture indoors.

"I totally heard noises," said Elton, as if it were a bragging point. Since Elton and Anne's bed was right next to Mary and Edmund's, it was sadly not implausible.

"Were you listening?" said Anne incredulously.

Elton looked as if he didn't want to answer that question.

"Mary says she's pretty serious about him," said Harriet, directing the conversation to more wholesome places. She sighed happily. "She said that it was different this time, and that he's special… aw, I think they're really great together."

George kissed the top of her head. "You're so sweet, did you know that?"

Elton and Anne looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Having found themselves in similar places in their respective relationships, and with news of Mary and Edmund's night having altered the energy in the villa, Anne, Lizzy and Emma decided that that afternoon was a good time to sit around the kitchen, eat cookies and overanalyse their love lives.

"I do like him," said Anne. "When we're alone he's so thoughtful and a really nice guy, but it's just…"

"You don't see a future with him," Emma finished.

"Right," said Anne. "But I thought I did once, with my ex, and I was obviously wrong. So I don't think I know anything."

"Is this The Ex?" asked Lizzy.

"What?" asked Emma. "Who's The Ex?"

Anne looked pained. "Um."

Lizzy clapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh God, I'm so sorry, was I not meant to — "

"No, it's fine," said Anne easily, waving a hand. "Honestly, it was just a dumb teenage relationship
that I haven't — anyway." She told the story as if it had happened to someone else. "I was with this guy from when we were fourteen to eighteen, but we broke it off because he went to join the navy and I didn't. He became a navy engineer and I could've been a navy doctor, but it just wasn't the life I wanted. Also," she added offhandedly, "I hate swimming."

"And he got mad at you for not going with him? What a dickhead," said Emma.

"Um, well, not exactly like that," said Anne. "I broke it off with him. I didn't think it could work, what with me doing med at uni, and him in the navy, and no end-point where he'd quit, or I'd go out there."

"Oh," said Emma.

"In summary, we haven't seen each since, and he's The Ex because he's the only one I have."

Emma looked shocked. "The only one you have? Anne Elliot, if you've been holding back on romance because of this one guy — oh my god, don't tell me you're still in love with him?"

"Obviously not," said Anne wryly. "That would be insane. But there you go: that's why I'm on this show. Because I'm worried for myself."

That last sentence was said with Anne's characteristic self-deprecating humour, but even she didn't laugh. There was a silence. On a day with the romantic hopefulness of this one, Anne's tale of her ex had been a reminder that life was usually not a fairy tale. Emma felt that if there was any justice in the world, The Ex would parachute down to the isle tomorrow, still in love with Anne and they'd live happily ever after. But from what Anne had said, all ties between them were severed. He'd almost definitely moved on.

"Enough of my tragic past," said Anne. "Emma, how's it going with you and Frank?"

Emma blushed, which she never did, and said a single, cryptic: "Good."

"She got it on last night," said Lizzy, sipping orange juice.

"Lizzy!" said Emma, swatting her. But she didn't deny it. "OK, not as far as Edmund and Mary, but definitely…"

"There was action," said Anne.

"Yes."

Anne and Lizzy looked at each other, but Emma seemed determined not to say more.

"Fine," said Lizzy. She changed the subject. "So I'm still sharing a bed with Will, but it's so sexless it means nothing." She didn't notice the glance exchanged between Anne and Emma. "But I think if Wickham asked…"

"You would?"

"Sleep in the same bed as him, and only if he asked," said Lizzy, shooting down their gleeful comments. "Jesus Christ, I've still only known him two days."

"But two days here feels like two weeks," said Emma teasingly. "Lizzy, own up. You're attracted to him."

"Of course I'm attracted to him," grumbled Lizzy. One would think she was talking about an
an annoying colleague, not the guy she fancied. "Just look at him."

They looked over to the pool, where at that very moment Wickham was preparing to perform a jackknife. Just before he dived, he looked over, caught Lizzy's eye and winked.

She felt washed over with giddy feelings. "He's so damn charming," she said. "I can't help myself."

On such a day as this, in the evening something dramatic was bound to happen.

"Darlings!" said Yvonne Leblanc-Wu — really, who else could it be? — as the contestants stood around the fire pit. She was dressed with a boldness that served as a middle finger up to the tabloid stories about her recent romantic difficulties.

"It's been so long since I've seen you all. Don't you think it's about time for a recoupling, followed by a dumping? And I think the girls should choose this time." She added, with a slice of bitterness, "It's so rare that anyone ever listens to us."

Perhaps the tabloids weren't completely off the mark.

"Well, shit," said Will, after Yvonne had left and the group had dispersed. He, George, Mary and Emma were sitting together, and each represented uniquely different reactions to the recoupling news. His was the most pessimistic.

Then he shrugged. "I've been on life support since day three, so this was a long time coming."

"I'm going to miss you, man," said George. "Iceland this winter, yeah?"

"Course, brother."

They clinked glasses. "To my last 24 hours."

"Gallows humour is not productive," said Emma.

Will gave her his usual unimpressed look. "Are you going to save me by coupling up with me?"

"No, but maybe, um…"

She trailed off, defeated by the hopelessness of Will's situation.

"Exactly," said Will.

Mary sighed and said what they were all thinking. "Maybe you should've tried harder with Lizzy."

They looked over to where Lizzy and Wickham stood by the kitchen, Lizzy doubled over in laughter, and each felt the key turn in Will's prison-lock.

He lifted his glass. "So, it's been good knowing you all."

Jane cleared her throat when the episode ended. Tom had said barely anything for the whole hour, and she didn't know whether to poke it or to leave it.

She decided to poke. "Are you all right?"
He smiled his usual wide grin, but after an hour of not talking, one smile was not going to convince Jane that everything was peachy.

"Just tired," he said, as if that was a satisfying explanation.

Jane nodded.

"It looks like Will's time is up, then," she said.

"Looks like it," agreed Tom.

"Maybe there's room for another lawyer," said Jane proddingly. Tom joked all the time about going on the show. There were plenty of replies he could make to that. She was practically blowing the conversation wide open.

He chose one she did not expect. "You think my love life is so bad I need to go on reality TV?"

"What? Tom, it was a joke. Hey, are you all right? Is this about Pauline?"

"No," said Tom, annoyed, and Jane felt affronted. She hadn't done anything wrong. "That's the problem. It wasn't about Pauline. It wasn't anything about her."

And with that, he walked out the room.

Chapter End Notes

Oh no! Will's going to be booted off! Or is he?

I know nothing about the navy. I only know what a jackknife is from High School Musical 2: The Book of the Film. You get a sarcastic congratulations if you can guess who The Ex is. I know these chapters of late feel a bit filler-y, but a) I'm staying true to the nature of reality TV and b) I promise you there's some real whoppers coming. Please leave a review if you'd like, and you can always find me on Tumblr (loversinfiniteness) to ask questions, lavish praise or just to chat!
Title from Lana Del Rey's Summer Bummer. Which, for some of the characters, is also an apt description of their time on the isle.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Previously on Down the Isle…

Mary and Edmund's relationship is stronger than ever after they took things to the next level. Anne revealed that a lingering breakup with her school boyfriend is the reason why she's on the show. Two other couples: Lizzy and Wickham, and Emma and Frank, are doing well respectively. But for certain others, Yvonne's announcement last night that there would be a recoupling (and dumping) the next day left them worried about their fate on the isle…

"Sorry I was a dick yesterday," said Tom, settling on the sofa beside her. "We're good, right?"

This was his third apology. He'd said sorry the first time over breakfast that morning, and at lunch he'd texted her a picture of a pigeon with the caption 'don't let your anger be a bird-en'.

"As much as I enjoy your grovelling," said Jane, "please stop picking at the scab. I was confused, not angry."

"That's why you're my favourite," said Tom, and planted a smacking kiss on her forehead.

Jane rolled her eyes and tucked that away to analyse later.

Emma was up early today: not as early as Will, who woke up at the goddamn crack of dawn, but still early enough that she felt she had this time to herself. She hummed softly as she dressed, and was met with a pleasant surprise fifteen minutes later when she bumped into Frank coming out of the bedroom.

"Good morning," she said. "Sleep well?"

"Very well," he said, and leaned in to kiss her.

Emma backed away. "Have you brushed your teeth yet?"

Frank looked momentarily put out, then laughed. "You don't want to kiss me?"

"I didn't say that," Emma protested. "I just don't want to kiss you now."

"Hmm," said Frank. "I suppose I don't really want to make you mad today…"

Of course, the recoupling, which was in the girls' hands. Most likely Will and Elliot would be going home, and whilst Emma didn't care much for Elliot (she still remembered how he tried to go after
Mary, but then again he did save her in the last recoupling) she was quite fond of Will, and was reluctant to see him go.

"I see how it is," said Emma teasingly. She leaned against the door and pretended to think. "I wonder what else I can get you to do today."

Frank put a hand over his heart. "Are you going to use how much I fancy you against me?"

Emma was momentarily at a loss for words. Of course he fancied her, or he wouldn't be with her, but still. It was nice to hear.

"We'll see," she said mysteriously.

Frank's mouth turned upwards into a grin. "And that's why I like you," he said. He kissed her forehead before making his way to the bathroom. "See you later!"

Emma didn't stop smiling all the way to the gym.

Having also woken up quite early that morning, Anne was in the kitchen alone, making herself a fruit smoothie with the gorgeously expensive blender that was, quite sadly, one of her favourite things about being on the isle.

As was usual at the beginning of a day, she felt cautiously optimistic. It was a great comfort knowing that the girls were in control of tonight's recoupling, and though things with Elton weren't exactly as she could've hoped for… that was still fine, right? It was foolish to expect an instant, undeniable connection with someone — happiness was all about your expectations, and Anne knew she needed to lower hers. And more to the point, they did have fun together…

She was interrupted in her thoughts by Elton's appearance.

"Morning, babe," he said, coming up behind her for a hug.

She turned her head to look at him and smiled politely. "Good morning."

It was Elton's ritual to have fried eggs on toast every breakfast. She watched him fry eggs thoughtfully. She of all the girls had the biggest decision to make tonight, and though the obvious choice was Elton: they were attracted to each other, they had fun… there was something about the two of them that just didn't feel right to Anne. But it was more than she had with either Will or Elliot, so choosing Elton was the only choice she could really make.

She emptied the blender into a glass, took a sip of her smoothie and held it out to him. "Want some?"

He looked dubious. "What's in there?"

"Frozen raspberries, blueberry yogurt, banana…"

The last item caused a look of alarm to flash across his face. "I don't eat bananas," he said, drawing back.

Anne felt the fear of God strike in her heart at his words.

"Is that so," she replied, slowly.

"They're not natural," he said. "Have you seen that documentary Second Banana? It showed all this stuff about bananas not being naturally grown. And people are working on injecting them with
chemicals that they can't control that everyone has to eat, and it'll put some people out of their jobs, and — "

Anne couldn't believe what was happening.

"Disease is natural," she said. "Antibiotics aren't. Something being natural has nothing to do with whether or not it's good."

Elton shrugged and held up his hands in surrender. "Hey, I don't want to fight with you. I'm just saying I like to know what I'm putting in my body."

But Anne was a doctor, and she'd spent too much time staring at internet misinformation to cool down now. "There isn't a conspiracy against you, or anything. I can promise you, if you get sick, it won't be from GM bananas."

Elton found himself actually getting quite angry. "Hang on, that's not even — anyway, why do you care if I don't eat them? I'm not going round trying — "

"Because your reason isn't intellectually sound!"

"I'm not going round trying to convert people," he said. "It's a personal choice."

"But it's a stu — " Anne stopped herself before she said something she would regret. She took a deep breath. "I'm a doctor. My life is built on knowing that science can help people. I can't accept that you think all science is bad."

Elton took a step back. He had no idea how one comment about bananas had blown up into this huge thing. Now Anne was angry — which was kind of hot, but more importantly not good on a day with a recoupling — and he tried to calm the situation: "OK, hold on, I never said that — "

"I'm leaving," said Anne, her rarely seen temper boiling over. "And I'm taking my banana smoothie with me."

The ad break ran immediately afterwards, which gave Jane and Tom the necessary opportunity to dissect what the hell just happened.

"That was…"

"Came out of nowhere," said Tom.

"Right," said Jane. "And I think Anne was out of line."

Tom gave her his most disbelieving look.

"But Elton is, you know." He made a face. "Kinda loopy."

"Maybe," said Jane. "But also Anne shouldn't have been so judgemental and wilfully misunderstood what he was saying? I don't know, that whole conversation felt like an artfully crafted train wreck created and planted to create drama for this episode."

"An artfully crafted train wreck? Never," dismissed Tom. "Who would even do that?"

By half ten, everyone on the isle was up, and most of the contestants were milling around outside.
Tonight's recoupling was all anyone was talking about.

Emma, having finished her workout, was performing her cool down exercises whilst grilling Harriet.

"You're going to pick George, right?" she said, as she lay on her back and stretched out her leg muscles.

"Oh, definitely," said Harriet.

"Good," said Emma. "So it's going well between you two?"

"Really good," said Harriet eagerly. "He's basically everything I've ever dreamed of. He's so attractive and mature. And really funny!"

"Really," said Emma, who had never consciously laughed at one of George's jokes in her life.

"Absolutely," said Harriet, nodding effusively. "And he's such a gentleman. I can't even — he's like, the perfect guy."

At that very moment, the perfect guy approached from the villa.

Emma took this as her cue. She finished her cool down — she had more dignity than to stretch her glutes in front of a male, even if it was only George — and called him over. "George, we're talking about you."

"Is that an invitation to sit down or an attempt to send me away?" he asked. He sat down anyway and smiled at Harriet. "Hello."

"Hi," said Harriet, blushing.

Emma found herself assailed by an inexplicable urge to roll her eyes.

"Anyway," said Emma. "Harriet says she thinks you're funny."

"Emma," said Harriet, aghast at this betrayal of trust.

George gave Emma his usual look: a mix of warmth and challenge. "You don't think she's right?"

"Obviously not," said Emma dismissively.

George sighed dramatically. "Then you, Emma, have terrible taste in men."

"I do not!"

"The evidence speaks for itself."

"I think George is funnier than Frank," volunteered Harriet. "No offence to Frank," she added hastily.

Both George and Emma turned to look at her; somehow, terribly, they'd forgotten she was there.

Emma changed tack. "Being funny isn't even that important," she said. "It's barely on the list of things I look for."

George would not let it go. "So you admit that I am?"

Emma sniffed derisively. "How can you even string those two premises together?"
"Well, you don't want to admit that you agree I'm funnier than — "

"Harriet," said Emma loudly. "Do you want to get some yoghurt?"

"I — sure," said Harriet, not without some bewilderment.

"Great," said Emma, standing up. "Let's go. See you, George."

Emma didn't looked back as she marched Harriet over to the kitchen. If she did, she might have seen George's exasperated, indulgent smile.

Lizzy found Anne slumped in bed, dispassionately finishing her smoothie.

"Anne? How long have you been drinking — " She came closer and saw Anne's miserable expression. "Hey, what's wrong?"

Anne lifted her glum face to look up at Lizzy. "Elton and I got into an argument about bananas."

Lizzy raised an eyebrow.

"Actual bananas, Lizzy," said Anne.

"Right," said Lizzy, climbing on the bed to sit next to Anne. "So it's just a dumb fight."

"No, it was the tip of the iceberg on how different we are," said Anne. "We're just never going to work."

Lizzy looked dubious — after all, how damning could an argument over bananas really be? — but nodded anyway.

"So, that was some crappy timing," she said, trying to lift the mood. "Now who are you going to choose tonight?"

Anne sighed and polished off the remains of her breakfast. "I don't know."

"Actually, I think she's giving up too quickly," said Tom. "She and Elton have barely even started getting to know each other. She's quitting before they've even begun."

Jane's face was one of incredulity. "I hope you're joking."

"Absolutely not," said Tom. He felt the weird, possibly masochistic buzzing delight he always did whenever he and Jane were about to get into an argument. "How can anyone know something's a bad idea before they try it?"

"Because," said Jane slowly, "factors such as a fundamental difference in outlooks can be quite indicative of a relationship's success. How do you think people had happy marriages before dating bridged the gap between 'interested' and 'married'? They made decisions based on what they knew of one another, without experience of being together."

"They had lower expectations," said Tom. "Anyway, you're just proving my point. With lots of arranged marriages, they wouldn't have chosen the other person in other circumstances, but the experience of being married to each other then led to love. Thus: trying something out yields unlikely results."
"Rubbish," said Jane. "Arranged marriages are based on compatibility. Religion, lifestyle, shared values… it's a perfectly sensible way to be married."

"How much can you _really_ know about someone before you actually experience being with them?"

"You can know plenty," said Jane. She sat back on the sofa and sipped her drink, as if the argument was over and she'd won. "I know most of what there is to know about you. And probably vice versa."

"Hey, not vice versa," said Tom. He swallowed, and said lightly, "I'm sure there's lots I don't know about you that Harry does."

"Harris," Jane corrected. "And I suppose you're right, because he knows what it's like to be friendzoned by me."

If Tom wanted to win the argument more than he valued his pride, he would've said: "And I don't?"

News spread like wildfire of Anne and Elton's argument, and that afternoon, Elliot took the chance to make his last bid to stay on the isle.

Anne was talking to Lizzy and Harriet when he found her.

"Anne," he said. "Can I talk to you?"

She couldn't really say 'no'.

"Of course," she said.

Elliot cast a glance at Lizzy and Harriet, who hadn't taken the very obvious cue to leave.

"Let's go to the kitchen," he said.

They went and sat down on the kitchen stools.

"I'm going to be honest here," said Elliot. "We all know that there's going to be a recoupling tonight. Elton, Will and I are all unspoken for. Will's already given up, so that rules him out for staying on. I know you and Elton had an argument, which proves that you're incompatible." He leaned forward and took her hands. "Anne, I'm asking you to reconsider the idea of us. I really think we could have something."

Emma would've said he was full of shit and Lizzy would've teased him to the point where he hung his head in shame. But Anne…

"You said you were going to be honest," she said.

"And I am," said Elliot. "Look, I know this looks unfavorably on me. You probably think I'm just trying to stay on the isle. But you know I think you're interesting and beautiful. I really am asking you to give us another chance. Don't give in so quickly."

That was a low blow, that. Anne had told Elliot, ages ago, that part of the reason she was on this show was because in her life, it was too easy for her to make excuses. Most of the time, she just said she was too busy with work to date. But here, on this sunny island with nothing else to do, there was time and space for a relationship to grow.
"I'll think about it," said Anne.

"Thank you," said Elliot. He stood up. "A kiss for luck?"

That definitely clouded her judgement, because the man knew how to kiss. Even forthright, outspoken Emma would have to give him that.

Maybe Elliot was a fool for kissing Anne in front of the whole villa, because Elton, sitting with George, Will and Edmund, saw it and was spurred into action.

"I have to go over there," he said, after Elliot had gone inside.

"And do what?" said Will. "Kiss better than him?" He knocked back another lime jelly shot. "Anne's not flighty."

"I don't care," said Elton. "I can't leave the isle yet; I haven't even met anyone." He stood up and ruffled his hair. "Lads, is the hair all right?"

"Fine," said Edmund, inspecting the artfully curly mess. "But I really don't think you should just — "

"Too late," said George. Elton was on his way over to Anne with all the subtlety of an elephant, and the whole villa stopped its conversations in order to watch the impending disaster.

"Anne!" said Elton, jogging the last few feet towards her. She'd just stood up to leave; he hauled her back onto a stool. "I'm an idiot," he said. "All that stuff I said earlier… forget it."

Anne blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"Yeah, it was all wrong," he said. "I'm nowhere near as smart as you. You're obviously right about science and everything. I don't know what I'm talking about."

Anne frowned. "But you were right that I was being condescending," she said. "And I was unfair to assume what I did."

There was a pause.

"Right," said Elton, performing a marvellous turnaround. He furrowed his brow. "So you owe me an apology."

"We both owe each other apologies," said Anne slowly. And in her second marvellous exit of the day, she tucked the stool under the counter and said: "But somehow I don't think it's going to matter very much."

Later that day, half an hour before dinner, Lizzy was coming downstairs and she walked past Will. Had she not known that this would be his last day, she wouldn't have said anything more than a generic greeting. But it was, and she felt bad for him, as well as a little guilty. So just as he was rounding the corner to go outside, she called after him and he turned around.

"Hey," she said, going up to him. "Um, I just wanted to say that, you know — I'm sorry that you're probably leaving."

The corner of his mouth quirked up. "Join the crowd. George has been in a state all day."
Lizzy smiled — was that the first time he'd done that to her? "I know it's kind of my fault that things didn't exactly — work out between us."

"It's fine," said Will. "I know that you and Wickham — that there's something there."

"I think so," said Lizzy. "Anyway, good luck on the outside and all that." She smiled impishly at him one last time. "Get a manager before you sign any modelling contracts."

He raised an eyebrow. "Giving legal advice to a lawyer?"

She nodded wisely. "The cobbler always goes barefoot."

He smiled. "I'll remember that."

On what was surely the most exciting evening so far on Down the Isle, everyone sat around the fire pit, waiting for Yvonne to arrive. Elton and Elliot were sat as far away from each other as possible. Will wore the expression Anne Boleyn must've worn as she was led to the scaffold; George wore Thomas Wyatt's.

Tonight, Yvonne wore yellow and looked grave. "Darlings, it's horrible, but it must be done." It was an indication of how low the mood was when she didn't even take the opportunity to make a suggestive comment. "Boys, stand up and line up next to me. Girls, in the order I say, stand up and go to the boy you want to couple up with. You may sit down after you've made your choice."

Mary predictably chose Edmund; Harriet chose George; Emma chose Frank; and Lizzy, with a sympathetic smile at Will, chose Wickham.

"Anne," said Yvonne. "Please choose the boy you'd like to couple up with."

Anne stood up and looked at her options. She knew what she had to do.

"The boy I'd like to couple up with is..."

No one made a sound.

"Will."

"WHAT," said Tom. "WHAT."

"Calm down," said Jane. "Faced with options as shit as those, what else could she have done?"

"Do not tell me you saw that coming," said Tom. "She hasn't even mentioned if she fancies Will! At least she was attracted to Elton. Now she has to share a bed with Will!"

"For goodness sake," said Jane. "Can't a woman share a bed with a man she's not attracted to?"

She added, as an aside, "God knows we've been doing it for centuries."

"Congratulations, Will and Anne," said Yvonne. "Elton and Elliot, I'm sorry to be saying this, but you're going to have to say goodbye."

"No worries," said Elton, who was keeping a brave face. Elliot was slightly less graceful about it, but
soon both of them were so swarmed with hugs that it didn't matter.

"I'm sorry," said Anne, when Elton reached her. "I really hope you find someone. But I think we know that that girl isn't me. You're great, and someone else is going to know it even more than I do."

"Hey, don't feel bad," said Elton, hugging her. "Maybe we can go and catch a documentary some time?"

Anne's face stilled.

"Too soon?"

She laughed. "I'm going to miss you, Elton."

She surrendered Elton to George. Looking over the scene, she spied Elliot talking to Edmund and Mary, and made her way through the crowd towards them.

"Hey," she said.

Mary and Edmund made themselves scarce.

"I'm sorry it turned out this way," she said.

Elliot shrugged. "We can only make decisions for ourselves."

Anne nodded sagely.

"Just out of curiosity," she said, as a last word before she walked away and would probably only ever see him again at awkward Down the Isle cast member reunions. "Did you mean what you said earlier? Or was that just a plea to stay on the isle, and you would've said anything?"

Elliot didn't say anything for a while. Then he shrugged.

"Does it matter?" he asked. "I knew you were never serious about us."

Anne faltered out a reply, but it sounded empty even to her own ears. For all his condescending manner, she was very aware that he might have a point.

"Good luck, Anne," he said. "I hope you can open yourself up to the right guy when you meet him."

Bitterly and secretly, Anne wondered if she ever would again.

Once the initial shock of Anne choosing Will — with the by-product of sending both Elton and Elliot home — had worn off, Lizzy dragged Anne over to the kitchen to talk.

"You never told me you fancied Will," she said in a low whisper. "You sly minx!"

"I don't," said Anne calmly. "I made a calculated decision based on the options in front of me."

Lizzy sighed in relief. "OK, thank God you don't, because it would've been so weird if you did like him."

"Why would it have been weird?" said Anne.

Lizzy gave her a look.
"No, really," persisted Anne. "Why?"

Lizzy sighed again, but found she had nothing to say — or at least, nothing she was willing to say.

"You know," she mumbled. "Because he had a thing for me."

"Oh, right," said Anne. "I nearly forgot about that."

______________________________________________________________

Tom had recovered from the shock by the time the episode ended.

"This changes everything," he says. "Will/Lizzy lives to fight another day! And Anne is an excellent liar. 'I nearly forgot about that.' Does Lizzy know she's being manipulated this way to Sunday?"

"I doubt it," said Jane, scrolling through Twitter. "Look, someone's made gifs of every time Will looks at Lizzy adoringly."

Tom snorted. "Doesn't he know how obvious he is?"

"Apparently not," said Jane. "Since Lizzy still has no idea."

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know that Austen's Anne is a gentle soul who is rarely angry at anyone — though she is quite firm with Captain Harville at the end of Persuasion. But Austen's Anne would never go on a reality dating show. Also I don't mean to imply anything homoerotic by casting Will as Anne Boleyn and George as her rumoured lover, but in the words of Ben Wyatt, a possible descendant: who hasn't had gay thoughts? And I hope you're enjoying the brief moments of Will/Lizzy that I'm peppering in like shots of heroin. I PROMISE in two chapters' time you're going to lose your MIND at the drama — it's all going to boil over. And please leave a comment if you'd like — I reply every time, and if you ask I might give you a sneak peek of the next chapter (which, by the way, will most likely be up Saturday. I know I said I'd upload every Weds and Fri, but welcome to the real world, Jeremy).
She's Like, So Whatever

Chapter Notes

I know, I lied, and this is late. But trust me when I say you would not have wanted to read Saturday's version.

The first artist/song to have the honour of featured twice in a chapter title is Avril Lavigne, Girlfriend! Ponder that as you read.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Previously on Down the Isle…

A shock turn of events during last night's recoupling resulted in Elton and Elliot leaving the isle. Anne, who had been coupled up with Elton, chose Will instead of pursuing an admittedly soured romantic future with either Elton or Elliot. Now, the couples are: Will and Anne, Lizzy and Wickham, Frank and Emma, George and Harriet, and Mary and Edmund. What new surprises will another day bring?

Tom had been acting strange for the past few days. It was nothing drastic, of course, but Jane was a writer and a student of human nature, and it was blatantly obvious to her that something odd had got into him.

For one thing, he was jittery. Tom was one of those people who was always relaxed, always comfortable, and never jittery. But now, sometimes she'd say something and it would take him several seconds to snap out of whatever reverie he was in to reply. And sometimes his replies had no relevance to what she'd just said.

Minutes before tonight's episode of Down the Isle, she placed two bowls of popcorn on the coffee table and sat down on the sofa.

"So you don't have to steal mine," she said by way of explanation.

"Don't you like sharing with me?" said Tom, digging into his bowl before the episode had even started.

"No," said Jane. "You always eat it all so quickly there's never any for me."

"Oh," he said. "I'm sorry I do that."

She gave him an odd look. "Now you're apologising? You've been doing it for five years."

"Five years," Tom repeated. "That long, huh."

Jane gave him an odd look. "Yes. What's up with you? Suddenly feeling old?"

"You're older than me," Tom pointed out.

"By mere days," Jane snapped.
He laughed, and that put them in their usual rhythm again.

The sun rose on a strange morning on the isle. It was the first one without Elton doing pull-ups over by the gym, or Elliot recruiting for the cult of Frank O'Hara over by the patio. It was only now that they were gone that everyone realised the presence they'd had in the group: now, there was no berating Elton for messing up the toothpaste, or having to tread softly past the lawn so as to not disturb Elliot's morning meditation.

But still, Anne didn't feel guilty for sending them home.

After a surprisingly not-awkward night spent in the same bed as Will (they'd both taken a half and stayed strictly on their side), she wandered down the path from the villa to the outdoor kitchen, humming aimlessly.

Will was already there, pouring cereal in a bowl that already had milk in it.

"Good morning," she said politely. She eyed his painfully incorrect method of preparing breakfast, but said nothing.

He put down the cereal box and cleared his throat.

"Anne, I should probably say this before anything happens." He took a deep breath. "Look, I really appreciate what you did for me, but if you thought that I felt or that we could have something… I just don't feel that way. Nothing against you, but it's just not… not how I feel."

Anne waited until Will had stopped talking to give him an incredulous look. "You think I saved you last night because I secretly fancy you?"

Will's face immediately turned sheepish.

"The thought did cross my mind," he admitted. "But after hearing you say that, apparently I have nothing to worry about."

They locked eyes and both burst into laughter.

"I can't believe your ego!" she exclaimed. "You thought I was into you? After a night of sharing a bed with zero sexual tension?"

"I don't know, I thought maybe you were hiding it."

"Hiding it? Do you even know how sexual tension works?"

"Apparently not," he mumbled.

Anne rolled her eyes. "Right, let's put all our cards on the table to avoid this happening again. Gorgeous as you are, I'm not attracted to you. I picked you because I dreaded starting up something again with either Elliot or Elton, and because I like you as a friend. Also, I secretly have hopes for you and Lizzy."

Will seemed to accept everything Anne said until that last sentence. "What?"

Anne made an unimpressed face.

"Everybody knows," she said. At Will's panicked expression, she added, grudgingly: "Except
"Right," said Will. He sighed as he stirred his cereal. "But I'm dumb and it's not going to happen, because yesterday she told me that she's seeing where things go with Wickham."

Anne started chopping fruits and throwing them into the blender, so she wouldn't have to look at Will's sad, lovesick face.

"As much as I'm grateful that you kept me here," said Will, rubbing the back of his neck, "I wonder if it was better for me to have left yesterday. She wanted me to back off, so I have, but I'm not interested in anyone else. And I don't want to be the creepy guy who pines from a distance, so there's nothing else for me to do here — "

"Will, stop it," said Anne. "You're not doing anything wrong. Just hang out with me for a few days, be open to any new girls who come in, and maybe there'll come a time when you and Lizzy feel the same way about each other."

Will muttered something into his cereal that sounded like: "Not fucking likely." Anne let it slide.

Yvonne arrived on the isle for the second time in twelve hours, dressed like an extra in a Fergie music video.

"Since we've made the boys suffer a bit," she said, as she held a blue parasol that exactly matched her pink and blue dress, "I think it's time we give them a reward. So, meet your two new housemates!"

Everybody turned round to face the villa entrance, where two new girls, each looking like the antithesis of the other, were coming in.

"Yoo-hoo!" said the girl in red. "Hello, everyone!"

Wickham said, very audibly, "Jesus fuck."

The other girl, dressed in white, smiled shyly. "Hi, I'm Fanny," she said.

"And I'm Lydia," said the other girl. She continued chatting when she reached the group: "Oh my gosh, this is so exciting! The villa is so nice, I didn't know it would be so big, and you all look even hotter in person. This is going to be fun!"

"I'll leave you all to get acquainted," said Yvonne. "Until next time, darlings!"

After one minute of conversation, it became clear that Fanny was the shy type, so the group tactfully split into two. The first was made of up Fanny, Edmund, Mary and George, who went off to the kitchen. The second was made up of Lydia and everyone else, who piled onto the massive swing set to let Lydia amuse them all with her personality.

"So what's your type?" asked Emma, once they were all settled down.

Lydia gave everyone — women and men — a full once-over.

"Anyone who's interested," she said.

Half the group laughed; the other half looked nervous and tightened their arm around their partner.
"You've watched the show, right?" said Emma.

"Er, obviously."

"So you know that Elton and Elliot went last night, and basically the only person available is Will. And Anne," she added, as an afterthought.

Will waved perfunctorily; Anne stammered and said, "Er, sorry, I'm not into girls." Thus both options presented to Lydia immediately folded.

Lydia laughed. "That's nice, but like… none of the relationships in here are even official yet. Technically everyone's available, and I'm not going to, like, deny myself if I feel a connection."

"Savage," said Wickham admiringly.

Lydia flashed him a smile. "He Gets it."

Unlike the other group, Fanny, Edmund, Mary and George's conversation hadn't got the memo that this was a reality show, because they weren't talking about who they fancied. Instead, it was along the lines of:

"What kind of music do you like?" asked Edmund.

"Jazz," said Fanny immediately.

"Oh, cool!" said Edmund enthusiastically. "Which artists?"

"Um, you know, the classics," said Fanny. "Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, the Gershwin brothers…"

"Oh, right," said Edmund. "I'm really into modal jazz. Have you listened to Kind of Blue? You'll like it; Coltrane's in it."

"Darling, I didn't know you liked jazz," Mary cut in.

"Oh, yeah, I do," said Edmund, turning back to smile at her. "But I know you're classical. I didn't want to, well…"

"Introduce conflict?" Mary laughed. "I'm not a snob. I think other music styles are wonderful and emotive too."

"Mary's the harpist at the Philharmonia in London," George explained. "We've all heard her practising and she's brilliant. I've no idea how they're coping without her."

"Oh, how wonderful!" said Fanny, turning to Mary. She added shyly, "And you know, there are lots of jazz harpists. The most famous is Dorothy Ashby, but there are lots of others."

"Thanks," said Mary, "but I'm quite happy playing Mahler."

Fanny bit her lip. "Of course, classical music is beautiful too."

"Mahler's Romantic," said Mary helpfully.

Edmund looked pained. "Mary…"
He broke off at her innocent look, and there was an awkward silence.

"Don't worry, I do that all the time," said George, rescuing the situation. He smiled kindly at Fanny, and said, with the air of repeating an oft-heard lecture, "But the pedal harp wasn't really used in orchestras until the Romantic period, so Mary has a thing about us saying she plays classical music, when in the precise sense of the term, she doesn't."

"It's not personal," said Mary, smiling at Fanny.

Their group broke up after Fanny confessed she was a bit tired and wanted to rest, so George went to join everyone else, in a conversation which was still dominated by Lydia.

"Oh, hello," she said, as George approached. She held out her hand and giggled slightly. "I don't think we've met yet."

George took it gingerly. "I'm George."

"Lydia," she said.

She was still holding his hand, and George's pea brain couldn't think of anything to say to detach himself from the situation.

Lydia looked up at him. "George, how tall are you?"

"5'10," he replied. "Rounded up."

Lydia giggled. "Rounded up! Oh my god, you're so funny."

"Yes, well," said George, glad that his sense of humour was getting the appreciation it had been denied scornfully yesterday, "that's what I keep telling everyone." He narrowed his eyes at Emma.

Lydia laughed again as Emma chimed in with a remark that was sure to dent George's ego. He was about to reply when he caught sight of Harriet, sitting on the edge of the circle, wearing a hurt expression her face.

Emma must've seen it too, because she tactfully distracted the group by bringing up a subject everyone always had an opinion on: what they were having for dinner that night. And apparently Harriet saw this as her chance too, because she slipped off the swing, didn't look at anyone and went straight inside the villa.

George kicked himself for feeling a burst of irritation, and followed her.

Anne and Lizzy offered to give Lydia a tour of the villa, leaving Frank, Emma, Will and Wickham on the swing set.

"Well," said Emma, once they had departed. "Lydia is..."

"Fit," said Wickham.

Emma rolled her eyes. "Is that all you ever think about?"

Wickham protested that he was just stating a fact and called on Will and Frank to back him up; Will denied him and Frank said, "Sure, but she'd be high-maintenance."
"So's — " said Wickham, making a completely unsubtle gesture at Emma. Emma saw it and rolled her eyes.

"Hey, man, not cool," said Frank.

Emma had made it clear from the beginning that Wickham's opinion meant nothing to her, so she said to Frank, mock-desolately, "I thought you liked that about me."

"I do," said Frank. He kissed her and she smiled.

"Get a room," said Will lazily.

"Fanny?" Mary knocked on the door of the room where Fanny was supposedly sleeping. "It's me, Mary."

"Oh," came a voice from inside. "Come in."

Mary pushed open the door and was surprised to find that Fanny actually had been sleeping. "Sorry, I thought — you know what, I'll come back later."

"No, it's fine," said Fanny, swinging her legs around to dangle over the side of the bed.

"Right," said Mary. She stepped into the room. "Look, I was a being a dick earlier, and I'm sorry. There's no excuse for it." She sighed. "If I'm being really honest, I was kind of being territorial about Edmund."

"Oh," said Fanny. "No, um, it's fine. You were right."

Mary was quite sure she wasn't, but they'd be there forever if she was to argue out that point. "OK," she said. "I just wanted to clear the air."

"OK," said Fanny.

Mary nodded, and left.

George finally found Harriet curled up in one of the nooks in the lounge room.

"I just wish she hadn't done it," said Harriet, once George had convinced her that he really did want to know what was wrong, and that he definitely wouldn't think she was silly, or immature, or ridiculous if she told him.

George cleared his throat and tried to put it as reasonably as he could. "Harriet, you know it doesn't mean anything, right? Lydia's a flirty person; it doesn't mean she's interested in me. And I'm definitely not interested in her."

"But she was flirting with you," Harriet persisted.

"I know," said George, feeling tired and too old for this. Harriet was sweet and more interesting than most people gave her credit for, but the fact of the matter was that it wasn't working out between them. "But you trust me, don't you? I'm with you; I wouldn't betray that by looking at her."

"But she's so difficult to not look at!" wailed Harriet. "How can you be interested in me when there's someone who's the exact opposite right in front of you?"
George suppressed his desire to sigh very deeply.

"Harriet, I'm being as honest as I can with you. I'm not interested in Lydia. You have nothing to be worried about."

"It's just hard," she said. "I feel like I'm not good enough for you, and when someone like her comes in who so obviously is..."

"Harriet, hey," he said. He put his hands lightly on her shoulders. "Hey, look at me. This isn't about Lydia, is it?"

"I guess not," said Harriet. She sighed and a switch seemed to flick inside her. "No, it's stupid. I'm fine. Go back outside — I'll be out in a few minutes."

"OK?" said George. "Are you sure?"

"Positive," she said, putting on a bright smile. "Nothing's wrong, I'm fine. I'll see you soon!"

"OK," repeated George, very confused. "I'll just — be on the patio, then."

"Cool," said Harriet, waving him out. "I'll see you!"

"So what's the deal with Will?" Lydia asked later that afternoon, sitting on a bean bag under the shade of some trees.

Emma and Anne exchanged looks.

"I mean, obviously I've been watching the show," Lydia continued, "and I know you're with him now," (she said this to Anne), "but that's just a friend thing, right? So what's his situation romantically? Can I go there? He can't still be into Lizzy, right? That was ages ago. And she's got someone else now. She's totally moved on."

"She has," agreed Emma. "But he hasn't."

"Seriously? It's been days." Lydia wrinkled her nose. "And he's so sexy — all those one-liners and brooding looks and pouty lips. I bet he'd be a good kisser. And probably also good at — "

Anne would have paid a large sum for Will to hear what was being said about him. 'Pouty lips' was a phrase she was sure would cause outrage.

She'd told Will earlier that day to try to move on with one of the new girls, but today's offering of new girls had more or less killed off that possibility.

"You could talk to him," said Anne neutrally. "See what he has to say."

"I will," said Lydia. She shrugged. "But he says no: hey, no biggie. Wickham's hot, right?"

After dinner, Edmund waited a sensible amount of time before going to find Fanny. It didn't sit right with him how Mary had talked to her earlier, and for some reason he felt partly responsible.

Fanny was inside, quietly unpacking the last things in her suitcase before everyone came in to get ready for the evening.

"Hey," said Edmund, standing in the doorway. "Isn't anyone helping you with that?"
Fanny looked up at him and blinked. "Oh, um — I said I'd be fine doing it myself." She smiled at him shyly. "But you can help if you want."

"Sure," said Edmund, coming forwards. Fanny handed him her toothbrush and some toiletries to put in the bathroom.

"I just wanted to say — " he began, as he opened the drawer labelled 'Fanny', " — I'm sorry about that earlier, with Mary. I don't know what's got into her. She's not usually like that."

"Oh!" said Fanny. "No, don't worry. I was wrong. And afterwards, when I was inside, she apologised to me."

"Oh," said Edmund, feeling that maybe he should've talked to Mary before talking to Fanny. He came out of the bathroom. "So that's all right then."

"Yes," said Fanny.

They stood there awkwardly for a minute.

"So did you have anything else…"

"Er, no! I'm all done."

"Right," said Edmund. He rubbed the side of his nose nervously. "Well, I just came to say that about earlier, so… enjoy your time here, I guess. I'll see you later."

"See you," said Fanny, and watched him leave.

It was, in general, a quiet evening on the isle. Lydia had jumped into the pool ten minutes ago and half the other contestants had followed, but over on dry land, everyone was milling around, talking comfortably. Lizzy and Anne were two of those who preferred not to be soaked to the skin, and they were chatting in the kitchen.

"I don't know," said Lizzy. "He's charming and so good-looking and it's kind of flattering that he is — or was — into me, which was why I picked him yesterday. But now I can't stop thinking there's something about him that just puts me off. Like in the way he treats other people. He hasn't tried to make Fanny feel welcome; I notice sometimes that he — "

She broke off, as Wickham himself sauntered across the lawn with Lydia in tow, both of them dripping wet and laughing.

Lizzy and Anne exchanged a look.

"I don't even care that he's going around with her," said Lizzy, once Lydia and Wickham were out of hearing. They watched Lydia giggle at something Wickham was saying, and Lizzy discovered that she felt… nothing. Not even the slightest hint of jealousy. "Not that being jealous means you care, but you know what I mean."

"I do," said Anne.

Lizzy sighed. "Why is this so hard? At uni I fell in love, like, four times a week. And now I'm in here, with loads of hot guys, and I don't care for any of them."

"None of them?" probed Anne.
Lizzy waved her hand. "You know. Romantically."

"I do," agreed Anne. "But I have a long explanation for my lack of success in here."

"I can't believe you just… don't date," said Lizzy. "What happens if you get a crush?"

"I date!" protested Anne. "It just never goes anywhere."

"Well, it will on here," said Lizzy. She added, very solemnly, "Anne, you're beautiful, intelligent, successful and delightful. If you want to find love, you will find it."

"Thanks, mate," said Anne, very touched. "And hey, you will too."

Lizzy laughed and said her standards were probably too high; Anne knew she was being ridiculous and hugged her anyway.

As Mary walked past the living room before getting into bed, she heard Fanny and Edmund inside, talking.

She told herself she was being ridiculous. This was not a Jane Seymour situation. She wasn't proud of the way she'd spoken to Fanny earlier, and she'd meant her apology — thought it was an apology Fanny had almost seemed surprised to receive.

But still, a part of her could see that Fanny was much better suited to Edmund than she was. At any rate, Mary was not one to let traitorous thoughts fester in her mind and screw her up inside, so she decided to confront it head on.

Their bed was on the end of the line, which made it much easier to talk privately. When Edmund got into bed, she greeted him as usual, then began to broach the topic.

"You and Fanny have a lot in common," she said.

"Hmm?" said Edmund. He turned on his side to face her directly. "Right, yeah, I suppose we do."

Mary swallowed and looked at him intensely. "I know that you and I have said things to each other, but technically we're not official, and… if you wanted to slow things down between us, I'd understand."

Edmund frowned. "Do you think I'm interested in Fanny?"

"Yes," said Mary bluntly. "Or you could be."

Edmund blinked. "What? Why?"

"It's not improbable," said Mary defensively. "Fanny's very sweet. You two have a lot in common: much more than you and I do. I'm just saying that I'd so much rather you told me if you felt anything, rather than try to suppress it and then resent me even though I never asked you to do that… do you see what I'm saying?"

Edmund pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. "You're worrying about nothing."

"I am?" asked Mary, and relaxed instantly. Hearing him say those words made her realise what a huge weight it was that she had been bearing. "Good," she said, nestling into him. "I don't want to let you go."
"Well," said Tom, as the episode ended on a happy moment between a couple. "I foresee doom."

Jane shrugged. "If they're strong enough, they'll work through it."

"Well, they've known each other for two weeks, which isn't long. Compared to you and I," he said, taking the conversation through a sharp turn, "who've known each other years, and whose friendship will never be broken."

"I wouldn't say never," said Jane.

Tom laid a hand on his heart. "You think I would wittingly ruin our friendship, the purest, most fulfilling — "

"I don't know," said Jane defensively. "I'm sure there's something. Like if you dated my sister."

"Oh, Cassandra," said Tom. "She turned me down once, you know."

"WHAT?"

Tom held his poker face for a moment, then burst into laughter.

"Your face!" he said, wiping imaginary tears of laughter from his eyes. "I should've hidden a camera somewhere. That was priceless. Oh, Jane, you crack me up."

"Delighted to hear it," said Jane acidly, steamrolling over the horrible mix of confusion and betrayal that had sprouted up when she thought Tom had been interested in her sister. Dear God, she was going mad. "I'm going to bed," she said.

"Are you mad at me?" asked Tom, as she plucked her phone off the table.

"No," said Jane, and unsure herself whether she was telling the truth or not. "Goodnight, dipshit."

She heard Tom's laughter all the way into her room.

Chapter End Notes

I do not have a particular fondness for jazz, but I'd say I like jazz more than I like Fanny Price. Obviously in this Lizzy and Lydia aren't siblings, and Fanny and Edmund aren't cousins. I have actually tried to stick to parts of canon with the Mansfield Park characters with Edmund tutoring and guiding Fanny's interests, but tbh what's the point when we all know I'm just going to do what I want in the end.

Next chapter is a goddamn rollercoaster, so get excited for that!! Hit me up on Tumblr and I'll see you with that soon.
Previously on Down the Isle…

Yesterday, the arrival of two new girls to the isle blew everyone into a frenzy. Bold, flirtatious Lydia seemed to have her eye on everyone, whilst shy girl Fanny struck up a connection with Edmund. That's right, the same Edmund whose relationship with Mary is the strongest on the isle. There's probably no need to worry, though: Mary asked Edmund about Fanny last night, and he said there was nothing there. Was he telling the truth? All will be revealed on this episode of Down the Isle…

"So, it's not looking great," said Tom, settling in front of the TV. He ticked off points on his fingers. "Edmund's head will inevitably be turned by the least interesting girl in the world; George has actually moved onto Harriet, contender for second least; Anne deserves the world and all she's had are crap men."

"Also, Emma's with Frank," said Jane. "And hey, Fanny isn't that bad."

Tom rolled his eyes. "She so is. And now that I've given up on George and Emma I've come to see the merit of her and Frank."

Jane made a noise of disagreement but said nothing.

"What?"

"I didn't say anything."

"You made a noise," said Tom. He adopted a wheedling tone. "Darling Jane, please tell me what you meant."

Jane told herself not to be affected by his usage of an endearment.

"I just get a bad vibe," she said. She pointed at the TV. "Aren't you going to watch?"

Yvonne descended on the isle fairly early that morning.

"Hello, darlings," she said. "I'm just stopping by to announce that this afternoon, Fanny and Lydia will be allowed to ask any two people they want on a date." She turned to them directly. "Girls, I'll give you some advice I was never given: choose wisely."

It seemed improbable that no one had ever told Yvonne to choose wisely in all… fifty? years of her life, but if they hadn't then it certainly explained a lot of her romantic choices.
And at the prospect of going on two dates, Lydia looked thrilled, whilst Fanny looked terrified.

"OK, babe," said Lydia to Fanny. "Time to get chirpsing."

Half an hour later, Emma and Frank were lying on one of the narrower day beds whilst the rest of the villa moved around and gave Fanny and Lydia advice. Emma was wearing her sunglasses, which gave her the advantage of being able to conspicuously look at Frank's glorious chest without being called out.

"What would you do if I got picked?" asked Frank, more to enjoy the sight of Emma's anger than from actual curiosity.

Emma recoiled. "What? Dammit, I knew I couldn't trust Lydia."

Frank arched a brow. "I said if."

"OK, well, if someone asked you on a date," said Emma pedantically, "I'd be so mad. It would be such a snaky move because she hasn't even told me — "

Frank laughed, cutting Emma's rant short. "You're cute," he said affectionately.

Emma wrinkled her nose and tried to suppress the warmth in her chest. "Yeah, says you."

"I am, aren't I?" said Frank, deliberately misunderstanding her. He nudged into her and dropped a kiss on her forehead. "Lucky you."

Emma shoved his shoulder; he laughed and kissed her again.

Ever since Anne had coupled up with Will, they had gradually become rather good friends. She had thought he was cold and a bit evil when he dumped Charlotte from the isle all those days ago, but now she was confirming her suspicion that despite a kind of confusing set of morals and a huge dose of pride, he was genuinely a decent guy. Also, he had a sharp wit and low tolerance for bullshit, which, Anne noticed, Lizzy shared.

She was very tempted to tell Will as such, but she didn't think they were quite up to the stage of friendship when they could offer unsolicited judgement on the other's love life. Yet.

"It's really unfortunate that we don't fancy each other," she said, eating crackers with cheese under the shade of the gazebo.

"What could've been," agreed Will. "The doctor and the lawyer. The fantasy of eligible professionals everywhere."

Anne sighed. "My aunt would've been really pleased."

"That's an odd coincidence," said Will, turning to look at her. "So would mine."

"Well, she's not really my aunt," said Anne. "Katty's my mum's best friend. But, um, my mum died when I was just starting Year 8, and Katty was kind of my surrogate mother."

"Mother died when I was young too," said Will. There was a brief pause of understanding, before he made a face. "But Aunt Catherine is a terror, and I had to live with her for a while."

"How did you survive?" asked Anne.
Will's mouth curved sardonically. "Boarding school."

Inside the villa, something was happening that was to have huge, far-reaching consequences.

"Edmund!" said Fanny, as he walked past on his way outside. She steeled her nerves. "About this afternoon... do you think you could, um, go on a date with me? If Mary's OK with it," she added hastily.

Edmund thought about Mary and how he'd promised her he wasn't interested in Fanny. But this was just a date. It was harmless. He genuinely liked Fanny: she was sweet and they had a lot in common. She was shy and he wanted to help her settle in here, and saying no to the first thing she asked of him was not going to do that.

"I'd love to," he said warmly. "Don't worry about Mary. I'll talk to her.

"Great!" said Fanny. She breathed a sigh of relief. "Um, and who else do you think I should ask?"

Edmund felt that he was out of his depth with this question. "Shouldn't you just ask whomever you like?"

"I don't like anyone but you," she confessed, staring down at the floor.

"Oh," said Edmund uncomfortably. He swallowed. "I guess George is pretty easy to talk to, so maybe him? I'd definitely avoid Will, but I'm sure people have already told you that."

Fanny beamed at him. "Thanks, Edmund."

Edmund found that he rather liked the way she looked at him, and felt guilty all the way to the gym.

Everyone probably expected Lydia to ask Wickham on a date, as they'd spent so much time together yesterday. But Lydia never did what was expected of her. Despite everyone's (mostly Emma's) warnings, she had chosen Will to be her first date... though she was currently having a hard time letting him know of the fact.

She'd been searching for him for ten whole minutes now and she couldn't find him anywhere. He wasn't outside, he wasn't in the main bedroom, he wasn't in either of the four bathrooms.

Sighing, she climbed the stairs up to the terrace. The chances he'd be up here were minute, but Lydia was not a girl to give up easily. If Will was hiding from her, she'd search every inch of this villa before —

"Oh," she said, when she saw him sitting at the end of the terrace. She moved closer and saw that he had a sketchbook in his hands and was making a drawing from his view of the villa below.

"Hey, I've been looking everywhere for you," she said brightly.

"I was here," said Will tautologically.

Lydia gave him an odd look. "Right," she said. She looked over at his sketchbook. "Wow, I didn't know you drew."

"I don't," said Will. "I'm just bored."

Lydia wondered if everyone's advice not to ask Will on a date was actually well-intentioned, and not
just because this entire villa was made up of pussies who hated conflict. "I know what'll make you not-bored," she said. "Do you want to go on a date with me?"

Will didn't immediately say yes, which wasn't a circumstance Lydia had really prepared for.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," he said.

Wait, was he even allowed to say that? "Are you even allowed to say that?"

"How about this," said Will. "If I can't convince you not to ask me, then I'll go."

Lydia was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to convince her, but she agreed to let him make his little speech anyway.

"You know what's been going on in here before you arrived, right?" he said.

"Of course," said Lydia with dignity.

Will smiled ruefully. "So you know how my time in here has gone."

"You and Lizzy," said Lydia, in a tone of realisation. She almost groaned. How was he still not over that? It had been a whole week ago, and time in here felt even slower than in the real world. "But she was so mean to you! And she's rejected you, like, four times. Are you really just going to — fuck, I don't even know what you could do. Just — seriously?"

"Seriously," said Will, smiling crookedly. "So I'm not emotionally available, and you should save your date for someone who is."

"Right," said Lydia, dragging the word out slowly. "OK, fine, you've convinced me. I do not want to get involved in your whole weird pining-from-a-distance thing. But speaking as a casual observer: what do you hope to, like, achieve from this?"

Will looked as though he asked himself that same question day and night. "I don't. I was ready to leave the other night, but Anne dragged me back in. I know it's stupid, but I can't in good conscience try and get to know someone else."

"So you're just going to do nothing?" Lydia almost shouted. Will gave her an alarmed look. "Oh, piss off, no one heard that. What the hell, Will? Does Lizzy know about this?"

"No," said Will, "and if you tell her, you'll ruin the last scrap of dignity I have left."

Lydia sighed. "But you're so — how can she say no to you?"

"I didn't go about things in the right way," said Will. "So now it's stuck."

"Oh, God help me," said Lydia. "You people are so — ugh. If you went about things in the wrong way, then start going about them in the right way! It's not like she's into anyone else." At Will's shocked face, she laughed. "Yep, she and Wickham are basically done. I'm telling you, if you want her that badly, you don't give up."

"It's not about me wanting her," said Will. "I can't go after someone who doesn't want me."

Lydia snorted. "OK, Will."

Will said nothing.
"You know what, I feel bad for you," said Lydia. "Since you're not going to do anything, I'm going to help. I'm going to pick Wickham after all."

"Lydia, that's really not — "

"Shut up," she said. She shrugged. "He was my second choice anyway. The guy is fit."

Fanny's and Lydia's dates were taking place in the same field, which was a relief. Whilst it was definitely more intimate than a restaurant, Fanny's preferred first date location if she were pressed to choose, at least she wouldn't be one-on-one with a guy she barely knew. She was also glad she'd taken Edmund's advice. After clearing it with Harriet and assuring her she didn't have any interest in the guy she was coupled up with, she asked George for the first of her two dates. He was easy to talk to and she felt she could ask him anything: which was why, a few minutes into the date, she asked him about Edmund.

"I really don't mean to upset anyone," she began, "but can you tell me what's going on between Edmund and Mary? Honestly?"

George blinked.

"I'd say they're the strongest couple in here," he said. "They aren't officially exclusive, but they might as well be."

"Oh," said Fanny, who had clearly been hoping for a different response.

George sighed. "But, you know, everyone's here for themselves, so if you really see something there, I guess you owe it to yourself to go for it."

"Oh!" said Fanny. "No, I couldn't — not unless Edmund said something first."

George blinked again. "Well, I guess that settles it."

A few feet away, Lydia and Wickham were having a much better time.

"No way," said Lydia, giggling over her wine glass. "Seriously?"

"Oh yeah," said Wickham, relishing in her response. He told this story on every date, but not all girls reacted in the same way that Lydia did: genuinely interested, laughing at all the right parts. "It's all in my yearbook."

"But didn't the police…"

"Nope," said Wickham. "Got away scot-free."

Lydia burst into a fit of giggles. Wickham sat back, very pleased with himself. This date was going fantastically. He hated to compare girls, but if he had to choose between Lizzy and Lydia… well, by their receptions of his teenage-brush-with-the-law story alone, Lydia came out on top.

"So, tell me more about Berlin," said Lydia.

Edmund found Mary with Lizzy inside.

"Hey, Lizzy," he said. "Is it alright if I talk to Mary?"
"Sure," said Lizzy, deathly curious but accepting of the fact that she'd probably have to wait a whole ten minutes before she found out what was going on. "I'll see you later."

Edmund sat down on the opposite bed. "I just wanted to run something by you. You're OK with me going on a date with Fanny, right?"

If Mary had a lesser ability to take surprises, her mouth would've dropped open. Instead, she blinked, and said, "What?"

Edmund looked confused at her shock. "Fanny's asked me to go on a date with her after George."

"No, I heard you," said Mary. "That wasn't so much a 'what' as a 'what the fuck, Edmund'."

He frowned. "I thought I already told you I wasn't interested in her. And I don't think she's exactly interested in George, so — "

"Oh, my god, Edmund," said Mary. "Do you think I'm an idiot?"

"No?"

"Good, then don't take me for one! Of course I don't want you to go on a date with a girl I know is better suited for you than me. But now that you've asked me for my permission, I have to give it, or I look like the clingy paranoid girl who's restricting your freedom. And if the date goes well, then I've basically given my blessing for you two, and you can ride off into the stupid sunset together whilst I try to figure out how you got away with manipulating me into encouraging your new relationship!"

A shadow crossed over Edmund's face. "Wait, who said — I thought you trusted me more than that."

"I do," said Mary tiredly. "It's just — "

"Great, then if you trust me, I'm going to go on this friend date."

He didn't give her a chance to reply. Irrationally angry and careless of whether or not he was doing the right thing, Edmund stormed out of the room and went to find Fanny.

"Lydia," said Mary minutes later, as she marched through the villa. "I've got an idea."

Lydia turned around from where she was chatting to Emma. "I'm listening."

"Instead of choosing between these shit men," said Mary, loud enough that Edmund could hear, "go on a date with me."

Lydia didn't even blink. "Babe, that's a great idea."

"Great," said Mary, and when she was sure she had an audience, kissed Lydia with a fierceness befitting the climax of a romance novel.

Everyone saw it, and no one moved. Glances flickered to Edmund, who stood next to Fanny with stony face and practised disinterest. Mary stepped back, her coral lipstick smeared over Lydia's mouth.

"Let's go," she said, and wrapped her arm around Lydia's waist as they sauntered off.

"Dude," said Wickham, to no one in particular. "That was so hot."
Mary saw that the two date settings were literally twenty feet away from each other, and swore loudly. At least they'd got to the venue before Edmund and Fanny.

"Look," she said to Lydia. "I'm really sorry that I did that. I was mad at Edmund — I still am, actually — and I wasn't thinking — "

Lydia shrugged. "It was a good kiss."

Mary smiled sadly. "It was, wasn't it? Too bad I'm in this goddamn thing with a boy, because we could've — "

At this point Edmund and Fanny walked in and sat down at the other table. It was horrible.

"Do you want to use me to make him jealous?" asked Lydia, glancing over at them. "I've already helped one person today. Why not another?"

"No," said Mary resignedly. She very pointedly didn't look at the other table. "If he doesn't realise it by himself, then it's not up to me to help him."

Lydia looked disappointed as she drank her milkshake through a very elaborate straw. "That's boring."

"And the right thing to do," said Mary, sighing. "Otherwise I won't believe he really wants me."

Back at the villa, everyone was reeling from the shock of what had just passed.

"When Edmund gets back, I'm going to punch his face in," said Emma, stalking from the kitchen to the massive swing where everyone was gathered, carrying food and drinks. George was with her.

"What a massive cockwomble. If he thinks he can just have his cake and eat it, he's in for a — " She trailed off, but the look on her face said all that was needed.

"I suppose he thinks he hasn't done anything wrong," said Lizzy. "Honestly. Asking Mary after he'd already said yes; putting her in that position, after she'd already said she was uncomfortable with him around Fanny…"

"But maybe he just didn't think it through," said Anne. "You can't say he did it on purpose to hurt Mary."

"Oh, can't I?" demanded Emma.

"You can't," said George softly.

Emma rolled her eyes but let it drop.

"Can't you all just chill?" said Wickham, kicking back. "Why are we acting like he's done something wrong? The guy's just eating cake at a fancy table outside the villa. It's not like he's gone and fucked someone else."

"Men," said Emma with disgust.

"Hey, how the fuck is this a thing about — "

"You're always so quick to claim innocent until proven guilty," said Emma, talking over Wickham. "Well, why did Edmund even agree to the date in the first place? If he just wanted to get to know
Fanny, he could've done it in the villa like the rest of us. And Fanny knows that Mary and Edmund are the longest-running couple here — hang on, George, didn't she ask you about them on your date? She clearly knew what she was doing.

George felt he had to speak up on Fanny's behalf. "Mine and Fanny's date was very platonic," he said. "Her date with Edmund might be the same."

"George is right," said Harriet, chiming in. "Fanny's such a sweet girl. I can't imagine she'd do anything horrible to anyone."

"Fine, then it's Edmund's fault," said Emma. "Which is what I said at the beginning."

Emma sipped her water triumphantly.

"So maybe Mary's better off without him," offered Frank.

"There, that's the crux of it," said Lizzy. "No one should be with anyone who'd do this to them."

Wickham rolled his eyes. "Fucking hell, guys, he hasn't done anything."

Lizzy was ready to retaliate when Will spoke for the first time.

"If Edmund really liked Mary as much as he claims, he wouldn't have wanted to go on the date."

George jumped in. "But he probably thought it was platonic because — "

"Bullshit," said Will pleasantly. "He knew what he was doing. If you really like someone, you don't go on a date with someone else."

He said it in such a compelled, decisive tone that it was difficult for anyone to contradict him, and both sides seemed to agree to settle it there.

"Unless we're in the non-monogamy realm," said Lizzy, uncomfortable with the silent agreement of Will's words, but not knowing why.

"Yes," said Will. "But if we were, this show would be even more of a mess."

Mary, Lydia, Edmund and Fanny came back to the villa together, but Mary and Edmund were standing very far apart, and everybody could feel the tension that crackled in the air.

As the day went on, Mary felt a kind of cold, frosty anger take hold of her. Edmund hadn't even made an attempt to apologise, in between all the hours from the dates and leading up to dinner. What was he doing? The guy she had thought she was falling for didn't seem to care that he'd hurt her more than he cared about being friends with some girl he'd only just met — and how much of that was true, anyway? Probably he fancied Fanny and thought that this — driving Mary away instead of having a grown-up conversation like a mature fucking person — was a convenient way to get rid of her. And Mary thought she'd go mad if she saw his stupid face any more this evening, or hear anyone's sympathetic assurances. So she said she'd strangle anyone who spoke to her with a harp string and went to bed right after dinner.

The other contestants tiptoed around the villa and speculated that it was, all so quickly, over between Mary and Edmund.

Emma couldn't take it any more. Mary was her best friend on the isle, and someone had made her miserable. Steeling her nerves, Emma marched up to Fanny, who was at that moment sat with
George and Harriet.

"Do you know what you've done?" she demanded.

Fanny looked as if she was about to answer, but George beat her to it. "Emma," he said, in a warning tone.

She would've ignored George and continued, but then she saw Edmund approaching. He'd been sat with Frank for most of the night, wisely avoiding Fanny, but it seemed Emma had apparently triggered some need to defend his lady, because he was over there in seconds.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

Emma smiled at him, and it was a smile dripping with condescension. "I'm having a conversation with the girl you went on a date with. Who isn't Mary, by the way, in case you forgot about her. Because she's in the villa. Which is where you should be, too, comforting her."

Edmund's expression was cold when he said, "We've already had our disagreement."

"What kind of answer is that?" demanded Emma. "But hey, now you're here, maybe you can answer too: do you know what you've done?"

"Emma!" said George.

"What? It's a valid question I'm sure we'd all like the answer to."

"It's none of our business," said George, his voice growing colder.

"No, it's fine," said Edmund. "Firstly, none of this is Fanny's fault. Stop attacking her."

Emma wasn't having any of it. "Oh for the love of God, what are you, her protector?" She snorted in disgust. "Isn't there someone else you should be — "

"Stop it," snapped Edmund. "That's between Mary and me."

"Oh, please, you're on a TV show watched by millions. Your business is already everyone's else."

No one had a response to that.

"Or maybe you can just answer this," said Emma. "Why didn't Fanny have the courtesy to ask Mary before she asked out Edmund? She did it with Harriet before she asked out George."

Then, Fanny shocked everyone by speaking.

"Edmund said he'd do it," she said. "I agreed because I thought that was better than me meddling in their relationship. I just wanted to get to know him better. He's the only person I spoke to yesterday whom I thought I had stuff in common with, so I thought it was the right thing to do to ask him on a date."

Emma said, very childishly, "Well, you shouldn't have tried to get to know him better."

George sounded despairing. "Emma, come on."

She didn't care for this argument any more. She knew she was slightly in the wrong, and probably shouldn't have got involved, but if she heard another one of Edmund's protestations of righteousness, she'd throw up. She turned on her heel, marched off, stopped by the kitchen to fill up her drink and
was on her way to find someone to rant to — Will, preferably, as his reaction to the news was almost the same as her own — when she almost crashed into Frank.

"Hey, Em," he said. "You alright?"

"No," said Emma morosely. "But Mary's worse."

He raised an eyebrow. "And so is Fanny, I should think."

The reminder of how she'd behaved to Fanny flooded Emma with embarrassment. "Oh, God, I was so horrible to her — I mean, I don't like her, but she's new and shy I shouldn't have been so rude — "

Frank shrugged. "She must've known something was going to happen when she asked Edmund out."

"Right," said Emma, unconvinced.

"Oh, come here," said Frank. Emma let herself be wrapped up in his warm, solid arms. "You know, I like how passionate you get when your friends are hurt."

"You do?" said Emma, looking up timidly.

"Of course," said Frank. "I can't wait to see what you'd do if someone kicked my arse."

"It would depend on whether you deserved it," said Emma, but she was smiling anyway. "Thank you."

"Ugh," said Jane, when the episode ended. "He's a slimeball."

"Frank? He hasn't done anything!"

"He will," said Jane. "Mark my words."

Tom changed the topic. "In other news, Down the Isle just embraced its first LGBT relationship."

"And then swiftly killed it off," said Jane. "Because Mary's too involved with Edmund, of all people."

"Oh, yeah, Edmund was so wrong to go on that date."

"Either he was lying yesterday when he said he wasn't interested in Fanny, or he moves on terrifyingly quickly."

"But," said Tom, "for a positive parallel to Edmund, there's Will."

"Oh yes," said Jane. "Explaining to Lydia why he didn't want to go on that date…" she sighed. "I guess sometimes men are OK."

The next morning

Text sent at 09:18

Tom: do you want to have dinner at undisclosed fancy place w half off voucher tonight???
Tom: rob cancelled and you're my backup

Tom: srsly jane people would kill for this voucher

Tom: i promise we won't miss down the isle

Text sent at 09:34


Jane: I WAS RIGHT!!!

Tom: WHAT

Tom: OH MY GOD

Tom: IS IT REAL????

Jane: YES!!!!!

Tom: WHAT

Tom: the absolute CHEEK of him

Jane: I know!

Tom: how did no one know???? omg and poor emma

Tom: men are the WORST

Chapter End Notes

Crikey, what a drama-filled chapter! Any guesses as to what Frank could be revealed to have???

I was not planning on making Lydia so brilliant, but then she started talking to Will and seeing the mess that is his emotions and she just became his antithesis. I think I finally understand what I mean when all those touchy-feely authors talk about characters having a life of their own. Honestly I think I may have birthed something with Mary Crawford and Lydia Bennet (isn't it interesting how their initials LB and MC precede each other in the alphabet by one?)

Also I don't know if I've used the word chirpsing correctly so apologies re that. Hit me up on Tumblr and I'll see ya soon!
Title from All Too Well by Taylor Swift, the mother of all breakup songs.

SORRY this is late — it seems whenever I make a promise as to when I'll upload, it's actually a curse that I'll break it. It took so long because I kept adding more bits (this is the longest chapter yet yo and a veritable monster) as I realised that people didn't behave in the way I'd written them. Also I watched an entire season of SKAM yesterday.

This is your pre-show warning that this chapter is a hot mess. I thought about spacing the drama(s) out, but then I decided that no, this is life, and when one thing breaks down so does everything else. So I present to you: a disaster. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Previously on Down the Isle...

Before yesterday: one of the new girls to arrive was Fanny, who struck up a connection with Edmund. Mary, who's been coupled up with Edmund since the beginning, expressed concern over how close Edmund and Fanny immediately were, but Edmund told her there was nothing between them. Also, now almost two weeks before, Lizzy decisively rejected Will in an explosive confrontation.

To condense a drama-filled day yesterday: Will told Lydia he still had feelings for Lizzy; Fanny asked Edmund on a date; Edmund assumed Mary would agree to it; Mary got mad and kissed Lydia in revenge; Emma had some choice words for Edmund and Fanny. But this is all sure to be dust in the wind once it is revealed to the isle the shocking secret that broke last night...

Tom was still on edge when they sat down in front of the TV, eleven hours later.

"Shouldn't the producers get sued for this?" he demanded.

Jane rolled her eyes and adjusted the volume. "Is that all you lawyers ever think about?"

Will was usually the first to get up in the mornings, which meant he had the enviable task of carrying out the command, passed onto him by Brian the tech guy, that everyone had to gather around the fire pit by 9:30 in the morning. For a group of people who usually had breakfast at 10, this was — to say the least — ambitious.

"Wake up, children," he said, pressing the button to open the mechanical curtains at a risky half past eight in the morning.

"I'm older than you," came George's groggy voice.

"Fuck off," said Will. "You've all got an hour to look presentable before you have to be at the fire pit."
Then he left to go on his morning run.

Fifteen minutes later, the villa was a flurry of action.

"So no one knows what's happening?" asked Lizzy, spritzing her hair with a disgustingly expensive, deliciously smelling anti-humidity spray. The girls were all in the dressing room, some only there because they had been forcibly removed from their beds, and everyone was absolutely mystified as to what was going on. They had never been ordered to gather by the fire pit so early before — and by someone who wasn't Yvonne.

The unlikely theory that Will was playing a cruel prank had been stamped out when the lead tech guy confirmed the order.

"Something must have happened," said Anne.

"Something already has," snapped Mary.

Fanny, who was on the other side of the room with Lydia, had the luxury of pretending not to hear that.

"Are you sure that's all Will said?" demanded Emma, furiously brushing her hair. "Just that we have to be at the fire pit in an hour?"

"Yes." This from Anne, Lizzy, Harriet.

"Look, whatever it is, we'll find out in… less than forty minutes." Lizzy smiled warmly at everyone. "I'm sure it can't be bad."

Obviously, she was wrong.

Yvonne looked grave as the contestants filed in around the fire pit. She tapped her long-nailed fingers against her bejewelled microphone and allowed a dramatic pause to set in before speaking.

"Sorry to have pulled you from your warm beds," she said, "but there's something that everyone on the outside knows that I think you all should too. Frank," she said, turning her mascara-coated gaze on him. "Please answer these questions truthfully."

Emma, who was standing next to Frank, made to hold his hand. He pulled away, and that was the sign that something awful was about to be revealed.

"Frank," said Yvonne. "Do you know someone called Jane Fairfax?"

He cleared his throat. "Yes."

"Good," said Yvonne. "And is it true that Jane Fairfax is your girlfriend?"

There was a silence. Emma's face froze and she found that she couldn't look at him.

Frank said, "That depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is."

"Bill Clinton?" Tom demanded in a very high-pitched voice. "That's practically an admission of guilt in itself!"
"Well, Jane Fairfax's aunt said they were together," said Jane. "But the article said that she herself wasn't available for comment."

"Probably because she was so goddamn humiliated," said Tom.

Jane said, hypocritically, "Or maybe she's got better things to do with her time."

Emma didn't know where she found the strength of will to keep her composure, but she did it. After Yvonne left, with the assurance that there would be a new bed brought into the bedroom should anyone want to modify their sleeping arrangements, Emma turned to Frank and said, very calmly, "Explain." 

"Um, we should go," said Lizzy, meaning everyone, all of whom were still standing around the fire pit.

"No, stay," said Emma, crossing her arms. "You might as well hear it from the horse's mouth."

Frank looked uneasy. "Emma, are you sure — "

"Start talking," she said.

"Emma, I'm sorry you had to find out this way — "

"Save it," said Emma. "I want to know who this Jane Fairfax is."

Frank cleared his throat uncomfortably. "She used to be my girlfriend. A month ago she went to Uganda to do relief work, so we decided to go on a break."

"A break?" She rolled her eyes. "You're twenty-five, make up your fucking mind whether you're in a relationship or not. And then you decided to come on this show? For unattached single people?"

"I wouldn't say I'm attached — "

"Well, I would," snapped Emma. "So you haven't technically broken up? How long were you together for?"

Frank looked uncomfortable. "Four years."

"Oh my god," said Emma, covering her face in her hands. "What was I, then? A diversion? Something to keep you occupied for a few weeks?"

"No! Emma, you're worth so much more than that."

"I know," she retorted. "So when were you ever going to tell me?"

"I wouldn't have even known what to say."

Emma rolled her eyes. "Hey, Emma! Just to let you know, I'm still kind of in a thing with my not-really-ex of four years and I'm just with you for a laugh." She gave a sigh of disgust. "OK. That's it. Anything there was between us? It's over. Good luck with everything, and I hope Jane never talks to you again."

"Wow," said Tom.
Jane looked equally impressed.

"The news about Frank leaking was really terrible timing," she mused. "Now there's two big dramas going on, and none of it is going to resolve neatly."

After that, Mary dragged Emma away and they ensconced themselves indoors to bitch about the men in their lives.

"I don't want to talk about it," said Emma.

Mary raised an eyebrow.

"Seriously," said Emma. "There's nothing to say. I've cut him out."

"OK," said Mary doubtfully. She flopped back into the sofa. "So, this was a terrible idea."

"What was?" asked Emma. She looked up from where she was peeling the paper off a cupcake. "This cupcake?"

"No, that's a great idea," said Mary. "I mean coming on the isle. My sister said I'd hate it, it's way too heteronormative; I said it would be fine… and it hasn't been." She threw a bunched-up cupcake case into the bin and missed. "There. A metaphor for my time here."

"Well, Edmund's an idiot too," said Emma. "Why are guys so — " she broke off and gave a decisive shake of the head. "Not thinking about that. Has Edmund still not apologised?"

"Last night he said he was sorry if he did anything to hurt me," said Mary, rolling her eyes. "But we didn't really have a conversation. I was going to speak to him today, but then obviously…"

Emma picked sprinkles off her cupcake dispassionately. "You can say his name."

"Right," said Mary warily. "Well, then, before we all found out about Frank, I was going to speak to Edmund and say that I was sorry for kissing Lydia and for hiding away from the group last night… but I want to be here for you first."

"You don't need to," protested Emma. "Seriously, Frank isn't even — we just hung out for a few days. Nothing more."

Mary gave her a look. "Emma, it's OK to feel like crap. Even if it's unreasonable."

"But I don't," said Emma fiercely.

Mary left it at that.

"Right," she said. "Well, I do feel like crap about Edmund. I know I have to speak to him at some point. I just don't — " her voice did a pitiful croaky thing, and she swallowed. "I don't want to do it, because I don't think it's going to go how I want it to."

"Oh, babe."

Mary shrugged.

"I just don't get it," said Emma. "How can someone says he cares about you, when he's got some
"I don't know, Emma," said Mary. "But I do know that Edmund doesn't want to admit that he's interested in Fanny."

"But maybe he —"

"No," said Mary wearily. "He talks to her at every opportunity. He practically relies on her. They're alike in a way that he and I can never be. I've been in this situation too many times before, where I've been suspicious but I've trusted them, and I'm always wrong. I'm not going to go through it again."

Emma sighed.

"But you… you wouldn't forgive Frank, right?" said Mary tentatively.

"No."

"Good."

"After he lied from the beginning? At least you and Edmund were good before Fanny came along."

Mary sighed. "It isn't Fanny's fault."

"Right. Men are awful," declared Emma.

At that point there was a knock at the door.

"Yeah?"

"Emma, Mary?" called George through the keyhole. "Do you want me to bring some lunch in?"

"George, love of my life," said Mary. "Yes please."

He laughed. "Emma?"

"Please, thanks."

It took all of Mary's energy not to give Emma a pointed look.

If there were any people who had reason to be positive about the drama surrounding Frank, they would be Fanny and Edmund. The villa's focus had shifted to someone else, and whilst they weren't blasé enough to spend more time alone together, Harriet as a quasi-chaperone sat on the edge of the massive swing was not exactly effective.

"It's a terrible thing that Frank did," said Edmund.

Fanny and Harriet expressed their agreement.

"But Emma will recover," said Edmund.

"Oh, definitely," said Harriet. "Someone really great is going to come in and she'll forget all about Frank."

Fanny nodded. "Definitely."

Harriet remembered that she'd promised to teach Anne swimming this afternoon, and made her
"So," said Edmund. "What did you think of *La La Land*?"

Fanny looked uncomfortable. "Edmund, should we really be talking without anyone else around?"

Edmund tensed up. "What, because of Mary? We're not doing anything wrong."

"Not openly," Fanny ventured, "but I think she's hurt."

Edmund looked furious.

"*She's* hurt? How about me, watching her kiss someone else when all I've done is talk to you? And then yesterday night I made an effort to set things right between us, and she just ignored me like what I said wasn't good enough! She's created all this drama herself because of her self-destructive tendencies. She's not even my girlfriend and she's already trying to interfere in my life. She can't *stop* me from being friends with you."

"I don't think that's what she means," said Fanny gently. "I think she just wishes we hadn't gone on that date."

"Right, and I've told her I'm sorry," said Edmund. "Christ, I've done all I can. Maybe I was wrong to assume she'd be OK with me and you eating sponge cake with two other people right next to us, but for God's sake why is she mad at me about something I haven't done? I've told her a million times that you and I don't feel that way about each other. I don't know what else I can do."

"I know," lied Fanny, "but I don't think she believes you."

"Yeah, because she's *choosing* not to believe me. *God.*"

Fanny cleared her throat. "Maybe she has a good reason to."

Edmund frowned, confused. "What?"

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"Oh, poor Fanny," said Jane.

Tom snorted. "Yeah, right. She can be as mild as she wants. She's still a homewrecker."

Jane raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you going to blame Edmund and Mary for the breakdown of their own relationship?"

"Of course I'm blaming Edmund, at least," said Tom indignant. "But mark my words: Fanny is not as nice as she seems."

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"I really don't see her point," Edmund was saying. "It was just a date; it's not as if we've done anything wrong. You and I are friends, aren't we?"

"I… I suppose," said Fanny. Her eyes widened when she saw who was coming towards them. "Edmund, maybe I should…"

"She's just paranoid," Edmund continued, ignoring Fanny. "It's not my fault if she can't stomach the thought of me talking to another girl. And does she really have so little trust in me that she thinks I'd ___?"
"Spend time with Fanny when I'm not around?"

Edmund turned round to see Mary, standing over him, looking ready for war.

"I — I have to go," said Fanny, and made her escape.

"So?" said Mary. "What the fuck, Edmund?"

Edmund stood up. "Actually, I don't like how you're dealing with this. I haven't done anything wrong. Fanny and I are friends. She's not really close to anyone else on the isle — "

"Maybe if she didn't spend all her time talking to you, she would be," snapped Mary.

All other activity in the villa stopped to focus on what was brewing by the swings.

"Mary, come on, that's not even the point!"

"Yes, it bloody is! Why do you need to keep spending time with her? Surely you know that I'm jealous of her! And it hurts me that you run to her whenever we — "

"You're jealous?" Edmund sounded almost confused. "You? Of Fanny?"

"Of course I'm jealous of Fanny!" Mary screamed. "Fucking hell, Edmund, don't you see anything? You had that fucking connection about fucking jazz the moment you met, and it was like you'd completely forgotten about me." She sucked in a breath. "You and I were good because we were so different and it was exciting that we were so unlike our usual selves around each other. But maybe you just want something familiar."

"Mary, I'm not — where is this even coming from? You kissed someone else! Why can't you believe that Fanny and I are platonic?"

Mary gave a condescending sigh. "I only kissed Lydia because I was angry at you. And I can't believe you and Fanny are platonic, Edmund, because you're not."

"My god, how would you even know that?"

"Because I have a feeling about it, OK? A fucking feminine instinct, if that's easier for you to process. And I wanted you to humour my stupid feelings and stay away from her, but it doesn't look like that's going to happen."

"But why can't you — "

"Because I can't," said Mary. She was walking away now. "I can't do this with you, Edmund. Choose her, if that's what you want."

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"Oh, come on. Is she really asking him to choose between herself and Fanny? Doesn't that smack of serious insecurity?"

"Yep," said Jane, as she serenely ate her yoghurt. "But in this case, no. I think Edmund's being daft."

"You think all men are daft."

Jane raised an eyebrow.

"Ugh, I think you're right about Edmund," said Tom. "He hasn't told Mary how he feels about her
even once. It looks as if he's giving up on them."

Whilst the Mary-Edmund-Fanny drama had only really impacted the three of them (and Emma, in a way), Frank's making of Emma into the other woman had consequences beyond the breakdown of his and Emma's sapling relationship.

"We're being sanctimonious," Wickham said later that day, as he waded into the kitchen where Lizzy, Anne and Harriet were sat discussing the Frank situation.

Anne and Lizzy exchanged a look. This was a weird combination of people, especially as Lizzy and Wickham hadn't yet had the "clearly we don't like each other so let's look somewhere else" chat, but Wickham seemed to believe he could fit in anywhere.

"What?" demanded Lizzy.

Wickham shrugged and emptied a bag of roasted peanuts. "Barely anyone's been nice to him for the whole day. I mean, it's not like he and Emma were really together."

"That doesn't matter," said Lizzy incredulously. "He led her to believe that he was potentially ready for something serious with her."

"Are you saying you don't owe it to people to be honest?" asked Anne.

"Emma's really hurt," added Harriet. "Frank shouldn't have even come on the isle."

Wickham rolled his eyes and held up his hands. "Christ, OK, I'm sorry," he said. "Wasn't expecting to get attacked just for expressing my opinion."

This confirmed Lizzy's feeling that their conversation was long overdue.

"So, I know your love life is a post-apocalyptic wasteland," were George's first words to Will when he joined him on the terrace half an hour before dinner, "but I need your help so mine doesn't turn into one too."

Will raised an unimpressed eyebrow. "Why should I help you?"

"Thanks, I knew you'd say yes," said George. He sat down. "I have to tell Harriet it's not working."

"So tell her it's not working," said Will, betraying zero signs of interest. "Bring even more drama into this godforsaken day."

"Will, please stop pretending that you don't care about my life," said George. "I have to do it: it's not fair to her to make her think it's working between us."

Will looked bored.

"Fine, I'll make it easier for you. Do you think I'll look like more of a dick if I tell her honestly why it isn't working, or if I give her a load of platitudes and blame myself?"

"Depends," said Will. "Why do you want to end things?"

George sighed. "Honestly, we've both been distant lately, but I think she doesn't want to make the move to end it. Which is basically the point. I want someone who wouldn't be scared to make that
"You want someone who'd break up with you," Will said, his face lighting up. "Jesus Christ, George, you're a fucking masochist! If you tell her that then you won't even need to break up with her. A girl like Harriet? She'll run away all by herself."

George sighed. "I suppose I brought that on myself. I just mean that Harriet's a really sweet girl, but she's not my type."

"You like 'em mean," said Will, nodding sagely. "Pretty kinky."

"I hate you," said George. He continued, "So I should just be honest, right? I mean, she's definitely not in love with me. It's not going to break her heart."

"Sounds good," said Will. "Then you can chase after Emma."

"I am not — no. Shut it, Darcy. That's not what's happening here. That would be unfair to Harriet because it'll look like I've been stringing her along, waiting until Emma became available — "

"Right," said Will. He wouldn't say it, but he actually believed George: he knew that George had really thought there might be something between him and Harriet, but a week together had shown him that it wasn't going to work. It was just unfortunate coincidence that it happened at the same time Emma and Frank blew up.

Knowing George, he'd probably wait even longer to tell Emma how he felt, so Harriet wouldn't feel he'd dumped her for Emma.

George was a good one. And Will was aware that he was becoming one too.

"Wait, what?" said Tom. "George is going to dump Harriet?"

Jane rolled her eyes. "You are not telling me that you didn't see that coming."

"I thought he liked her!" protested Tom. "Couldn't he have waited to do it on a less tumultuous day?"

"If anything, this is the best day to do it," said Jane cynically. "Harriet will have lots of people to cry with."

Frank was with Wickham; Anne and Harriet were preparing dinner; George was consulting with Will on the terrace; Edmund was (still) talking to Fanny. It was the perfect moment for Lydia to pull Lizzy aside for a chat.

"So," said Lydia, "I want to talk to you about Wickham."

Lizzy raised an eyebrow. "OK."

Lydia sighed and flopped onto the day bed. "There isn't really a cool way to say this. So yesterday I was going to ask Will on a date because, I mean, hello, but then we talked and I decided actually I wanted to ask out Wickham. I had a really good time on our date and we've been hanging out, but I haven't asked him yet because I wanted to ask you what the sitch was like with you two. And I know I've literally just gone after the two guys you've had something with, but I swear I don't hate
you or anything. I guess we just have a lot in common."

Lizzy blinked and held up a hand. "Sorry, rewind. Why didn't you go out with Will?"

Lydia shrugged. "He's not for me. Not the point of this story, Lizzy. Wickham?"

"Right," said Lizzy, shaking her head. "No, you're so fine to go there. I was already pretty sure he wasn't what I was looking for, and today was the last nail in the coffin."

Lydia made a face. "What did he do today?"

Lizzy shrugged. "He just said that Frank didn't do anything wrong because he and Emma weren't official."

Lydia wrinkled her nose. "Lowkey gross, but I can deal with that."

"Great," said Lizzy, slightly relieved that the Wickham thing was going to be resolved so nicely. If Lydia was really interested in Wickham, then it would seem less like Lizzy was dumping him, and more like she was letting him move on. "I'll talk to him tonight, and then you can make your move?"

"Brill," said Lydia. She kissed Lizzy's cheek and sat up. "Love you, Liz."

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Tom threw his phone on the floor and said, "Jesus Christ, I can't keep track of all these changing relationships."

Jane nudged it towards him with her foot. "Learn to."

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Dinner was incredibly awkward.

A lack of planning coupled with grave misfortune had led to Emma being seated opposite Frank. Anne, who was next to Emma, had offered to switch places, but Emma had just looked at her perplexedly and said she had no problem with where she was. Fanny and Edmund were sat apart, but Fanny was nearer to Edmund than Mary was. And George was diagonal to Harriet.

Anne, Lizzy and Harriet tried valiantly to keep the conversation going, but Harriet's attempts to drag George into the conversation weren't exactly met with an enthusiastic response, and Lizzy could only monologue about Wilkie Collins to an uninterested audience for so long.

"OK, this is dumb," said Lydia, as Lizzy trailed off midway through a digression on *The Moonstone*. She put down her fork. "Lizzy, I love you, but that was the deadest ten minutes of my life. Can everyone just like, talk to each other instead of having all this fucking tension, and then Lizzy won't feel the need to lecture us on some boring book?"

She looked around at everyone.

"It's not boring," said Lizzy.

Frank darted a glance at Emma, who wore an expression of laudable nonchalance.

"Lydia, I don't think that people want to say these things in front of everyone," said Anne.

"Why the fuck not?" demanded Lydia. "We're all living together. We're going to find out anyway."
"Regardless," Edmund bit out, "that doesn't give you the right to get involved in things which aren't your business."

"Are you serious? Why are you on a fucking reality show then?"

"Because — because I wanted to find love."

Mary looked at him and said, "Really? Because you did a good job of fucking it up."

Edmund turned very red, but didn't respond. Fanny felt everyone's eyes on her and she was flooded with mortification. She hadn't done anything wrong; she had merely followed her heart and where it led, and it had led her to Edmund. Privately, she thought if his and Mary's relationship couldn't withstand the slightest test, then it was obviously not meant to last.

Lydia rolled her eyes. "Aren't you going to say something back?" she demanded of Edmund.

"You know, Lydia," said Edmund coldly, "I don't care for you or your opinion."

"Is this about what happened yesterday? Oh my god, OK, I'm sorry for kissing Mary."

"That's not even — can we just drop it?" he said, his voice etched with tension.

"Fine," said Lydia.

The silence now was even heavier than before. Frank might've said something, had he not been sat directly in front of Emma and unable to avoid the sight of her proud, hurt face.

After a few horrible minutes of silence, Anne asked everyone what they thought of the shrimps, and that carried them through until the end of dinner.

"Hey," said Lizzy to Wickham after the dinner from hell, when everyone had dispersed across the villa. "Can I talk to you?"

"Sure," said Wickham.

She sat down on the day bed next to his.

"I probably should've done this a while ago," she began. "I know you and Lydia have something going, and I just wanted to say that I don't feel anything more than friendly towards you. Lydia's great, and you should really go for it with her."

Wickham looked a bit surprised.

"Wickham?" asked Lizzy, when he didn't respond. "Did you — did you hear me?"

His face closed up. "Yep. Just wasn't what I was expecting."

Lizzy frowned. "What were you expecting?"

He looked sheepish. "I kind of thought you were into me."

Lizzy was taken aback.

"Yes, ages ago," she said slowly. "But then I think it just petered out. And you spent all of yesterday flirting with Lydia."
"Yeah, right," he said. He stood up. "Thanks for being so cool about me and Lydia."

"No problem," said Lizzy. He was already walking away.

Breakups were in the air tonight, as George sat with Harriet in the lounge and made the speech he'd prepared without Will's help.

"I think we both know this has to happen," he said gently. "Listen, Harriet, I think you're sweet and kind and wonderful, and I really wanted to give us a shot. But I think the last few days have shown that it doesn't work between us. You agree, right?"

"Yeah, definitely," said Harriet hollowly. "You're right. I'm too — you're too — " she broke off and laughed weakly. "You know what I mean."

"Right," said George, who did not know what she meant. He breathed a sigh of relief anyway. "I'm so glad you feel the same way. I was afraid this was going to be really difficult."

"No, yeah," said Harriet. "I agree it's the right call."

George smiled. "Great. OK, I guess I'll see you around."

Absolutely no one was surprised when the news spread that George and Harriet had ended things, except Emma. But she was (though she didn't admit it) preoccupied with the drama about Frank, which saved George from being shouted at by her.

Fanny and Anne hadn't seen Harriet come out of the villa after George, and it had been fifteen minutes.

Worried, they went inside and found her curled up on her bed.

"Harriet!" said Anne, coming up close and seeing her blotchy face. "Hey, are you all right?"

Harriet nodded unconvincingly.

"It's OK not to be OK," said Anne steadily, sitting down next to her.

"Anne's right," said Fanny. "You'll feel better if you talk about it."

Harriet gave a whimper. "I know we haven't been hanging out much recently, but I thought it was just a rough patch! I didn't think that it'd come to this. I thought he really liked me."

Oh, boy, thought Anne.

"I'm sorry," said Fanny, rubbing soothing circles on Harriet's shoulder.

"And do you know what the worst thing is?" said Harriet.

Anne didn't know if that was rhetorical. "... That he didn't?"

"That he didn't think I even liked him!" Harriet wailed. "He asked if I agreed we shouldn't be together — I don't, but I said I did — and he acted like I knew it was going to happen!"

Anne didn't know how helpful she was going to be when comforting someone over a breakup everyone else saw coming.
"You'll find someone better," said Fanny confidently. "If George thought you were on the same page when you knew you weren't, then that means you didn't understand each other."

"Exactly," said Anne, feeling horrible for wanting to laugh when Fanny was next to her, being utterly serious about this. "You'll find someone right for you."

"I'll never like someone that much ever again," Harriet mumbled into the pillow.

Anne suppressed a sigh.

That evening, Mary decided she couldn't let this carry on any longer. She was going to talk to Edmund again, and she wasn't going to storm away from their argument until they'd decided on a way forward. They were going to talk one last time, lay all their feelings on the table, and finally resolve on something.

He was sleeping on the sofa tonight. She made sure not to draw attention to herself when she slipped out of the bathroom and went into the lounge.

Edmund, who was already in bed, sat up. "Mary."

"Edmund," she said.

She sat down opposite him.

"Look, I'm tired of being angry. I don't really care that you went on a date with Fanny any more, and I hope you can see that me kissing Lydia was only done in the heat of the moment. I only care about the future. Are you interested in Fanny?"

Edmund sighed. "Mary, I'm not."

She nodded, expressionless. "Fine. Is she interested in you?"

He blinked. "What? I don't — I don't know. I haven't asked her."

Mary sighed. "Edmund, she is. Can you promise that you won't spend time with her until I'm sure nothing will happen between you two?"

Edmund felt his temper rising. "Why? I've told you again and again that I'm not interested in her. Why won't you believe me?"

"I believe you think you're not interested in her," said Mary. "But I think you are."

"So you're going to stop me from talking to her?"

"No, don't be ridiculous," said Mary.

Edmund felt a light burst of relief. All this difficulty would be over and he and Mary could get back to where they were —

" — But I can't be with you if you keep hanging out with her alone. This has happened to me too many times before, that I thought someone I was dating liked someone else, but they said they didn't, and then it turned out they did."

"So you think I'm like everyone else?" demanded Edmund.
"I think this situation is like every other time," said Mary.

Edmund stared at her with incredulity.

"So it's over? Just like that?"

"I have to protect myself," said Mary.

"But I won't hurt you!"

"You might."

Edmund swallowed. "I can't be with someone who doesn't trust me."

"It's not that I don't trust you," said Mary tiredly. "I trusted all the other people too."

"Who weren't me!" Edmund said. He felt his temper boiling, as it did every time he talked to her these days. "Fine, Mary. I'm not going to stop being friends with Fanny because you're paranoid about her. So I guess that means we're over."

"I guess it does," said Mary. "If I mean less to you than some girl you only met two days ago, then it's a good thing we're finished."

"Good!"

"Fuck you, Edmund," said Mary, forcing herself to leave the room. She felt the tears welling up and brushed them away angrily. "You know, before all this, I really thought you were it for me."

Then she walked away, and the day drew to a close.

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"Holy shit," said Tom. Neither he nor Jane had moved to turn the TV off; both of them were in a kind of shock caused by witnessing events of unforeseen high drama. "I think I'm going to cry."

"I'll get you a tissue," said Jane, but she was clearly affected too. "Surely that's it, then. Edmund and Mary are done."

"I need to lie down," said Tom. "First Frank and Emma, then George and Harriet, now Mary and Edmund?"

"It's splitsvilla," said Jane, idly scrolling through her phone. She sighed. "Oh, come on. Someone's already made that hashtag."

Chapter End Notes

Whew. Henceforth this shall be known as the breakups chapter.

Also, fun fact: I had a dream last night that I was on Love Island and I was really getting along with this guy but it turned out that he had two secret children. So maybe Emma is my authorial insert?

I know I could've made the Frank thing edgier, but the reasons why he isn't secretly
married or something truly wild are because 1) they would hardly have let him on the show, 2) it would honestly be kind of silly and 3) he would be very obviously in the wrong. I think Frank's more stupid than malicious, and going on a dating show as an impulsive act makes more sense than outright cheating.

Austen is usually quite morally unambiguous, or at least I think so. The narrative makes it clear that it believes Wickham is terrible, that Darcy was out of line when he broke up Jane and Bingley, that Colonel Brandon is right for Marianne, that Captain Benwick moves on too quickly. But I don't think that my Mary is right to demand what she does of Edmund, or that Edmund is right to refuse. Just wanted to make that clear.

Comments and/or Tumblr asks are incredibly welcome!
A Lot to Drag Me Away From You

Chapter Summary

(Trying this out...) in this chap we fill the gap between heartbreak and hope for the future with friends taking the piss out of friends and a heckaload of staring into the camera like you're on The Office

Chapter Notes

Title from Toto's Africa; music taste from someone without any clue. Once again this has taken longer than I thought it would, but I have a genuine excuse this time about un petit disruption chez moi. Something potentially weird, potentially brilliant gets started in this chapter, and I'd love your thoughts on it if you will!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Previously on Down the Isle...

Last night was the most dramatic episode yet, featuring a grand total of four breakups. It began with a reveal to the isle that Frank had a sort-of girlfriend outside of the show, which led to Emma immediately breaking things off with him. Though she had been considering it for a while, Lizzy finally ended it with Wickham after Lydia expressed an interest in him. Later that evening, in what some might call suspiciously convenient timing, George broke it off with Harriet. And Mary and Edmund, who were previously the strongest couple on the isle, finally sat down and decided they couldn't work past the issue of Fanny.

In the midst of all this heartbreak, surely something good has to happen?

"Well, this is shit," said Tom.

Jane echoed his sentiment.

"There's no conceivable reason why George doesn't just tell Emma how he feels," said Jane. "She obviously feels the same way."

"Well, he doesn't know that," protested Tom. "And neither do you!"

Jane arched a brow. "I know everything."

"Fine, then, O Great One. How do you know that Emma loves George?"

Jane listed her reasons. "She treats him differently to all the other guys; she really cares for his opinion; there's no one else on the isle who's as honest with her as he is."

Tom rolled his eyes. "How would he know any of that?"
Jane shrugged. "He wouldn't, but he should tell her anyway."

Lydia and Wickham were the only people who could be said to be in a good mood today. There were also being very unsubtle about it.

"I'm going to throw something at them," said Emma. It was morning and most of the girls were gathered around the kitchen, watching Lydia and Wickham splash each other in the pool.

As the nearest thing to hand was a pair of scissors, Lizzy removed it from Emma's reach.

"Look, you can't let Frank ruin your time here," said Anne.

Emma sighed. "No, it's not that. I really don't care about Frank."

Lizzy and Anne exchanged a look.

"I'm serious!" said Emma. "I know I was protesting too much yesterday, but then last night I had a nice cry and now I feel fine. Anyway, he was too much like me for it to have worked long-term."

They seemed to accept this, and attention turned to Harriet, who was in much worse shape than Emma. She hadn't said much this morning, but she sat morosely on a stool and barely touched her smoothie, which was for her a cry for help.

"Come on, girls," said Lizzy, with all the spirit of a PE teacher cheering on the netball D team. "None of these boys are worth it."

"I just don't know what I did," said Harriet. "I thought George really liked me."

"I'm going to talk to him about it," said Emma decisively. "I'll get an answer for you."

Lizzy and Anne exchanged concerned looks.

In response to the overall low mood of the villa following yesterday's four breakups, the production team decided to send in their secret weapon.

"Darlings!" said Yvonne as she strode into the villa. She surveyed the faces before her: stony, hurt, tired. "Why so glum? You're on Down the Isle!"

"Exactly," said Mary.

Yvonne pretended that she hadn't heard that. "Anyway, girls, I've got a nice surprise for you. Tonight, there will be two new boys coming into the villa. And for some of you, I think you'll be delighted to hear that tomorrow evening, there will be a recoupling — boys choose!"

No one looked especially delighted, though Lizzy raised her eyebrows at Anne suggestively. Yvonne saw it.

"That's the spirit, Lizzy! Here's hoping you find your dream man tonight. Chin up, darlings, and carry on!"

"But I don't want to meet any new boys," moaned Harriet.

Emma had given herself one last hour to think about Frank that morning, and now it was over. She
was moving on in the way she knew best: throwing herself into work. And work, on the isle, was the emotional stability of her fellow contestants.

"Harriet, listen to me," she said, very firmly. "There is no use in pining over someone who doesn't want you. And it's his loss that he doesn't. You're better than him. He shouldn't be moving on from you; you should be moving on from him."

She hadn't had the full story that morning when she declared she was going to talk to George. Now, having pieced it together from various pieces given by Harriet, Emma was in a different mind about it altogether. Privately she thought George hadn't done anything wrong: he'd tried to be with Harriet, then found it wasn't right for him, and told her as nicely as possible. But if she said that to Harriet it would just start another round of crying again, and Emma did not think she could bear that.

"OK?" she prompted.

"OK," said Harriet, but not before giving a huge sniffle. "OK! I am going to be OK."

"Exactly," said Emma. "Hold onto that attitude."

"I just wish he liked me," repeated Harriet tearfully. "What did I do wrong?"

Emma felt her patience wearing thin.

Frank knew Emma was avoiding him, but he had to speak to her — if only to apologise.

"Hey," he said, catching her at a moment when she was alone.

She looked up at him but didn't say anything.

Well, it wasn't a rejection. He sat down at a good distance and said: "I'm not trying to cross your boundaries; I know you don't want anything to happen between us any more, and that's fine. But I really never meant to hurt you."

"OK," said Emma tonelessly.

There was more he could've said. He and Jane had as good as broken up when she left for Uganda. It was Frank who'd begged her for it to be a break. They'd been so young when they got together, and Jane had outgrown their relationship. The break was a chance for Frank to sort himself out, to stop being the man Jane had wanted four years ago and to become the man that Jane wanted now. Obviously, he cocked it up by signing up for and going on a reality dating show. And then he met Emma, who was sharp and beautiful and so much easier to be with than Jane…

"I should've told you about Jane," he said finally. "We were basically broken up, but she'd been in my life so long that I just wanted to hold onto her. And the more time we spent together, the more I realised she was in my past."

"You shouldn't have used me as an experiment to see if you were ready to move on," said Emma evenly.

"I know. Emma, I never meant — I think you're amazing. I'm so sorry that I — "

The door to the terrace opened, and Frank and Emma turned around to see the tall, dark-eyed figure of Mary Crawford standing against the door, folding her arms.

"Lunch is ready," she said. "Em, George said he needed your help with something?"
Emma blinked. "He did?" But she swallowed the lie and went downstairs.

Mary turned to Frank after Emma left. "What were you doing?"

Frank smiled his most charming. "Just talking."

Mary narrowed her eyes. "If you were trying to convince Emma she was wrong about dumping you, I'll hurt you."

"There won't be any need for that," said Frank smoothly.

Mary seemed to relax a fraction. "Good. Well, I didn't lie about lunch."

He half expected she'd leave, but she stayed there, apparently waiting for him to get up.

"What, you think I went up all those stairs just for you to avoid lunch?" She rolled her eyes. "Don't piss me off more than I already am."

Frank usually knew what to say, but in this moment…

"Edmund?" he asked.

Now that he'd stood up, she was already turning away. "You don't have to say anything," she said, and marched down the stairs. Frank followed.

After lunch, Edmund was talking to Fanny by the patio, because no one else on the villa wanted to hear what he had to say.

"I just don't get why she couldn't trust me," he said. "I thought things between us were so good. I had no idea this would happen."

"Maybe this was inevitable," said Fanny.

Edmund rubbed his hand over his face. "Do you think I did the right thing?"

Fanny didn't know how to reply to that.

Edmund realised his mistake. "Of course, sorry, I can't ask you that. But I didn't do what I did because of anything specific. I did it as a principle. I can't believe she wouldn't trust me."

Timidly, Fanny offered, "I'm glad you did it."

"Thank you," said Edmund. "You're the only one. No one else even wants to talk to me — I mean, George did this morning, but he'd talk to anyone — and I didn't even do anything wrong. Was it wrong to want to get to know you, as friends?"

"Of course not," said Fanny soothingly.

Edmund sighed and dropped his head onto the pillow. "I don't know what to do."

"You could take back what you said to Mary," suggested Tom.

Emma collapsed on the day bed next to George's. "Ugh," she said, when he didn't immediately react.
George blinked and looked up. "Emma?"

"Hello, it's me," said Emma, waving a hand in his face. "Were you sleeping? It's three in the afternoon. How old are you, sixty?"

"Hilarious," said George, sitting up and swatting her hand out of his face. He swallowed. "Are you OK?"

Emma sighed. "I know it's kind of weird between us because of Harriet, but can you and I just — talk?"

George did not think that was a good idea.

"Emma, I don't think I'm really the right person… do you want me to get Mary? Or Lizzy?"

"Yes, you are," said Emma insistently. "The girls are all so sympathetic, which is nice, but I know you won't tread carefully around me. What do you think about Frank?"

George had a lot of thoughts on Frank, but he was aware that saying any of them out loud was going to expose him as pathetic, jealous and potentially creepy.

He settled for: "He's an arsehole."

"Obviously," said Emma. "But what did you think about the idea of me with him? I mean, before yesterday revealed that any idea of us was never real to him."

*I thought you were a million times better than him, and he didn't deserve you.*

"I don't know how to say this," said George. "Look, it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. What do you think?"

"I don't know," said Emma frustratedly. "I've got this weird feeling that I actually don't care, which is stupid and probably full of denial, because I spent a whole week with him and a week here is like seven bloody months in the real world. But once I got past the hurt pride and trust, I didn't really feel anything. I don't want revenge and I'm barely angry. So do you think I just never liked him that much?"

George sighed. "Emma, how am I supposed to know how you felt about someone else?"

"Well, I don't know," said Emma unreasonably. "Fine, forget it." She laid her head on his shoulder, and said pointedly, "You know, Harriet's really broken up about you."

"Fuck," said George, with feeling.

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For reasons unknown, at the exact moment which Edmund was coming upstairs, Mary was coming down from the terrace, and no one else was on the corridor when they walked past each other.

"Mary!" said Edmund.

Mary continued walking.

"Mary, please."

She stopped. "What is it, Edmund?"
"Just… hear me out," he said. "You're really ending things between us because you're afraid of something that hasn't even happened? You can't do that."

"I can't?" asked Mary.

"That's not what I meant," said Edmund. "Mary, please. Last night you said you thought I was it for you. If you really meant that, you can't — you shouldn't just throw that away."

"I'm not the one throwing it away," said Mary calmly. "You're throwing it away by not listening to my feelings."

Edmund stared at her.

"I can't believe you're blaming me," he said.

"It's not about blame!" Mary burst out. "It shouldn't be about whether you're right or I'm right. If you want to be a couple, then that has to be the most important thing."

Edmund did what he'd been doing a lot lately: he froze up.

"You can't demand all this of me before we're even officially together," he said.

"I know I can't," said Mary acidly. "That's why we're finished."

She pushed past him on her way outside, brimming with anger. In the real world, you could just block your ex and move on. On the isle, you lived together, and you ran into each other in silent corridors because people wanted to watch it on TV.

Lydia and Wickham — for alas, we must give them their screen time — had volunteered to make dinner tonight. No one objected, because it meant that as long as one avoided the kitchen, one would also avoid the sight of Lydia and Wickham snogging. Despite having known each other less than four days, they were all over each other like teenagers at a house party.

"Wickham!" giggled Lydia. Wickham was taking advantage of the fact that he was about a foot taller than her by holding the bottle of chili powder over her head. She tried to jump to reach it, but in vain. "Stop it!"

He looked down at her. "I'll give it to you… on one condition."

"Oh?" She lowered her lashes. "And what's that?"

His mysterious demand was that she give him a kiss; Lydia obliged. He tossed her the bottle and she caught it with another giggle.

"I don't know why you're using this stuff anyway," he said, leaning against the counter and watching Lydia add the chili powder. "It's so strong."

"Oh my god, just because you white people think tomato ketchup counts as flavouring — "

Mary came out of the villa and stalked past the kitchen on her way to the patio. "Please don't have a food fight," she said shortly. "None of us will be cleaning it up."

"Hey, who put that stick up — " was all Wickham managed to get out, because Lydia clapped a hand over his mouth.
"She's going through a tough time," she said. "We should be nice to her."

"Whatever," said Wickham, but he didn't finish his sentence.

Amongst many of his other mature traits, one thing George never did was just to let a problem sit there.

"Hey, Anne," he said, catching her on her way inside, just before dinner. "Can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure," said Anne, slightly wary.

"Thanks," said George, accompanying her inside the villa. "Um, is Harriet OK?"

Anne felt weary as she looked at him. "Not really."

"Oh," said George. "Is it because of me?"

Anne gave him a look.

"Right, of course," he said. "Sorry. Obviously." He looked guilty, which wasn't really necessary since he hadn't done anything wrong. And privately, Anne thought Harriet was being a bit dramatic. "Look, I really meant it when I told Harriet that I wanted to see how things developed between us."

"I know," said Anne wryly. "Don't talk to her, though. It'll get her hopes up, and she needs at least some pride."

George blinked. "Thanks for the heads up."

"Of course," said Anne. "You're a good guy, George. But don't go chasing after Emma right away."

George's face froze.

"I'm not — I didn't — that was never what I was planning," he managed. "And that wasn't what happened today. She came up to me, I tried to tell her that she should go…"

Anne sighed. "No, you should do it. God knows if you wait for her to realise, it'll take a lifetime. But just give Harriet some time, yeah?"

Dinner was a mostly endurable affair, though Lydia and Wickham, who unfortunately were sat together, managed to sicken everyone out of their (notably spicy) pasta by being overly affectionate and completely unaware of their surroundings. There was no sign of the Lydia who told Will straight-up that he was being an idiot. This Lydia was entirely fixated on the mediocre specimen of mankind next to her.

After dinner, George volunteered himself and Will to wash the dishes — mostly so no one would hear their conversation.

"I didn't want to do this," said Will, who was on drying duty.

George passed him a plate. "I know."

Will dutifully wiped the plate clean and stacked it on a shelf. "Out with it then."
"Out with what?"

"Fuck you, Knightley."

"Fine," said George. He handed Will a bunch of cutlery. "What are you going to do about Lizzy? Now Wickham's out of the picture."

Will wasn't in a sitcom: he didn't drop the knife he was holding. But he did still his movements and very carefully put the knife down, to prevent any unfortunate accidents.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

George rolled his eyes. "Will, my man, not everyone is as blind as the girl of your dreams."

"She's not — fuck off."

George shrugged. "You wouldn't be so mad if I wasn't right. There are two new guys coming in tonight; what if she's interested in one of them?"

"It won't matter even if she isn't, because she's not interested in me," Will muttered.

"Bullshit," said George cheerfully. "Why wouldn't she be? Apart from the fact that you were a bit shit to her when you first met — "

"A crucially important detail."

"— you're a catch, Darcy, and since you're being dumb about this, I'm going to tell you that she has no reason to reject you." He brandished a plate as he said this; Will took the plate from him and dried it.

"This is all coming from a guy whose own love life is in the sewage pipe."

"True," said George. "But I'm working on it. Whereas you aren't."

"There's no point," said Will. He looked over to where Lizzy was, laughing with Mary. "She'll never feel that way about me. I'll just do nothing and carry it with me forever."

At this moment, Anne and Lydia came over to the kitchen to get some water.

"Are we interrupting another sad terrace pining group meeting?" Lydia asked.

"What?" said George and Will, continuing to do the dishes.

"Well, obviously you're not on the terrace right now," Anne put in. "But sad kitchen pining group doesn't have the same ring to it."

George and Will still looked befuddled.

"Jesus," said Lydia, drawing out the syllables, "it's not like it's confusing. You two sit on the terrace and pine. Sadly."

"Lydia, I swear to God — " Will began.

"Oh, come off it," said Lydia. "Everyone knows except Lizzy and Emma. And maybe Harriet. But if she hasn't figured it out by now, she's really — "
"Lydia!" said Anne.


"I'm not pining," said George.

Lydia rolled her eyes. "OK, George."

George was saved from being dragged by Lydia because it was announced that the two new boys would be arriving soon.

Lydia patted his shoulder. "Let's go and see what competition you're going to have."

Their names were James and Martin. They weren't devastatingly attractive, but they seemed very nice and were probably chosen as an antidote to the arseholery of the recent welcomes to the isle, so no one was complaining.

"James is kind of cute," said Lizzy, watching at a distance from the kitchen as the new boys mingled. "Don't you think?"

Anne looked dubious. "I guess."

"Anne, come on," said Lizzy. "Hey, I know you did a really noble thing in picking Will, but if you two aren't going anywhere romantic you've got to look for it somewhere else. What are you here for?"

"To find… love," said Anne, pained.

"Exactly," said Lizzy triumphantly. "Go on, talk to James."

Thus commenced a staring contest.

"All right, fine," said Anne, giving up and downing her drink. "I'll do it."

"Atta girl."

Anne flashed Lizzy a glare as she made her way over to where James sat with George and Emma. She wondered about the consequences of dragging James away and leaving George and Emma alone together, especially with Harriet right there, but then she looked closer and saw that Harriet seemed to be pretty distracted with Martin.

"Hi, I'm Anne," she said, holding out her hand to James.

He took it. "Hi, I'm James."

George and Emma had some of the better wingman instincts out of the people on the isle, and they both made plausible excuses for why they had to leave.

"So, James," said Anne, once they were alone. "What brings you here?"

"Er, I guess I'm looking for love," said James.

Anne nodded. "Mm-hmm, checks out."

He made a face between a smile and a grimace.
"So what do you do?" she asked politely.

"I was in the navy for ten years," said James.

Anne checked her instinct to laugh maniacally.

"Oh, really!" she said. "That's, er, wow." She forced herself to not think about the thing she was thinking about. "What's your favourite place you've been?"

"Probably the Caribbean," said James. "We were deployed in the Bahamas for an operation three years ago, and the beaches there are amazing. We were in Cyprus for one of my last deployments, which was pretty amazing too."

Anne nodded blandly.

"I've never been anywhere outside of Europe," she offered.

James looked faintly horrified and began planning out her holidays for the next ten years. Anne sat back and laughed at the appropriate moments, and the conversation wasn't horrible. But it was a relief when Lizzy came over to rescue her. Frankly, any interest she might've had in James had fled with his similarity to Fred.

It wasn't that Anne still hadn't moved on, but more that she had just switched tack all together. She didn't know how to date. Apart from that, she had a perfectly normal social life: she had friends outside the hospital and she read books in her spare time, but aside from a few things at uni that had petered out very quickly and the occasional date forced on her by her sister, there was no romance in her life.

Which was why, after all, she had come on the isle.

In no time, Lizzy and James were bonding over a shared love of a TV show about a drug dealer, so Anne pretended that she was dying for a drink and left them to it. On the way to the kitchen, she bumped into Harriet.

"Hey, Harriet," said Anne. "How are you?"

"Amazing!" said Harriet. Anne blinked: not five hours ago, Harriet had been miserable over George.

"Martin's so nice," she gushed. "We've been talking for ages. We're both studying graphic design — well, he's finished, but only two years ago — and we have so much in common! We both really like Arctic Monkeys, and Friends, and don't you think his hair is really cute?"

"Wow," said Anne, blinking. "Er, yeah, I guess. Well, it's great that you like Martin so much!"

"It really is," said Harriet happily. "I thought I was never going to get over George, but then tonight Martin just came in and…" she trailed off, looking worried. "Hey, you don't think George will mind, do you?"

Anne was confused. "Um?"

"That I've moved on so quickly," said Harriet. "Like if didn't mean to break up with me."

Anne blinked. "No, I think you're fine."

"Hey."
Mary, who was only sitting alone because Will had just left to get something from the kitchen, looked up. "Oh, Christ, why? That earlier was not an olive branch, you know."

Frank sat down next to her. "Look, I know I'm not anyone's favourite right now — "

"You hurt my best friend," said Mary.

"Right," he said, but his expression was embarrassed rather than ashamed.

Mary sighed. "What do you want? If it's for me to put in a good word for you, forget it."

"Not that," said Frank. "Emma's made it very clear that we're finished. But I still feel bad about what I did, and I wanted to do something small just to apologise. Nothing romantic, just… to show her that I do care about her."

Mary had no idea where he was going with this. "OK?"

"I know you're Emma's best friend in here," said Frank. "So with the recoupling tomorrow night, I wondered if it would be OK if I picked you."

Mary gave Frank an unimpressed look. "Because I've been brutally fucked over by the guy I was with, and you're a social pariah no one wants to be around?"

He took the insult gracefully, adding: "And because it would make Emma happy that you stayed."

Mary sighed.

"I don't even know why you're still here," she said. "Shouldn't you leave nobly so the entire country doesn't think you're trash personified?"

Frank winced. "Ouch."

Mary raised an eyebrow.

He shrugged. "Why? Jane and I were only on a break because — OK, obviously you don't care. The point is, there's nothing to salvage."

Mary didn't say anything.

"Plus, it's basically a free holiday," said Frank, and he was back to being flippant and selfish again.

"Sure," said Mary, rolling her eyes. "Well, fine. As long as we're clear there is nothing and never will be anything between us?"

"Clear as crystal," said Frank. He got up. "I'm really not proud of what I did."

"Yeah, whatever," said Mary. "You did it anyway."

"I nearly forgot about that," said Tom, as Jane searched for the remote to turn the TV off. "There's a recoupling tomorrow."

"Oh, yeah," said Jane. "What will happen?"

"Frank will pick Mary," said Tom.
"Wickham will pick Lydia," said Jane. "It's the least he can do after spending the whole day sucking off her face."

"Jane!" said Tom, shocked and delighted. "That was so vulgar."

"Yes, well, I don't say it lightly," said Jane, her cheeks faintly pink.

"So there's James, Will, Edmund and George," said Tom. "I need to write something down."

Fortunately Jane had writing utensils scattered around the apartment, and Tom snatched up a nondescript notebook and a green pen with a pom-pom on the end. He scribbled down the names of all the contestants. "So, Edmund will choose..."

"No!" said Jane suddenly. "This is ruining the fun."

Tom raised an eyebrow and carried on talking. "Surely Edmund can't be that much of a cockwomble to pick Fanny, simultaneously proving Mary right and looking like the world's biggest — "

"I'm going to bed," said Jane.

"And is it too much to hope that George will choose Emma?" pressed Tom.

"Probably," said Jane. She kissed his cheek lightly. "Good night!"

Chapter End Notes

Just to clarify, James is Captain James Benwick from Persuasion, not James Morland from Northanger Abbey. There are now only four characters from Austen's novels left to appear!

Comments and Tumblr asks are lovely: that one anon who always sends me an ask after each chapter, you're a gem. Also speculations about future events are VERY welcome, esp about the weird/brilliant thing that I won't explicitly state because if I do then I won't be able to see if you picked up on it, you know?

Anyway, the next chapter will be up v soon!
You're the Perfect Thing to Say

Chapter Summary

Someone FINALLY makes a move!!!!!!

Chapter Notes

Title from Michael Buble's Everything, because this is a recoupling chapter and someone's finally going to say the right name.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Previously on Down the Isle…

Apart from Lydia and Wickham, romance on the isle is, at the moment, pretty dead. Neither Will nor George have the girl they want; Edmund doesn't even know who he wants; Mary's moving on from Edmund's betrayal, and there aren't many romantic possibilities for Lizzy and Anne right now. To George, who is newly broken up with Harriet, Emma confessed that she 'actually didn't care' about the shock revelation two days ago that Frank is still in something of a relationship outside the isle. In the evening, the arrival of two new boys lifted spirits considerably: especially those of Harriet, when she discovered that she and new boy Martin had a lot in common. So with a recoupling looming tonight, there's the potential for a huge shake-up.

"We're halfway through the show," announced Tom, when Jane sat down. "Something has to happen."

"That's really not how love works," said Jane.

"It bloody well should be," said Tom. "If I get halfway through my life and I'm still leading a loveless existence, I'm going to be so pissed."

Tom had never mentioned or acted in a way that alluded to this desire to settle down before, but Jane knew the male mind was an odd and contradictory place.

"How will you know you're halfway through your life?" she asked.

Tom ignored her. "Let's just say forty. No, thirty-five. If I'm single and loveless at thirty-five, I'll feel that life has betrayed me."

"Very potent," said Jane, stealing one of Tom's strawberry laces.

"I'm serious," said Tom. "Come on, I can't — hey, if we're both single at thirty-five, will you marry me?"

It was as if he'd thrown his heart at the sky and it was currently suspended mid-air.
"Sure," said Jane, carelessly picking lint off her blanket.

"Jane, come on — wait, what?"

"Sure," repeated Jane, rolling her eyes. "What? You think it'll actually come to that?"

"Well, I can't speak for myself, but…"

"Prat," said Jane, and shoved him.

As was the case before every recoupling, the recoupling tonight was all anyone could talk about.

The pressure was off, though. There were an equal number of boys and girls, and Yvonne hadn't said anything about people leaving, so everyone was at least safe. And that made all the speculation less tinged with fear, and more with outright curiosity.

"How are we feeling for tonight, girls?" asked Emma, making an atypically late entrance to breakfast. She made a beeline for the fridge and took out the almond milk. "Who the hell knows what's going to happen?"

"I can't believe how much has changed since the last recoupling," said Harriet. "And I'm nervous, of course, but also… kind of excited."

"Martin, right?" said Anne.

Harriet blushed. "Yes."

Emma didn't look pleased by the idea of Harriet and Martin together, so she directed her energies towards making her breakfast.

"I'm going to talk to James some more today," Lizzy announced.

"Ooh, Lizzy's grafting!" said Lydia.

"I am not grafting," protested Lizzy. "Are you saying I need to graft?"

"Of course not," said Mary. There was a silence when she spoke, and she looked around at the girls. "What? I'm not touchy about tonight. Frank's picking me," she said, loud enough that Edmund, eating breakfast with George over by the smaller swings, could hear.

Edmund made the amateur move of looking over, which gave Mary the satisfaction of looking as if she didn't care what he thought.

"Mary…" said Emma.

"I know," said Mary resignedly.

No one mentioned Fanny, who was still inside the villa, but her presence was very much felt.

"Anyway," said Anne, ever the peacemaker. "Things have been so dramatic in here lately. None of us are going home tonight, so let's just relax and enjoy the day."

Of course, only the exact opposite happened.
Will had misplaced his sunglasses. No one had seen them anywhere outside, so he was now undergoing the chore of searching through every room in the villa.

He walked into the lounge, and his heart did a fucking jump.

"Hey," said Lizzy, looking up from her book.

"Hey," said Will cautiously. "Er, have you seen my sunglasses?"

Lizzy frowned. "I don't think so. What do they look like?"

"Um," said Will. "Black."

"Men," said Lizzy, to no one in particular.

Of course her light teasing made him blush. "They're Tom Ford," he said. "They're… rectangular, I guess?" For some reason he tried to make the shape with his hands.

"Hmm," said Lizzy, getting up. She pulled back the cushions on the sofa. "Not here."

"It's fine," said Will. "I'll just keep looking."

Lizzy looked at him amusedly. "No, hey, I'll help. I wasn't doing anything."

"OK," said Will.

The chances of his sunglasses being in the lounge were quite small, because he wasn't some lunatic who wore sunglasses indoors. On the other hand, Lizzy was here.

"Tom Ford, huh," she said.

Will groaned. "My sister got them for me. Normally I'd never spend that much on something so frivolous."

"Plus, you'd lose it," teased Lizzy.

She half-thought Will would stare at her blankly, or worse, react badly, but he just tilted his head and smiled at her. " Exactly."

Lizzy smiled back, and felt something shift in the air.

"Not here," she said, lifting up the blankets on another sofa. Will was looking under the table, which had the side effect of giving Lizzy a great view of his arse, until he crawled out and said, "Not here either."

She climbed onto the sofa and attempted to see if they were on top of the massive wardrobe on the other side of the room. Being tiny, she couldn't see a thing. She tried jumping, but the wardrobe was really big and she couldn't exactly suspend herself in the air for long enough to see up to the back —

"What are you doing?" asked Will, from behind the sofa.

Lizzy turned round. "Er, just checking to see if they're on top of that wardrobe."

Will looked at the wardrobe, which was about seven feet high. "Are they?"

"I couldn't see," said Lizzy grumpily. And then, because she was being possessed by a mad demon,
she said, "Can you lift me up for a sec?"

And apparently he was possessed by a mad demon too, because he said, "Sure," wrapped his hands around her waist and lifted her up.

Neither of them breathed.

"Nope," said Lizzy, after a few more seconds than necessary. He let her down and she turned around.

There was a few moments' silence.

"Lizzy," said Will, his voice deeper than usual.

"Yes?"

"About tonight…"

Then there was a sound from the hallway, and two seconds later Edmund walked in.

"Edmund," said Will, not without some venom, but with significantly less than certain other cast members had been saying his name with lately.

"Hi, guys," said Edmund. "Sorry, just passing through."

They waited until he was gone.

"Right, well, I should go and look in another room," said Will.

"And I should find Anne," said Lizzy.

"See you later," said Will.

"See you," said Lizzy.

They left in opposite directions.

Mary had her pride to think of, and she would not let anyone know how much Edmund had really, really hurt her. She knew her deal with Frank was impulsive, but it had very neatly sorted out any potential mess surrounding the recoupling. And now she had to distract herself, so this morning she was talking to Emma.

"So what's your plan for tonight?" she asked, as they sat on deckchairs under the midday sunshine, doing absolutely nothing.

"I don't have one," said Emma.

Mary narrowed her eyes. "You always have a plan."

"Not this time," said Emma. "I've taken Anne's words to heart. I'm just going to relax and not think about it. And I'm not interested in the new boys. Anyway, Martin's with Harriet, so…"

"How about James?" said Mary.

Emma wrinkled her nose. "Nah."
"Nah?"

"Not my type. Plus, I think Lizzy's interested in him."

Mary snorted. "Yeah, right."

"They were talking together last night!" protested Emma. "Laughing and everything! Anne had to leave because she felt like a third wheel."

"Sure, if you think that," said Mary. She adjusted the position of her sun hat. "Anyway, I have a feeling you'll be just fine tonight."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Emma suspiciously.

"Nothing, darling!" trilled Mary. But she looked very pointedly towards the swings.

That morning the terrace was taken, so George and Will had to relocate to the swings.

"I'm not saying there was a moment," said Will, "but there was something."

"That's great, man," said George supportively.

"Yeah, well," said Will. "It's a step up from totally hopeless."

"And maybe in another two weeks, you'll only be at 'a little bit hopeless'."

"Fuck off, George," said Will. "Speaking of hopeless, how's it going with Emma?"

"Hilarious," said George. "Well, yesterday she said she's barely sad about Frank any more, and asked me what I thought of their relationship."

"Did you tell her you hate him and was wildly jealous the whole time?"

At that moment, Emma looked over in their direction; they made eye contact; she waved.

"Clearly not," said Will.

After lunch, Edmund and Mary had the misfortune to run into each other. Alone.

"Oh," said Edmund, standing to the side to let Mary pass through the door first.

Mary walked straight past him.

"Mary — " he said.

She swung round to stare at him. "What?"

He looked young and confused and desperate as he stood there, in his sensible sandals and baseball cap that probably did nothing to block out the sun.

"Can we just — talk?"

Mary folded her arms. "Fine. Talk."

Edmund nodded. "Um, so, I heard that you and Frank…" he drifted off, clearly unable to finish his
"Go on, say it."

"That you and Frank were coupling up tonight."

Mary narrowed her eyes. "And?"

"I guess I'm just surprised that you've moved on so quickly."

"Oh, my god," said Mary. "Are you serious? Firstly, that you think I'd do that to Emma — "

"I didn't — "

" — Yes you did! And secondly, it's actually *not* romantic. He's doing it as some weird apology to Emma and I'm doing it because he's the only option."

Edmund faltered, but he still said: "Not the only one."

Mary looked at him. "What?"

"I think I was wrong," he said. "I should've respected how you felt about us."

Mary had no idea what to feel, how to respond.

"What's brought you round to this?"

"Well, I've had a lot of time to think, and I've talked about it with — people."

"People? You mean Fanny?"

"I — er, maybe."

Mary let the castle she'd been building in her head tumble down. "So you were, what? Going to use Fanny's insight into being a decent fucking person to get me back, then never talk to her again?"

"No — not like that — but I thought we could —"

"You're unbelievable," she said. "You're the only one who doesn't see how dependent you are on her. And I don't ever — fuck you, Edmund."

She stalked out of the bathroom without what she'd come into fetch, but leaving Edmund to feel like the world's biggest cock-up.

James had spent less than twenty-four hours on the isle, and already he knew that if you didn't go after what you wanted, you weren't going to get another chance. And at the moment, the girl he was most interested in was Lizzy.

Although it seemed as if Anne would never leave Lizzy's side and he'd be forced to replay the awkwardness last night of making someone into a third wheel, she eventually did, and James took his chance.

"Hey," he said, approaching the kitchen, which was where she was. "Can I talk to you for a sec?"

Lizzy smiled. "Sure."

sentence.
"OK, I just, I know I don't have to do this, but going by your track record… is it all right if I pick you for the recoupling tonight?"

"Oh my god," said Lizzy, covering her face in her hands. She recalled, very clearly, screaming at Will for picking her in her first recoupling, and him screaming back. "Don't remind me. That was… not my finest hour."

"And I didn't want you to repeat it," said James, smiling. "So that's why…"

Lizzy looked startled. "Oh! Um, well, it's very thoughtful of you to ask, and I guess…"

And because fate (or maybe Brian the tech guy) had a sadistic streak, at that very moment Will walked into the kitchen.


"Hello," said James.

"Hi," said Lizzy, feeling for some reason that this was very, very awkward.

Will nodded and reached up to open the highest cupboard, which had the added effect of raising the hemline of his dark green shirt to reveal a stomach Lizzy had to force herself to look away from.

"Did you find your sunglasses?" she asked, when the silence got too much.

"I'm afraid not," said Will, resealing the bag of cashew nuts and reaching up, again, to put them back in the cupboard. "So now I have to wear this hat everywhere."

Lizzy and James looked at Will's hat, which had a pink rose badly embroidered on the front.

"My sister thought she was going to be a fashion designer for three weeks seven years ago," he said by way of explanation. "This was my twenty-second birthday present."

"Do you like roses?" asked James, who felt he must contribute to the conversation in some way.

"Not any more," said Will.

Lizzy laughed though James didn't, and Will laughed too.

"Don't worry, I think I've got a spare pair of sunglasses somewhere," said Lizzy. "Though I can't promise they're Tom Ford."

"Why are you making fun of me for having good taste?" he protested. "Tom Ford is good, right, James?"

"Sure," said James, slightly bewildered. What was going on? Was this an inside joke?

"Your sister has good taste," corrected Lizzy. "You're just lucky to have her."

"She'll love you for saying that," said Will. "I think you'd…"

He trailed off.

James looked between them. "Sorry, is something going on here?"

"No!" said Lizzy. "No, what? I'm just giving Will the ribbing he deserves for losing his fancy
sunglasses when he hasn't left this place for three weeks."

"Right," said James. "Well, give me an answer before tonight, yeah?"

"Sure," said Lizzy. "Um, I think Emma is calling me. I'll see you guys later."

"Oh, for the love of God," said Tom. "Now that Lizzy and Will have finally caught up to each other, here's this random bronzed navy bloke come in to prolong the pining."

"I hardly think they've caught up to each other," said Jane.

"Come on," said Tom. "Who else is Will going to pick tonight?"

"Anne," said Jane snidely.

Tom forced his head into a pillow.

Edmund was once again talking to Fanny, the only person on the isle sympathetic to him.

"I don't know what she wants from me," he said frustratedly. "I've told her I was wrong and that I still have feelings for her. And she acts as if I've done something even worse. She doesn't make any sense! It's driving me mad."

"Maybe she's just hurt," said Fanny. "Give her some time."

Edmund ignored her. "God, why are women so confusing?" He sighed. "Except you, Fanny."

Fanny smiled and tried not to cringe. "I try my best."

"And she said that coupling up with Frank was this intricate thing to apologise to Emma, but who believes that? She's probably just over me and into him, despite his whole girlfriend-on-the-outside thing. How dare she act so high-and-mighty when in reality…"

"I really don't think — " Fanny began, then hesitated. "Revenge coupling is taking it a bit far, don't you think?"

Edmund looked as if an idea was slowly forming in his mind.

"If she's going to do that to me," he said, "I'm going to do the same thing to her." He faced Fanny. "You're absolutely free to say no, but in case you wanted someone to couple up with tonight… how about I choose you?"

"To make Mary jealous?" asked Fanny, her heart speeding up as she maintained a doubtful tone. "I don't think…"

"No, not just that," said Edmund. "I really like you, Fanny. You're my best friend in here and I want you to know I'll be there for you. And it might make you feel safer to have someone to couple up with."

"Oh," said Fanny. "I suppose that does make sense."

"Brilliant," said Edmund. "It's a plan."
We will continue on these pre-recoupling conversations by going over to Martin and Harriet, sat very innocently together on the day bed.

"Harriet, I don't want to overstep," said Martin suddenly, in the middle of a conversation about paint brushes. "But I was just wondering… would it be OK if I coupled up with you tonight?"

"Of course!" said Harriet enthusiastically. "I'm so glad you asked."

Well, at least that was one conversation where both sides were happy.

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"I hate to say it," said Tom, who was about to say it, "but they're boring."

"It's because they're immediately happy," said Jane. "The happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history."

"Right," said Tom. "And also they're just boring."

___

"Babe, you're picking me tonight, right?" asked Lydia, for the tenth time today.

"Course," said Wickham. "Nobody in here has anything on you."

___

Anne was an honorary member at the sad terrace pining group tonight, though she was not treating the experience with the reverence it deserved.

"Is this all you do?" she asked. "Sit here and be miserable because the girls you like don't know you like them, and how could they, because you aren't doing anything about your feelings?"

"We shouldn't have invited her," said Will. "Whose idea was this?"

"Yours," said George. "And actually, I am doing something about my feelings."

They prodded, but George would give no more details.

"Fine," said Will. "By the way, Anne, I'm going to pick you tonight, so start preparing your excited face now."

"Thanks for asking," said Anne. She always got a bit more acerbic when she was around Will. "Why aren't you going to pick Lizzy?"

"Thank you, Will, I'm so grateful," said Will, in a horrible impression of a woman's voice. "Of course, Anne, you're a very good friend to me."

"I saw you and Lizzy talking in the kitchen after the sunglasses thing," said George. "So I'd say she definitely tolerates you now."

Anne high-fived him.

"With all this support from my friends," said Will acidly, "it's inconceivable that I haven't made a move."

___

After dinner, everyone gathered around the fire pit. Soon enough, Yvonne entered in a blaze of
rhinestones, and took her spot in front of the semi circle.

"It's recoupling time!" she said. "Goodness, if only we had this when I was young, it would've saved me so many — anyway. It's the same as always, folks. I call out a man's name, he stands up and calls out another. Now's not the first time I'm hoping it's the right one! So without further ado…”

The first name she called was, "George."

Everyone realised that in the midst of thinking about their own recoupling, they had forgotten to speculate about everyone else's, and whilst most of them were pretty easy to guess, George's pick, since he'd broken it off with Harriet, was truly unpredictable.

He smiled softly and said, "Emma."

"YES GEORGE!" screamed Tom, who'd jumped up, punched the air and only just missed the ceiling.

"Calm down," said Jane. "The story's not over yet. This could be platonic."

"Platonic, my arse," said Tom. "Mark my words, Jane. This is the start of something."

After George said her name, he continued to smile at her as if nothing had changed. Emma on the other hand looked as if she'd seen a ghost. But she still managed to go through the normal motions. She walked over to George, kissed him on the cheek respectfully, and they took their seats behind the fire pit.

On the outside, she looked calm and happy. On the inside, she was in turmoil.

_He could've picked anyone, and he'd picked her. Was this — had she really been so — she hadn't thought it until it had hit her in the face — it was George, after all?_

Yvonne had moved onto other people. Next to pick was Martin, who surprised no one by going with Harriet. Frank chose Mary; as everyone already knew about their pact, this didn't raise any eyebrows. It was immediately followed by Edmund choosing Fanny, which _did_ raise eyebrows, but everyone supposed that Edmund had no choice, if Mary was already taken. Still, it was questionable.

"James," said Yvonne.

Will was a goddamn coward for feeling relief when James's name was called before his.

"Lizzy," said James, and Lizzy smiled appropriately.

Wickham, true to his promises, picked Lydia, which left Will with Anne. Yvonne looked at all the neat pairings sat around the fire pit, and almost felt pity for what she was about to say.

"This is all very lovely," said Yvonne. "But we wouldn't want things to get _boring_, now, would we? So I think it's time for a little twist."
"It might feel very cozy in here," said Yvonne, "but never forget that millions of people are watching you. And it's only fair that we give them some power too, right? So, now that you've made your choices, the public will make theirs too. Over the next twenty hours, they'll be voting on their favourite couples, as decided by you just now. Those of you with the fewest votes risk being dumped from the isle. Good luck!"

She disappeared like a bad omen fairy, leaving everyone to stare at each other in shock.

"Oh fuck yes," said Tom, already downloading the Down the Isle app to his phone. He tapped the screen a few times and got to the voting page. "Shit, this is good. It's the one that isn't first past the post — what's that called?"

"Australia," said Jane.

"Hilarious. You Google it, I'm preoccupied," said Tom. "Hmm, I guess I have to put Lizzy/James up high even though I don't care for them, because I do care for Lizzy and Will. Oh, man. I love this."

"I hate this," said Mary, when the group had dispersed.

Anne made a sympathetic face. "Edmund's just..."

"Not that," said Mary, barely concealing her anger. "I'm not even — he'll say it's just platonic, whatever, I don't want to get into it. I mean the vote and the dumping. No one's going to vote for me! Though I guess it serves me fucking right for doing a recoupling of convenience."

Will and Anne looked at each other morosely and laughed.

"OK, but let's talk about George and Emma," said Lizzy. "I'm honestly really proud of him for just — doing it. And I bet Emma's figured it out by now."

"Where is Emma?" Anne asked, seeing George with Martin on the patio, and with Emma nowhere in sight.

"Hiding," said Mary flatly. "She's with Harriet pretending to celebrate that Martin likes Harriet, but really she's avoiding George."

"Harriet's a good defence," said Will.

"Ugh," said Mary. "Well, props to George for making a move tonight. God knows it's worked well for him."

"You think people like watching Emma and George skirt around each other, one oblivious of her feelings and the other not willing to admit it?" asked Lizzy.

"Obviously," said Mary. "Have you never seen a TV show?"

Emma might've thought she could avoid George for the evening, but it became clear that she was going to have to face him sometime before the lights went off. Especially as they now shared a bed.

"Hey," she said, when he got in. Though everyone on the isle was horribly nosy, they all found in themselves the decency not to eavesdrop on this very obviously private conversation. "Um, so, thank you about tonight?"
"Of course," said George. "I wouldn't choose anyone else. You're my best friend."

"Apart from Will," said Emma.

George smiled. "Sure, but there is one notable difference between you."

Emma felt her heart stop beating.

"Will's much nicer to me," he said, by way of a punchline.

She was grateful that he said that. She hit him with a pillow, he said something funny, she smiled in exasperation and then they went to sleep. It was just as it always was. All of this, all the stuff that had been dug up by today: she'd sort through it tomorrow.

Edmund and Fanny were faced with an awkward situation when they got into bed that night.

"I'll just — face this way," said Fanny, motioning towards the wall.

"Right," said Edmund.

Neither of them said anything else for the rest of the night. Edmund lay in bed and tried to shift through everything that was happening to him. It was true that he'd chosen tonight to couple up with Fanny, and it wasn't entirely out of malice to Mary. He liked Fanny; she was sweet and patient and it felt nice to have her smile at him. But he found he couldn't think of Fanny without thinking of Mary. He knew he'd behaved badly. He just didn't know if there was any point in trying to rectify the situation, because it was all so fucked up that it would be easier to just walk away and start again with someone else.

On the other side of the room, Mary slept next to Frank. A stupid, romantic part of Edmund felt that he'd give anything to be in Frank's place.

"I can't believe it," said Tom. "George really just…"

"He's being bloody platonic about it," said Jane.

"The man's nervous!" protested Tom. "Give him a break."

"It's not hard," said Jane. "Just tuck back a lock of her hair and kiss her."

"Excellent advice, Jane," said Tom dryly. "I'll remember that the next time I want to put the moves on a girl."

Chapter End Notes

Wow, what a chapter. Some light discourse about voting systems, Jane quoting The Mill on the Floss, and the threat of some contestants having to LEAVE THE ISLE?????? Honestly I'd love to actually have you vote on the couples, but I think literally ten people are reading this so it would be grossly unrepresentative. Also I want the power to decide what happens.
Please leave a comment and/or hit me up on Tumblr! We're having a Fanny Price
discourse party atm but literally anything is welcome.
I'll Make You So Sure About It

Chapter Summary

This is BLOODY LONG and took me forever, I'm so sorry, but I hope you will accept my apology present because it's pretty darn good if I do say so myself.

Chapter Notes

Title from The Beach Boys' immortal love song, God Only Knows.

Well, I guess I asked for opinions… and boy did I get them. Thanks, team, for coming together last chapter to tell me that I have more than ten readers. I do really love you and I'm so grateful that this has a readership who care.

I'm SORRY this chapter took so long to come out, but I was trying to figure out the long-term plot and I had to write quite a bit ahead to figure out what needed to happen here. ANYWAY, you didn't come for a BTS of how this was written, you came for the plot… and here you go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Previously on Down the Isle...

It was a day of surprises all round, not least with the reveal at the end that a public vote on the couples would be followed by a dumping to happen tonight. In the recoupling, George shocked everyone by (finally?) acting on his interest in Emma — though just before they went to sleep, his manner suggested that things between them were still platonic. There was a hint that Will would pick Lizzy, an occurrence one could easily believe was what they both wanted, despite fervent denials… but eventually James picked Lizzy, and Will picked Anne. Martin and Harriet capitalised on their instantaneous connection by coupling up, but Mary's practical coupling-up with Frank left a sour taste in Edmund's mouth as he proceeded to couple up with Fanny. So who will befall the axe on tonight's dumping? Find out on this drama-filled episode of Down the Isle...

"It fucking better be," said Tom. "If either Will or Lizzy go home, I will find the producers and I will play them my tuba until they — "

"Deafen themselves out of self-preservation?" asked Jane sweetly.

Tom threw a piece of popcorn at her.

George woke up that morning with a raging hard-on.

He swore softly and looked around the room. No one seemed to be up, including Emma who was still asleep beside him, but somehow during the night, he'd moved or she'd moved and now his arm
was under her side and her arm was thrown over his waist, and also her knee was tucked into the back of his.

Well, he couldn't be surprised. He'd known this might happen the minute he'd decided to do away with the bullshit and just pick her.

He carefully extracted his arm from her beneath her. Success. Next, he tried removing her arm from his waist.

Not a success. She made a dissatisfied sound and actually, cruelly, pulled him closer.

If they were in a room alone, George would've… no, he wasn't even going to let himself think about that, because he was in bed with the woman he loved in a room with eight other people, and his life was a playground of cruel jokes.

He took a deep breath, prayed to any god willing to listen, and tried moving Emma's arm again.

This time was a success. Her sleeping self didn't seem happy about it, but she let her arm be moved away, and George rolled out of bed before any of his work could be undone.

He fled to the bathroom. Everything else… he'd deal with it later.

Emma woke up earlier than usual. She checked her watch: it was barely seven. She knew Will woke up early so he was probably up, and… she was aware that there was no one next to her in bed. So George must be up too.

She pulled the covers over her head and tried to arrange her thoughts into some order of sense. It was no use. Whenever she tried thinking about something else, the fact that she had a huge, undeniable crush on George Knightley came crashing into her head and knocked all her other thoughts far, far away. 'Crush' probably wasn't even the right word for it. He was kind and funny and definitely too good for her. It almost terrified her how much she liked him.

Though… what was she supposed to do? Was she supposed to tell him? Hey George, I'm an idiot because I didn't realise until last night that my feelings for you are almost scarily overwhelming, but at least I've figured it out now.

There was also the small matter that he might have merely chosen her in the recoupling as a friend, and had no romantic interest in her at all.

Sighing, she knew that none of her problems would be solved if she lay in bed, so she got up and headed for the bathroom. A restorative shower was what she needed. Her morning skincare routine would also help. She just needed the space to think about this logically.

She opened the door, and of all the bathrooms…

"George," she spluttered. "Good morning."

"Good morning," he said hesitatingly.

And apart from choosing the one bathroom out of the four that was actually occupied by George, of course he was wearing a towel and only a towel, and his hair was at the stage of wet where it was still dripping but it wasn't soaked, it was curling up all over his head, and Emma desperately wanted to run her fingers through it.
She caught herself before she did anything she couldn't take back. "I'll just… go to another one."

Then she ran.

"Oh my god," said Tom, throwing the remote down in disgust. "I give up. What is stopping them?"

George watched Emma go.

He saw his two options very clearly. He was very aware that this could be their last day on the isle. If they left, he imagined afterwards that they would see each other, but it wouldn't be — it wouldn't be like this.

Fuck it, he'd been keeping it in for three weeks. He wasn't going to any longer.

He put on some clothes, went down the hallway and knocked on the door of the bathroom Emma had fled to, but he knocked so hard he pushed the door open.

Emma had just finished brushing her teeth and she looked at him, startled, with her toothbrush still in her hand.

He started talking before he could stop himself. "Look, Emma, I just… I can't keep this in any longer. If we go home today, it might be my last chance to say it. So I just have to tell you — I like you so much it's ridiculous; I think I'm in love with you; I think I was the moment I saw you."

She was beautiful as she stared at him and said, "What?"

He smiled wryly. "You heard me."

"George, oh my god — " and then she dropped her toothbrush in the sink, went towards him and pulled him down to meet her lips.

George's first thought was that this wasn't really happening. Then she sighed a little and curled her hand in his hair, holding him close, and the movement was so Emma that it swept over him in a huge wave, how much he loved her.

He broke away, because he had to ask. "So you…?"

"Yes!" said Emma, and laughed a little deliriously. She spoke into his chest. "I was going crazy lying in bed overthinking it all. I thought," she said, almost shyly, "you might not like me back."

"I can't believe you," said George, smiling down at her. "Let's look at the evidence. I spend weeks talking, arguing, letting myself be mocked by you; I pick you for the recoupling; I escape out of bed at the crack of dawn because I'm genuinely fearful I might not be able to control myself… and you think I don't like you?"

"I didn't say I thought it," Emma protested lightly. "I merely considered the possibility."

"It was an absurd possibility," said George, nuzzling her neck.

"Well, I see that now," said Emma. She cast a look down the hallway. "And now I think we should lock the door."
"Wow," said Jane.

"Wow," agreed Tom.

"That's the way to do it, I think," said Jane. "Big confession and hope for the best."

"You think?"

"Definitely."

"Huh."

Fanny woke up on her fifth day on the isle, more confused than ever.

There was Edmund, who showed every indication of liking her, but she was sure he still had feelings for Mary. And Fanny would never ever confess her feelings for a guy before he told her how he felt. It was risky and potentially damaging. But how else was she to break out of this stalemate? Clearly Edmund wasn't going to act any time soon.

She considered the possibility of speaking to someone about it. She wasn't really close with anyone in the villa except Edmund, but there were definitely people — Wickham, for instance — whom she'd rather die before confiding in. Emma was too close to Mary and thus out of the question; Lizzy was too intimidating; Harriet and Lydia would probably tell someone; and for some reason she didn't feel comfortable around Anne.

Then she realised she could talk to George. They'd spoken before, briefly, about Mary and Edmund, and he hadn't been judgemental.

She glanced over at George and Emma's bed, only to find it completely empty.

That was odd. Neither of them were early risers.

*Maybe they're taking a walk,* she told herself. At any rate, her problems could wait. She got up, got ready for the day, and went outside for some breakfast.

The way to the kitchen from the villa was an odd one. You had to walk along a long garden wall, covered with vines and light pink climbing roses, then follow a sharp turn at the end which led you straight into the kitchen. Often this meant people on their way to the kitchen from the villa saw something they weren't prepared to see.

This morning, it happened to Fanny.

She let out a small shriek.

"Jesus Christ, Fanny, how long have you been standing there?" said Emma who was in the kitchen, and ensconced in George's arms in a way that was definitely not platonic. She spooned white dough balls into a bowl and held up a bag of flour. "I found some of this in the kitchen, so I'm making tang yuan. But I'm using peanut butter instead of — " she snapped her fingers irritatedly. "George, what's English for zhi ma?"

"Black sesame," said George, who did not know Mandarin, but had listened very closely to Emma's long explanation of the proper tang yuan fillings earlier that morning.

"Right," said Emma. She held up a bowl that appeared to be steaming. "Want some?"
"Oh," said Fanny, recovering her voice. "Sorry, I'm allergic to nuts."

"No need to apologise," said Emma amusedly. She whispered to George, "I think she's confused by us."

Fanny, always attuned to a situation where she was not wanted, knew that it was time to leave. "I'm just — going to go upstairs," she said.

She escaped into the villa to register what she'd just seen. So... Emma and George had finally worked things out. She wondered how it had happened, and ruefully, if she'd ever have the courage to do the same.

If Fanny had had the confidence, not to mention the opportunity, she would've warned Will before going into the kitchen that morning. Unfortunately for him, she hadn't.

Will, back from whatever exercise he did in the morning, arrived in the villa and was greeted with the sight of George and Emma kissing in the kitchen.

"What the fuck?" he said, pulling out both earbuds and staring at the sight before him.

"Good morning, Will," said George pleasantly, pulling back from Emma. "How was your run?"

"My run was fine," said Will. He looked between them — not that there was much space there, as Emma was snuggled into George's side. "What the fuck is going on here?"

"Sorry, Will," said Emma, "but George has left the miserable singles club."

"Have I?"

"Has he?"

She looked unsure for a second. "I just assumed that we were — I mean, you said you loved me, so I don't think I'm jumping the gun."

"Do you want to be my girlfriend?" asked George, very seriously.

"Really?" said Emma, smiling. "In front of Will?"

"Don't mind me," said Will, whose brain had now adjusted to this new development. "I'm not here."

Emma and George ignored him as he walked past them to go into the villa. "I don't know," said George. "I thought you might want to give this a trial run — maybe it's too soon after Frank, or you need time to adjust to the idea of us together."

"Already adjusted," said Emma, smiling up at him. "I'm serious, George. I told you Frank barely meant anything to me. Of course I want to be your girlfriend."

George looked happier than Emma had ever seen him, and she couldn't let that go without a kiss.

"How much time until everyone finds out?" asked Emma.

George grinned. "Half an hour? Will's definitely going to rat us out."

"What a terrible friend," said Emma affectionately.
"I know," said George. "But for some reason, I can't bring myself to feel mad at anything today."

"How strange," said Emma, tugging him closer, before capturing his mouth with hers.

The two big pieces of news that held court on the isle today were Emma and George finally confessing their feelings, and the fact that some contestants (and it was entirely impossible to predict who) would be leaving the isle tonight. Smaller developments, like the ongoing drama of the Mary-Edmund-Fanny triangle, took a slight backseat.

For the girls, Emma was annoyingly and uncharacteristically calm about the fact that this could be her last day on the isle.

"Oh, who cares?" she said, lying on a day bed under the midday sun. "There's a life on the outside too."

"That's easy for you to say," said Mary bitterly. "But I haven't ended up in a happy relationship here. My pragmatic arse is going to get dumped."

"You won't," said Emma. "You think people are going to vote for Lydia and Wickham? Edmund and Fanny?" She lowered her voice. "Lizzy and James?"

"Sure, there's a lot of crackpots out there," said Mary.

"Don't insult the electorate," said Emma airily. "They'll bite back."

Wickham, James and Frank had formed a sort of club from being guys who didn't have any romantic drama.

"Mate, listen, you'll be fine," Wickham was saying to James. "Lizzy's not into you? No prob, I'll help you out."

"She also went off you," James pointed off.

"Nah, she was just jealous and pretended she wasn't into this," said Wickham. "Your problem is you're too nice. Girls don't like that." He saw Lydia approaching and took his chance. "Here, watch this."

"All right, babe?" said Lydia casually as she walked past.

Wickham pretended he hadn't noticed her until she'd almost moved past him, at which point he wolf whistled and winked when she turned around.

"Right," said James, confused and unimpressed. "Honestly, I don't think Lizzy would really..."

"Nah, I think just give it up," said Frank. "If she's not into you, she's not into you."

"Hey," said Wickham, sounding mortally offended. "Stop being so fucking defeatist. That's why you two don't have a girl, and I do."

"Feeling confident about tonight then?" asked Frank.

Wickham shrugged. "If people don't like what they see, I can't help them."
The sad terrace pining group was no more now that George was finally in a relationship with the woman of his dreams. Honorary member Anne wasn't pining, though her love life was indeed sad. So that left only Will.

"Do you think people will vote for us to stay on the isle?" Anne asked Will.

"No," said Will.

George laughed.

"But we'll go out in a blaze of glory."

"A blaze of platonic glory," amended Anne.

"Good enough. And when we get on the outside we'll do endless interviews and chat shit about everyone."

"I can't wait," said Anne.

"Hey, don't be like this," said George. "I'm sure people love you. This right here — " he gestured between them — "isn't banter you can get on any reality show."

"No one votes for banter," said Will. "They vote for sex."

"Well, it's your fault for ditching Caroline," said George.

Edmund had spent the morning and lunch feeling confused and alone. He decided to seek out someone else so he'd only be confused.

"George, man," he said, serendipitously bumping into him as he walked from the patio to the villa. "Can I have a chat?"

"Sure," said George cheerfully.

Edmund remembered from Fanny that George had finally told Emma how he felt, and luckily she felt the same way, and now the two of them were, rather uniquely, deliriously happy.

"Right, well, you know I'm in a whole fuck up with Mary and Fanny. Put simply, man, I don't know what to do."

"Clearly," said George. He sat down on a random bed. "Look, if you don't know what to do, do you at least know how you feel?"

"Not really," admitted Edmund.

George clapped him on the back and stood up to leave. "Well, don't do anything until you figure that out."

Edmund couldn't really blame George for abandoning him for Emma. He flopped back on the bed and went over the facts one more time.

If he was really honest with himself… he'd liked Fanny from the beginning, and it would've been better if he'd just told Mary about it. His indecision was only because he'd been afraid of being an arsehole; he didn't want to break Mary's heart, and so he'd dragged it on in the hopes that something would save him from admitting it to her. But he knew he'd gone about things in the wrong way: he'd
been in denial, offended, proud, inflexible. At least now, it was important that he apologise to Mary before he started anything with Fanny.

There was every indication that she wouldn't accept or even care for his apology, but he'd learnt that it mattered just to try.

"Hey, partner," said Frank teasingly, as Mary passed by him in the empty bedroom that afternoon.

He'd expected a 'fuck off' or at least a reminder that theirs was a coupling of convenience. She didn't respond, and he sat up and looked more closely.

"Mary?" he said. She was standing by the door to the villa but not moving. "Hey, are you OK?"

She didn't respond, at which point Frank knew that he had two options. He could either quietly slip away, find one of Mary's friends and tell them that she needed someone to comfort her. Or… he could be that friend himself.

"It's nothing," came Mary's voice, weak and croaky, and that made the decision for him.

"It's not nothing," he said cautiously, getting off the bed and coming towards her. A crying woman was not a situation any man was comfortable with, but Frank felt himself better at it than most. He pulled her into a hug and she went willingly.

"Hey, is this about Edmund?" he asked. "Because he's an idiot. I'm pretty sure he's wearing orange checked shorts right now."

Mary laughed a gross, sniffly laugh.

"It's so stupid," she said hoarsely. "That I care so much."

Frank rubbed soothing circles on her back. For a moment, they just stood there.

"But whatever," she said, after a while. "I've still got my pride."

"You do," agreed Frank, and she was surprised when his tone was almost affectionate.

She didn't know how it happened, but she found herself tilting her head up the slightest fraction — Frank was only a couple of inches taller than her — and with the gap between them closed, he could very easily brush his lips against hers.

At the first touch, she jumped back like she'd had an electric shock.

"No," she said, standing back from him, tear-stained face in an expression of faint horror. "That didn't happen."

Frank looked at her. "It didn't?"

"No," she repeated. "OK?"

Frank shrugged. "Why not?"

"Why not? There are a million reasons why not! I'm in love with Edmund! You've got that whole thing with the girl in Uganda! You were with, and fucked over, my best friend!"

"All right, I hear you," he said. "Fine, it didn't happen."
"Good," said Mary, all her feelings about Edmund forgotten in the cacophony of the now. "Thank God no one saw," she added, and walked out the villa.

Dear reader, she was wrong. Someone had.


Jane looked a bit dazed. "I feel as if two of my worlds have collided."

"Why couldn't they have done that before the voting closed?" said Tom mournfully. "I think I put them near the bottom of my ranking. Now they've shot up at least two places."

"This way, at least we know it's genuine," said Jane. "Even if it is a temporary fit of insanity."

Later that afternoon, Lizzy, Anne, Fanny and Harriet were sitting at the kitchen, eating yoghurt and discussing their love lives.

"Aw, they're perfect for each other," said Harriet, watching Emma and George over by the patio. Emma was lying on George's chest and laughing as George tried to talk over her.

Lizzy raised her eyebrows. "You've really moved on, huh."

"Oh, totally," said Harriet happily. "Martin's great. He's so much better for me than George was. All that stuff about George being too old for me… I was angry at the time, but now I think everyone was right."

"No kidding," said Lizzy. "Well, I'm happy for you."

"What about you, Lizzy?" asked Harriet.

"That's right, Lizzy," said Anne. "Why are you hanging out with us? You've been coupled up with James for less than a day."

Lizzy looked uncomfortable. "Yeah, well, um."

Harriet laughed. "Lizzy, that's not an answer!"

Lizzy sighed. "OK, I'm avoiding him. I don't know why, but I'm just not interested."

"Really?" said Anne. "You got on quite well the first night."

Lizzy shrugged. "It's a mystery."

"Hmm. Fanny, what do you think?" said Anne, in an attempt to give the conversation a new lease of life.

Fanny looked startled to have been asked her opinion.

"Maybe you're interested in someone else?" she suggested.

"Oh, that's interesting," said Anne, employing the full extent of her acting talent. "Maybe you don't even — "
Lizzy snorted. "I can't think who."

No one said anything.

"I know I have to tell James that I'm not into him," she said. "I'm just putting it off. He's really nice and he doesn't deserve me using him for a recoupling, then discarding him."

"Maybe you shouldn't say that the day the public votes on their favourite couple," said Anne.

"It's amazing how oblivious she is," said Tom. "Isn't Will being horribly obvious?"

"Well, clearly he needs to do more," said Jane.

Something boring but cute was happening over by the patio just before dinner, which I am obliged to tell you for reasons of continuity.

"If I leave the isle tonight and you stay on," Martin was saying, "I'll wait for you. I don't care if I go even though I've only been here two days. I've already found what I was looking for."

"I'll wait for you too!" said Harriet. "You know I really like you."

"I really like you too," said Martin.

Ah, young love. But who wants to dwell on it? Instead, let's move forward to…

A sense of foreboding settled in the air as after dinner, everyone gathered around the fire pit. Mary in particular was on edge. She hadn't told anyone what had happened with Frank because it was such a non-event, and anyway she was fairly certain that she would be leaving the isle tonight. She had come to think of it as a good thing. She could leave all the bad bits (Edmund) behind her, get back into a world with music and art and culture, and be able to wear layers of clothing without overheating. She was almost excited.

Yvonne appeared, dramatically as usual. The whole scene was very familiar, except that tonight, everything was in the hands of the people watching the show. The contestants were in a closed system, away from anything normal, but it was strange to think that in a few hours, some of them would be in the real world again — contending, probably, with fame.

"Good evening, darlings," said Yvonne. She faced them with a very grave look. "So, the public have been voting on their favourite couples, and now I'll reveal the top four, who'll definitely be staying on the isle tonight. The remaining three couples' fates will then hang in the balance. And in no particular order…"

The first couple safe, Emma and George, came as a surprise to no one. Emma took the opportunity to kiss George in front of the isle.

"The second couple is…" Yvonne paused for dramatic effect. "Lizzy and James!"

They both looked outright shocked, but dutifully hugged and sat back down.

"The third couple who is safe from being dumped tonight is… Fanny and Edmund!"

And here was proof that God truly worked in mysterious ways.
Yvonne adjusted her pashmina and looked deeply into the camera. She cleared her throat.

"And the final couple whom the public have chosen to save from a possible dumping tonight is…"

Everyone held their breath.

"Will and Anne," said Yvonne.

"Oh, thank God," said Tom.

"So that means Lydia and Wickham, Frank and Mary, and Martin and Harriet, you are all at risk of being dumped from the isle tonight." She sighed dramatically. "If you could come and stand behind me. The rest of you, please gather around each other."

The contestants rearranged themselves. The couples at risk were far enough away from the other contestants that they wouldn't be able to hear anything they said.

"It's up to you to decide the fate of your fellow contestants," said Yvonne, to those who had been saved. "You will discuss and vote on which couple you wish to remain on the isle, and consequently which two couples you wish to dump. After all, we must be selective. You have three minutes."

"All is lost," said Tom despondently, spreading himself out on the sofa like a starfish. "Mary and Frank are going to go, and we'll never see the outcome of what could've been this year's most unlikely love story…"

After the contestants came to terms with the sick psychological game the producers had decided to play with them, the first thing Emma said was: "I won't dump Mary."

"Emma…" said Lizzy uncomfortably. "I know she's your friend, but you can't — "

"Yes I can," said Emma fiercely. "Mary deserves to stay. She's been through so much shit with Edmund. Don't tell me you think her time here is up."

"But then we're saving Mary and Frank," said George.

"I'd be OK with that," said Emma.

George sighed. "I am too, we all have to be OK with it."

"I know," said Emma stonily.

"Right," said Lizzy. "But this is Down the Isle — we can't just save people we like. The point of this show is to find love."

She said this a little awkwardly, as everyone knew that she and James weren't exactly getting close.

"What about Lydia and Wickham?" asked Lizzy.

"I'd be sorry to lose Lydia," said Will.
Lizzy didn't have the time to delve into that unlikely friendship now, but she was going to later. "And she and Wickham are pretty strong," she added.

Everyone looked around at each other, uncomfortable with the decision they had to make.

"This is horrible," said Anne. "These people are our friends."

George made a face that very clearly said Frank wasn't his friend, but other than, there was agreement.

"Should we vote?" asked Lizzy weakly. "So there's two votes for Mary and Frank — from Emma and George?" They nodded. "Will and I both vote for Lydia and Wickham, right?"

"Right," said Will.

Lizzy looked at James for his vote.

"Martin and Harriet," he said, at last. "Martin's my buddy. I can't turn on him."

"Right," said Lizzy. "Anne?"

Anne looked almost mutinous.

"Anne, please," said Lizzy.

She dipped her head and said, quietly, "Harriet and Martin."

"Anne!" said Emma.

"I vote for Martin and Harriet too," said Edmund quickly.

"So that's two for Mary and Frank, two for Lydia and Wickham, and three for Martin and Harriet," said Lizzy in summary. "Fanny, you have the last vote."

Fanny looked around at the expectant group and cleared her throat.

"I think we should keep Mary and Frank," she said.

"YES FANNY!" shouted Tom, jumping into the air.

Everyone wore identical expressions of confusion.

Lizzy blinked. That was not what she'd expected. She'd expected Fanny to vote for Martin and Harriet, which would at least have left them with an obvious winner, even if it wasn't who Lizzy wanted. But for Fanny to vote to save Mary, the person who was the greatest barrier to her being with Edmund...

"OK…" said Lizzy. "Er, why?"

Fanny steeled her nerves. "I can't say."

Everyone looked at each other. "What?"

"I can't say," repeated Fanny. "But I think we should keep them."
"Fanny…" Edmund began. "You can't expect us to listen to you if you won't give any details."

Fanny shook her head firmly. "I can't say," she said again. "I just have reason to think they should stay." She elaborated. "Martin and Harriet already know where they are. Lydia and Wickham are comfortable here. But Frank and Mary need more time."

Everyone in the group was still getting used to the idea that there even was such a thing as 'Frank and Mary'.

"Is this just because you feel guilty or something?" Emma demanded.

Fanny blushed, but shook her head resolutely. "No."

Lizzy sighed. "Fanny, are you sure?"

"Of course she's sure," Edmund defended. "Fanny wouldn't insist on something she wasn't sure about."

"I wouldn't," said Fanny.

"But are you sure?" repeated Edmund, and everyone could hear the desperation in his tone. It would be a lot easier for him to start things with Fanny without Mary there.

"I'm sure," said Fanny. "But we have to pretend we did this just to save Mary. I shouldn't even have told anyone that I know something."

More exasperated glances were shared. If this had come from someone else, everyone would've instantly called bullshit. But though the situation was strange and unfathomable, there was one thing to believe in: Fanny didn't seem the type to lie about anything. So what on earth was she, and only she, privy to?

"Are you sure?" Lizzy asked again. "Yes," said Fanny.

Lizzy sighed in acquiescence. If Fanny wanted to make her life harder for herself, far be it for Lizzy to deny her. "So, Frank and Mary, and Martin and Harriet are tied with three votes."

"A deadlock," said Will unnecessarily. He looked at Lizzy. "Maybe we — "

"I'm going to change my vote," said Anne suddenly. "I trust Fanny. So I'm voting for Frank and Mary."

She and Fanny exchanged a look and a hesitant smile.

Lizzy sighed. "Really? All right. I can't believe we're doing this." Fanny's intel and selflessness had completely tipped the balance. "Then I suppose we're keeping Mary and Frank," concluded Lizzy wearily.

"All in favour?" asked George.

Will was the person the group chose to announce their decision, because no one else wanted to do it.

"We've made our decision," said Will.

"Wonderful," said Yvonne equably. "So, the two you'd like to save, please?"
Will was apparently not averse to being a bit dramatic, because he gave a long pause before finally saying, "Frank and Mary."

"A bold choice," said Yvonne, commanding attention back to her. "Congratulations to Mary and Frank! Commiserations to Lydia and Wickham, and Martin and Harriet. You've all been wonderful and I'm sure we'll miss you very much."

The first thing anyone said after the announcement was, "What the fuck?" and it was from Lydia.

Lizzy threw her arms around her. "I wanted to save you," she said.

Lydia rolled her eyes. "I bet you could've tried harder. Kidding!" she said, as she saw the embarrassed look on Lizzy's face. "I guess my time was up, and I've got a hot guy out of it, so can't complain. But Mary and Frank? Really?"

"Yeah, Fanny convinced us that she knows something about them, but she won't tell us?"

"Juicy," said Lydia. "I'll find out when I get home and finally get wifi."

Wickham was much less gracious about his exit, and he demanded to know who'd snaked him out. He was horrified when he was informed that the two people who'd shown support for him remaining on the isle were Lizzy and Will, and that information shut him up. Harriet was crying, but one assumes she would've cried no matter who was leaving, and anyway she'd managed to do what she'd come on the isle to do. Martin looked a bit peeved to have left after a few days, but he was leaving with Harriet, so he didn't have much to complain about.

The girls wrapped Harriet and Lydia in a huge hug; the boys hugged the way boys did: shaking hands and clapping backs. James and Martin promised to keep in contact and referenced plans for a trip to Ibiza. Lydia voiced her plans to beat everyone to a designer collab, and Wickham was very affectionate towards her. It looked as if they were sending home two happy couples.

Everyone stood at the door to wave them goodbye. Yvonne, though, didn't leave.

"So, I know that was sad and all," she said dismissively. "But the best way to get over someone leaving is to get under — " she clapped a hand over her mouth, as if everyone didn't already know what she was about to say — "is to get to know someone else! So throughout tomorrow, a total of two new girls and two new boys will arrive on the isle. Make them welcome, won't you?"

And then she left.

Mary pulled Emma aside after Yvonne left and said, very clearly, "What the fuck? Why am I still here?"

Emma looked blankly at her. "Of course I saved you. You're my best friend."

"Right," allowed Mary. "But Frank? The guy who screwed you over?"

Emma shrugged. "I've forgiven him now I've got George. Martin and Harriet are ready to leave the isle, and Lydia and Wickham need to be put to the test of the real world."

"Right," said Mary.

Emma rolled her eyes. "What, do you think this is some conspiracy to set you and Frank up? Don't be daft."
"Of course not," said Mary, feeling ridiculous. "That was dumb. Thank you for saving me."

"Of course," said Emma, and pulled her friend in for a hug.

Mary wasn't convinced by Emma's bare-faced lie, of course. But what else could it have been? She was certain that no one had seen her and Frank's millisecond liplock, both from looking around the room in a panic after it had happened, and from the fact that nobody had mentioned anything about it afterwards.

So she was clearly just being paranoid.

Half an hour later, in one of the villa bathrooms, something else was brewing.

"Guys, you're gross," said Lizzy cheerfully, walking past George and Emma's bed as everyone got ready to go to sleep.

Emma's head popped up over the covers. "You didn't even see anything!" "I didn't need to!" Lizzy called from the bathroom.

"Emma and George?" asked Anne, doing up her hair in a knot acceptable for sleep.

"You betcha," said Lizzy. "Hey, it's exciting about the new people, right? Maybe James will be into one of them and I won't have to break it off with him."

"Coward," said Anne affectionately.

"I mean it," said Lizzy, sitting down and getting ready to brush through her mass of hair. "And it's so exciting for you! Anne, I'm not just saying this. I genuinely feel in my bones that the love of your life is going to walk in here tomorrow."

"Pshh," said Anne.

Will, dressed in an outfit that could qualify either for pyjamas or a football kit, ducked his head through the gap in the door. "What's this about the love of Anne's life?"

"Oh ho, she'll be replacing you," said Lizzy. Anne laughed and patted Will's cheek as she passed around the room, picking up the skincare products she was using tonight.

Lizzy frowned as she encountered an especially large tangle in her hair. "I don't get how this happens," she said frustratedly. "I sit around all day, and at the end of the night there's a huge fucking knot in my — oh, shit," she said, wrenching her hairbrush through the tangle. "It's stuck," she announced, and looked up.

Traitorous Anne wasn't in the room any more, but can you guess who was?

"Let me help you with that," said Will, moving forward. "You're right, this is a mess."

"Thank you," said Lizzy tightly. Will was standing very close behind her and his hands were on her scalp as he slowly untangled her hair from her hairbrush. Lizzy felt weird and tense and breathless. This had to stop.

"Stop giving me a head massage," she said irritately.

Will removed his hands. "Clearly you've never had a head massage."
"Just focus on the goddamn task," she said snippily. She decided to move her hands up in an attempt to untangle her hairbrush herself and hopefully notion to Will that he wasn't needed, but all that happened was that her hands ended up touching Will's. She casually put them back in her lap.

This was torturous. Lizzy cursed her hairbrush, her heritage, her insistence on having long hair…

"There you are," said Will, presenting to Lizzy her hairbrush.

Lizzy jumped up. "Thanks. You can go now."

Will bowed out, leaving Lizzy to stare, alarmed, at the wall of the empty bathroom.

Anne came back into the room twenty seconds later.

"Oh, good, you got it out," said Anne, looking at the hairbrush.

Lizzy didn't even narrow her eyes at her, which made Anne worried. She was sure she'd get some light accusations of betrayal at least.

"Anne," said Lizzy. "I think I've been an idiot."

"I know," said Anne. The other bathrooms had quietened down now; it seemed that almost everyone was in bed. "Come on, let's get you to bed. We'll deal with it in the morning."

"Wow," said Tom, tossing the remote to the other side of the room. "It's all happening now."

"Hands touching over a hairbrush," said Jane thoughtfully. "Genius."

"I'm sure the producers will be glad to hear it," said Tom. He yawned loudly. "Right, I'm going to bed."

"Goodnight," said Jane.

He smiled at her from the doorway. "Goodnight."

Chapter End Notes

More and more is happening in these chapters! Who's stoked about Emma and George?? Mayhaps I was cruel to bump off Martin so early, but let's be honest you're not here for Robert Martin/Harriet Smith, are you? Lydia and Wickham were a necessary casualty because I didn't know what else to do with them except a play out of Wickham eventually being a disappointment, but that's just miserable for everyone. But I hear y'all, I love Lydia too… I can only say sorry.

I have big plans for Frank and Mary, but no one answered my feeling out call last chapter about them, so currently I have no idea if you hate it or love it. I love my idea so much that I'm probably going to do it anyway, but I'd still like to know your feelings. And didn't I tell you, Fanny stans, that this wasn't going to be a complete character assassination? That was part of why this took so long: I kept reworking my plan of how Fanny was going to show her selflessness and thoughtfulness.
Now let's focus on the real juicy drama that's about to unfold... and I don't even mean Will and Lizzy.
Chapter Notes

Title from Lana Del Rey and The Weeknd's Lust For Life, in which the complete line is: 'My boyfriend's back/And he's cooler than ever'.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Previously on Down the Isle…

Finally, our prayers were answered when in the warm glow of an European morning, George and Emma confessed that they were super into each other. George might even have used the L word. But not everyone on the isle is living life in a romantic glow: Edmund now has to start a new relationship whilst still living with his ex, and Lizzy just can't figure out why she's not into James. Frank and Mary, previously thought to be only a couple of convenience, brushed lips — though they immediately decided that it didn't happen. And your votes resulted in three couples: Frank and Mary, Lydia and Wickham, and Harriet and Martin being put in the danger zone. A discussion by the other contestants, in which quiet outsider Fanny played a vital role, led to Frank and Mary being saved from the dumping. But that wasn't the end. Yvonne announced that four new contestants would be arriving on the isle today. And a late-night hair-untangling moment between Lizzy and Will might've untangled some feelings as well…

"A horrible pun," said Jane, peeling a satsuma with disdain.

Tom grinned. "No such thing."

For some godforsaken reason, Lizzy woke up early today.

She yawned all the way through her morning routine. It was seven in the bloody morning and she was not meant to be up this early. But she dreaded waking up at the same time as James, because she had been putting off telling him that she wasn't into him and so it would be tremendously awkward if they were to wake up together, and this was a way of avoiding it.

She made her way downstairs, stumbled into the kitchen, and looked up at whoever was making pancakes this early in the morning.

"Oh!" she said.

Something was very wrong with her; she was always cool, always collected, and she had never made a startled 'oh' sound in her life. But apparently the sight of Will cooking pancakes in the morning, shirtless, was enough to do it.

"You're up early," Will observed, executing a perfect flip of the pancake. His tone was completely normal. Why couldn't hers be too?

"Yep," said Lizzy. "I guess I wasn't that tired last night. Or maybe my internal clock is off. Circadian rhythms..." she trailed off. What was she doing? He didn't want a bloody neurology lecture.
"Would you like some pancakes?" asked Will.

Lizzy's mind went blank.

"Er, actually, I think I left something upstairs," she said, backing away. "See you in a while!"

She fled the scene like a disgraced servant hearing of their master's murder.

"That was almost painful to watch," said Tom, chewing gum unsympathetically.

Mary pulled Frank aside that morning. "They know," she said, in a low whisper that foreshadowed doom.

Frank scratched his head and looked around at the otherwise empty room. "Can you be a little more specific?"

She swatted his arm. "They know. That's why they voted to let us stay last night. Someone knows that we kissed."

"So you are talking about it," said Frank, a hint of smugness creeping into his tone. He leaned against the doorway and raised an eyebrow.

"Fuck off, it was barely a kiss," said Mary, reflexively unimpressed. "What do we do?"

"What do we do?" asked Frank, stretching languidly. He shrugged. "Enjoy these extra days and wait to be brutally transported back to the UK."

"Oh," said Mary, feeling slightly foolish. Some absurd part of her had hoped that maybe this would change things. She'd thought if the rest of the isle thought that there was something to their kiss, then maybe Frank would too? This was better, though, that he didn't. She wasn't exactly in a state to start something new, and even if she was, the last person she'd pick would be Frank.

"Did you have a different idea?" he asked neutrally.

"Well," said Mary, clawing her way back to her previously stated position of nonchalance, "I just thought, since you were the one who kissed me."

"I thought it was barely a kiss," said Frank.

"It was, because I pulled away," said Mary archly. "Forget it. Let's just relax for a few more days until we have to go home."

It physically went against human nature for the other contestants not to speculate on what Fanny knew about Mary and Frank, even though Fanny was harder to break than a KGB spy. Everyone had finished breakfast by now, but George, Anne and Lizzy were still sat around the kitchen. Emma, who'd circumspectly gone inside after seeing Frank and Mary sneak in there alone, came out minutes later.

"They're talking," she announced, slipping into the seat next to George.

He slung his arm around her. "I can't believe you're spying on them," said George affectionately, brushing her nose with his. "Actually, what am I saying. Of course you would."
"Maybe they kissed?" suggested Lizzy.

Emma shook her head. "Mary would've told me. She was super normal last night after it happened, so it can't have been that big a deal."

"Maybe Frank bribed Fanny," said George.

"Sure, bribing the sea-green incorruptible," said Emma, rolling her eyes. "Honestly. You know what, maybe Lizzy's right about the kiss after all."

George and Anne laughed as Lizzy turned to Emma. "Not to be indelicate," said Lizzy, "but isn't it weird for you to think about your ex kissing your friend?"

In another guy the reminder of his girlfriend's ex might've provoked hostility or belligerence, but enlightened boyfriend George merely looked amused and said teasingly, "Yeah, Emma. Why are you so interested?"

Emma lifted her chin with dignity. "It's hardly odd that I want to know what's going on in my friend's love life."

"If Mary hasn't told you anything about Frank, then there's probably nothing to tell," Anne put in. "She's still pretty hurt about Edmund. She said she thought she was falling in love with him."

Emma shrugged. "Can't she be wrong about her feelings? That's super normal. I'm telling you, something's going on."

"Even so," said Anne, "we should respect their privacy."

Emma had on many occasions decried the strength of this argument, but it did hold weight coming from Anne. "I guess," said Emma reluctantly.

The first new contestant to arrive was another girl called Mary, henceforth to be referred to as 'new Mary'; or, thanks to this conversation:

"What's your surname?"

"Bennet," said new Mary.

George looked delighted. "Mary B and Mary C!" he exclaimed. "Like the Spice Girls."

Emma raised her eyes to the heavens and wondered aloud why she had a boyfriend with such horrible music taste. Mary B didn't even crack a smile.

Everyone recognised that she had frankly come at an unfortunate time. The girls outnumbered the boys yet again, and out of the boys who were there, only James possessed a degree of unattachment. Yet the future of that relationship was swiftly crushed when, as they prepared lunch, George asked James: "What do you think of the new Mary?"

James shrugged. "Cute, but not really my type."

George nodded knowingly. "Trying to make it work with Lizzy?" Because you remember, that Lizzy and James coupled up.

James sighed. "I guess. But nah, man, that's not happening. She's obviously not into me but just doesn't want to say it. It's cool though, I can handle it."
"Good on you," said George, squeezing lemon juice over the chips.

James frowned and continued, "I think she might like Will? She's super cool and never nervous, but she gets nervous around him."

George almost choked on air. Oh, this was too good. The guy Lizzy was coupled up with knowing that she liked Will before she could even admit it to herself?

"Don't tell her," said George.

The second girl, Louisa, arrived just after lunch. An initial grilling revealed that she fancied Frank, but was put off by the fact that he was clearly not ready for something long-term.

"Also, we thought Mary and Frank were just coupled up for convenience, but Fanny convinced us to let them stay," Anne explained, when the group had broken up to allow Louisa to get to know everyone better. "I don't want to ask, because it seems like it's a secret, but I'd definitely avoid him for now."

"Thanks for the heads-up," said Louisa.

"Only Anne and I are waving the platonic flag now," contributed Will.

"But you can't go for Will either," said Anne, ignoring Will's warning look. "Sorry. You've joined at a really bad time."

Louisa had eyes, so she understood. "You and Lizzy, right?" she asked.

Anne laughed at Will's shocked face. "Give it up, pal. Just accept that everyone knows."

"What's so funny?" asked James, who had picked a relatively good moment to come over. He sat down on the space next to the Louisa.

"Oh, have you two properly met?" asked Anne, ever the wingwoman. "James — Louisa, Louisa — James. We've just been talking about who Louisa fancies."

"Oh, really," said James, feigning only a moderate amount of interest. "Well, that is the name of the game."

Edmund had made a decision. Even after he'd pressed, Fanny had refused to tell him what she knew about Frank and (old) Mary. At any rate, it meant that Mary had truly moved on from him, and as far as that went, it meant that Edmund could move on too.

He found Fanny alone in the bedroom, and asked if they could talk.

"I just wanted to say that nothing else feels logical," he began. "I know it looks bad, but I can't help how I feel. Fanny, I really like you. I tried to deny it for a while but I just… can't. I want us to have something."

Fanny felt joy spring into her heart. This was what she'd wanted since she'd come on the isle and she couldn't quite believe it was finally happening. She was happy, shocked, delighted, elated. "I feel the same way," she said steadily.

"Great!" said Edmund in relief. "So, can I..."
"Yes, said Fanny softly, tilting her face up for a kiss.

"Yuck," said Tom.

"So mature, Tom."

"I'm not yucking the kiss," Tom protested. "That would be hypocritical. I'm yucking their relationship."

Jane sighed. "Well, I suppose it's what Fanny wants."

Now that George and Emma were cocooned in a blissful haze of mutual adoration, they spent a lot of time together. This inevitably led to Emma being invited to sad terrace pining chats — at the point woefully misnamed, but the moniker had stuck. But Will and Anne didn't mind her being there, because Emma, especially around George, was quite good company.

They shared opinions on new Mary and Louisa. Anne, Emma and George all thought Louisa was cute and Mary likeable, and Will agreed because he couldn't remember a single thing about them.

"Anyway. Will, how's it going with Lizzy?" Emma asked teasingly.

Will normally responded to this question with a mournful groan, but today he frowned and said, "Actually, something weird happened today."

George, Anne and Emma exchanged surprised looks. "Oh?"

"She came into the kitchen when I was making pancakes, then just ran away."

This information was received with confusion.

"Something's not adding up," said George. "Were you making it weird somehow?"

"Why do you assume it was me making it weird?" grumbled Will.

"Because Lizzy is a perfect angel," said Emma, and Will almost nodded in agreement. Anne caught him in the act and laughed to herself.

"I don't know," said Will, aggrieved. "I wasn't wearing a shirt."

Emma and George rolled their eyes. "What did you expect?" said George.

But Anne frowned. "Lizzy's mind wouldn't go blank just at the sight of a six pack."

"It's not just anyone's six pack," said Emma. "It's Will's."

"True," said Anne.

"Will, this is the most encouragement you'll ever get," said George. "The time is now."

"For what?"

"To start making the moves on Lizzy," said Emma, exasperated. She turned to George. "Is he always like this?"
"This is getting ridiculous," said Tom, with the air of a long-suffering parent bemoaning the failures of their progeny. "How long can Lizzy and Will avoid their feelings? And they're on a dating show; there's nothing to do there but romance. God. It's like they're doing this on purpose."

New Mary stood in front of her empty suitcase, having unpacked everything, and began to wonder if she had truly gone insane.

A combination of alcohol, being unable to back down from a dare, misfortune and bad taste in friends had led her to sign up for *Down the Isle*. Out of all the reality dating shows, she had chosen this one, on account of its comparatively less trashy and less superficial reputation. A selection process that was probably on crack had put her on the shortlist, though she hadn't made the starting line-up. As there were fifty other people on the shortlist, she had relaxed into the thought that she probably wasn't going to be picked for the show. She would only watch the series out of relieved curiosity for what might have been.

Then she'd received a call. Playing off a deeply buried impulsive streak, she'd agreed to join the isle.

Mary sighed. This was probably going to be fine. She had no illusions about finding the love of her life on some weird reality dating show, even if it did have a surprisingly good track record, but she thought at least she'd get some new friendships out of this. Lizzy and Anne seemed cool, and Emma too if she was around George.

Her plan, then, was to make friends and not be completely closed off to the possibility of romance. Before she went in, a producer had told her that two new boys would be arriving after her and to "play nice", whatever the fuck that was supposed to mean. She steeled her nerves, adjusted her skirt one last time and walked back out.

Lizzy was beginning to think that the constant sun, the lack of the internet and the not having spoken to Jane or Charlotte in weeks was driving her insane. Last night, she'd lain in bed and seriously considered the possibility that she might fancy Will. *Will.*

The guy who'd screwed over Charlotte for no good reason! The guy who'd said she wasn't attractive! Granted, those things were a long time ago and they were… friends? now, but still. He was the very opposite of her type. She liked charming, light-hearted, funny guys, not guys whose only show of emotion was brooding. So she'd come to the only conclusion possible: the idea that she had a crush on Will was complete nonsense. All the fluttery feelings she was getting of late were just because he was so damn attractive. Nothing more. It wasn't her, it was her biology.

She told this to Anne while they were sitting on the patio.

"Right," said Anne, her face covered by a large hat so Lizzy couldn't see her exaggerated eye-roll.

"You don't believe me," accused Lizzy. Without giving her a chance to reply, she continued: "I can't have a crush on someone I don't know anything about. We barely talk."

Anne repressed her urge to say that a crush was exactly that.

"I won't deny that the man's attractive," Lizzy continued. "Obviously he is. Anyone would get fluttery around him."

"I don't get 'fluttery' around Will," said Anne.
Lizzy paused.

"Well, all right," she said. "But that's because you two are a lot closer than me and him."

"Right," said Anne again. "So? What are you going to do?"

"I'm not going to avoid him," said Lizzy. "That would mean… no. Actually, maybe I should hang out with him more. Then I'll see him as a friend and these weird reactions I keep getting will go away."

Anne had thought her role in this conversation would be to subtly navigate Lizzy towards spending more time with Will so the two idiots could end up happily together, but evidently she didn't need to. Lizzy was, unbeknowingly, playing that role all by herself.

"Oh, look, here he comes," said Anne. "Hey, Will!" she called.

He came over.

"Hey, Anne. Lizzy."

"Will," said Lizzy.

There was a slightly awkward silence, which Anne revelled in.

"Have you found your sunglasses yet?" asked Lizzy.

"Er, no," said Will. "I've pretty much given up."

"Oh, no, don't give up!"

"They've been missing for a while; I don't think anything's going to suddenly change."

"It might not be a sudden change," suggested Anne, who was living for all this double meaning.

Both Lizzy and Will stared at her, and she wondered if they'd forgotten she was there.

"Anyway," said Will. "I'm supposed to be doing weights with George and he's finally torn himself away from Emma, so I should go."

If Lydia were here, she would've said something like, "Make it a show for us!" and mortified Lizzy to death. Fortunately for Lizzy, Anne wasn't Lydia.

"All right, see you," she said. Will and Lizzy exchanged an awkward goodbye, and he went off to the gym.

"That was good, right?" said Lizzy. "I was being friendly."

"Sure," said Anne, who had nothing else to say.

"What the fuck?" demanded Tom. "God, out of all this episode's "what the fuck' moments, that surely has to be the worst."

"It does stretch the imagination," admitted Jane. "Lizzy seems too smart to have not figured out her emotions yet."
"Sometimes," said Tom sagely, "smart people can be real dumb."

Once again, George and Emma were cooking dinner.

"Remember our second day in here?" asked George as he chopped bell peppers. "I helped you with dinner then as well."

Emma lifted her head from peeling carrots to frown at him, her memory hazy. Then her expression was replaced by embarrassment.

"I was such a bitch," she said, her cheeks heating.

"Aw, no," said George. She gave him a disbelieving look. "All right, maybe a little. I was trying to flirt with you, and I must've been terrible at it because you had no idea. I think you told me to go and figure out my feelings for Harriet."

"Harriet!" Emma exclaimed. "Oh, God, that was so stupid of me. Did you like her, or did you just tell me you did because you wanted me to stop pushing her onto you?"

George laughed. "Of course I liked her. But I think we can all agree she's better off with Martin. And anyway, I wasn't thinking straight, because I was so devastated that you didn't like me."

"No-o," said Emma, still embarrassed. "At first, I thought you were boring."

But she kissed him in apology, so George didn't mind.

"I was so ahead of you," said George, tossing the peppers into the wok. He grinned. "It took you forever. Whereas I liked you from the moment I met you."

"I thought you loved me," said Emma teasingly.

George stopped.

"Well, yes," he said carefully. "But since you didn't — I mean, yesterday when I —"

"Oh my god," said Emma, putting down the carrot peeler. She faced him, smiling, and said, very seriously, "Of course I love you."

The look on George's face was absolutely precious.

"You do?" he said. "Because you don't need to — no, wait, I mean, I want you to, but —"

Emma burst out laughing, and George smushed his hand over her face in a weak attempt to shut her up.

"I meant that I didn't mind if you weren't there yet," he grumbled.

"I know you did, darling," said Emma. The stir fry they were preparing was forgotten as she looped her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. "I love you," she repeated. "You're the best person I know."

"Impossible," said George flatly. "You're the best person I know."

"Me?" said Emma in disbelief. "Even I know that I'm outspoken, nosy, snobby and self-deluding." She booped him on the nose, said, "Love is clouding your judgement," and got back to the carrots.
George smiled and said, "Clouds? Surely not. You're sunshine."

"Oh my god," said Emma, and kissed him again.

Dinner was a mixed vibe. The most awkward moment was when Edmund, perhaps forgetting that he had an audience, idly kissed Fanny's cheek as she sat down next to him.

"Fuck's sake," said old Mary under her breath, but everyone heard.

James, George and Anne immediately started talking about a show they had all watched, which carried them through dinner. Afterwards, Edmund and Frank were on dish duty, so everyone else went into the villa to get ready for the evening. The first new boy arrived about an hour later.

"It could be him," Lizzy whispered to Anne, as they stood in the kitchen and watched him speak to various contestants.

"Who?" asked Anne.

"The love of your life," said Lizzy, rolling her eyes. "Honestly. Anne, I love you but you've got to be proactive. Show these guys you're interested!"

"What if I'm not?"

"Anne!" said Lizzy, exasperated. "Try?"

"Fine," said Anne. She felt slight déjà vu as she went to talk to the new guy.

"Henry, right? Hi, I'm Anne."

He turned slightly from where he was talking to Frank and smiled at her. Anne felt she had to take a step back.

"Pleasure," said Henry, holding out his hand. Wasn't it etiquette that you only shook hands if the first person to speak held out theirs? But Henry didn't seem like the type of person to care for etiquette. "You're the doctor, aren't you?"

"Er, yes," said Anne. He sat down on a bean bag and she made to follow, noticing that he hadn't sat down with any of the other people... "And you?"

"Investment banker," said Henry dismissively. "It's not as noble as what you do."

Anne blushed and hated herself for it. She couldn't help herself — there was a kind of undeniable charm to him, something about the way he looked at you that made you think you were the sole, chosen object of his concentration. "I wouldn't say it's noble," she said. "I do get paid for it."

Henry laughed, and his laugh was warm and full-bodied. This was much easier than Anne had imagined. She wondered if Lizzy was right, that all she had to do was to show guys she was interested. Right now, she didn't see a reason not to be interested in Henry.

"So cynical," he teased. "Aren't you supposed to be the hopeful, idealistic one out of the two of us?"

Some forgotten, flirtatious spirit in Anne caused her to say, "There's a two of us?"

Henry grinned. "Maybe, if you want there to be."
"Good fucking job!" said Lizzy, as Anne returned from her chat with Henry. She held up two thumbs. "I'm proud of you."

Will and George walked by, and Will said, "What did Anne do?"

"Anne talked to the new boy," said Anne in a bored tone. At Will and George's enthusiastic expressions, she grumbled, "Stop congratulating me. I'm not romantically inept."

"Aw, I know," said Lizzy, chastised. "I'm just excited!"

"Poor Will's going to be out of a platonic coupling choice," said George, clapping him on the back. He and Anne exchanged a look.

"Hmm, indeed," said Anne.

"So any thoughts on the new girls, Will?" asked George. "Or the old ones? It's not as if you can be picky."

Lizzy felt that something was going on, but she didn't know what, so she wasn't going to glare at Anne and George just yet.

"I'm sure they're very nice," said Will.

"You're sure?" repeated George. "Will, have you even spoken to them?"

"There isn't a time limit on it," said Will, who had forgotten his and Anne's conversation with Louisa entirely.

"Will, come on," said George. "How are you supposed to find love if you don't talk to anyone?"

"Being with Emma is making you even more annoying," said Will, completely dodging the question.

Anne interceded. "George is right. That's what Lizzy's been telling me all day. Come on, Will. You and I need to be braver, get out there more, et cetera."

"I feel like I'm being attacked by ugly marble cherubs," said Will stodgily. "I don't like it."

"Did you just call me and Anne ugly?" said George.

"That was only for you, not Anne."

"Thank you, Will," said Anne.

There was a slight pause. Lizzy didn't usually find herself on the sidelines in a conversation, and thought this was a good time to reinsert herself. But a mad instinct — because for some reason she was always possessed by another force when Will was around — made her say, "Hey, what about me?"

No sooner were the words out of her mouth did she remember Will saying to George, offhandedly, "She's not even attractive enough for all of this fuss." And then she also remembered him standing in front of her in the lounge, letting go of her hand, saying she was attractive and was worth making a fuss about.

She could do nothing else but try to artfully avoid eye contact, but she stood there and saw all of their reactions. Will looked stunned. George was actually pretending to inspect his fingernails, and Anne was about to open her mouth to try and rescue this conversation from the pit Lizzy had thrown it
into.

Lizzy beat her to it. "Better than George, surely," she said lightly.

George sighed. "I'm telling Emma," he said, and they all laughed. So, disaster averted. Lizzy could hold on until it ended, and then go into the villa and rethink her life.

"Hardly a competition," Will agreed.

There was something in the way he said it that made Lizzy swallow.

"You can SEE the love hearts in his eyes," said Tom.

Henry had managed to charm everyone he'd spoken to into liking him, with the exception of Fanny and Edmund, who had avoided talking to him by virtue of excluding themselves from the social scene of the isle. He also hadn't spoken to the new Mary, but that could wait. He was taking his time, exploring his options. For instance: Anne was interesting and beautiful, and maybe there could be something there.

He'd decided he wasn't going to rush getting to know Mary Bennet. He wasn't sure whether she was avoiding him or it was pure coincidence that they hadn't crossed paths yet, but he was looking forward to it. He didn't know anyone who dyed their armpit hair.

About half an hour after Henry's arrival, someone yelled, "It's the last boy!" and everyone raced to the door to meet him. Anne was with Lizzy in the kitchen. They were both pretty far away from the entrance so they jogged over as much as could be done in heels, when suddenly Anne stopped moving and froze.

"Anne?" said Lizzy.

"Oh my god," said Anne. She fumbled for the bench behind her and sat down. "Oh, my god."

"What?" said the short-sighted Lizzy, squinting. "Is he that hot? How can you even see him? He's just a dark blob from this distance."

"That's not it," said Anne weakly.

"Anne, you're scaring me," said Lizzy. "Who is he? Do you know him?"

"Yes," said Anne. "Oh, God. Lizzy, it's Fred. My ex-boyfriend. He's here."

"WHAT?" said Tom, jumping up in an outrage. "You can't just end it there!"

"Well, they did," said Jane, but she didn't sound any happier than he did.

Tom huffed. "Right, forget Henry and Anne."

"Sentences that are relevant in 1536 and 2019."

Tom booped her nose. "I love it when you talk English history."

Jane rolled her eyes, but something in her fluttered at his words.
"Anyway," she continued, saying whatever came to mind, "I don't know if I agree. Is Anne really going to end up with the same guy after eight years? It doesn't show much growth."

"Pish," said Tom.

"Pish?"

"Pish," he confirmed. "Come on, it's a romance. Maybe the timing was wrong the first time. It can't be a coincidence that he's here. He's probably been in love with her all this time and only recently realised it, and this is his grand gesture… or whatever."

Jane sniffed. "It's a bit demonstrative."

"Of course it bloody is, he's demonstrating his love." Tom rolled his eyes and said, with heavy irony, "I can't wait to see what you'll demand of the poor sod who falls in love with you."

Jane gave Tom an unimpressed look. "Don't joke about that, because if there isn't anyone in ten years time I'll be marrying you."

"What a chore," said Tom lazily. "I'll set you up with someone immediately."

Chapter End Notes

OK so for clarity, the new people have no idea that Frank and Mary kissed; they were already on no-internet by the time that episode aired. The only person in the villa who knows about it is Fanny.

Henry is Henry Crawford, not Henry Tilney or Henry Dashwood. He and Mary (Crawford) aren't siblings in this because it's work to set up relationships and I'm lazy. Louisa is Louisa Musgrove, not Louisa Hurst. New Mary is Mary Bennet, and I know it might be excruciating with the names, but I'll deal with it. Also for clarification she and Lizzy aren't sisters in this — you may notice I've never mentioned Lizzy's surname precisely as a contingency for this.

I'm totally playing on the excellent I'll write you harmony in c re a certain ship, which btw everyone needs to read.

What else? The European history jokes are strong with this chapter. Sorry for comparing Fanny to Maximilien Robespierre. And for reference, in Love Island they don't film every day, and that's what I'm saying is happening here too. They've all known each other just short of a month. Can you fall in love within a month? Every HR I've read says yes ;)}
Previously on Down the Isle…

Four new arrivals to the villa weren't the only drama that happened yesterday. After Frank and old Mary's brief shock kiss that allowed them to stay on the isle in a brutal dumping, they talked about it — and they agreed it was nothing. Clearly, this didn't get through to Edmund, because he decided to crack on with Fanny. Lizzy remains in denial over her feelings for Will, despite Anne and George's best attempts to get her to realise. Mary B and Louisa were the two new girls to arrive yesterday, but the two new boys caused much more of a stir. Charming, rakish Henry hit it off with Anne. But that's all about to change once he finds out that the last new boy to arrive is Fred… the very same one who was Anne's first love…

"I've been thinking about this all day," said Tom. He stuffed his mouth with popcorn. "Can you believe it? Anne's EX, the LOVE of her LIFE, is on the isle." He put his hand against his heart. "It's so romantic."

Jane gave him a look. "What if he turns out to be a dick?"

Tom shuddered. "Don't."

Jane grinned. "Or maybe he's capitalising on her fame and he wants to sell teeth whitening discount codes. Maybe he's… mrmhm."

Tom had clapped his hand over Jane's mouth. "Stop it. I won't let you ruin this for me."

She made a noise of protest against his hand.

The tacky fairy lights were lit up around the villa for the evening, and Lizzy and Anne were standing apart from the group, communicating in agitated whispers.

"What," said Lizzy. "What do you mean? He's The Ex?"

"Yes," hissed Anne. Fred was coming closer now; she could see very clearly that it was him. Oh, he'd changed in the last eight years… and all in good ways too, thought Anne miserably. He'd filled out in the shoulders, his face was sharper and his hair was just growing out of a buzzcut. She smiled at the memory of his mum dragging him to the barber; Fred protesting that Anne liked his afro. That was a long time ago.

"You cannot tell anyone," said Anne.

Lizzy gave her a disbelieving look. "You really think people won't find out?"
"Lizzy, please. Just until I recover."

Lizzy sighed. "Fine. But we have to go over there. It looks really weird that we're all the way over here."

"Yes, of course," said Anne. She felt dazed. Of all the people... oh, why was he here? Surely it couldn't be because — she pushed that thought aside, knowing it was absurd.

But it was really him, and she had no idea what to do. There was no etiquette for this. Anne would have to fumble through and try her best not to look like an idiot.

"Hi everyone, I'm Fred," he said.

Anne heard Louisa whisper to Mary B, "God, he's fit."

"Hey, man!" said James, shock and delight spreading on his face. "Good to see you here!"

As they did that handshake-hug greeting that guys did, Lizzy blurted out: "You two know each other?"

James nodded. "Yeah, we served together." He punched Fred's shoulder. "You didn't tell me you were doing this!"

"It was a last-minute thing," said Fred.

He still hadn't looked at her.

"This is amazing," said James. "We've got to catch up sometime." He looked around and saw that everyone was still there. "But hey, you've got to meet everyone first."

The girls were getting ready for bed, and talking about the new boys.

"It's crazy that James knows Fred, right?" said Emma, applying her moisturiser. "Look, if I knew that navy officers looked like that…"

Everyone laughed. "I'm telling George," said old Mary affectionately, pulling on Emma's plait.

"Go ahead; I've been trying to find a way to tell him my — "

"La la la!" sang Mary, sticking her fingers in her ears. "I don't want to know!"

Anne smiled and turned away from Mary and Emma. She went into the bathroom to search for a hairband, because the one she'd been saving on her wrist for a week had somehow disappeared.

"Henry seems like a player," Lizzy was saying over the sink. "You can't trust anyone with that much charm."

"But he's bloody attractive," new Mary pointed out. As everyone turned to her with their eyebrows raised, her face took on a defiant expression. "What? I'm just stating facts."

"Fred's cute and nice!" said Louisa. "We talked for a bit; he seems really genuine and a bit dorky. But he's got that military edge to him. I bet he's been through a lot."

So if Fred was how Louisa said he was, then he hadn't changed.
Anne was just about to give up her search and borrow a hair band from old Mary when Louisa asked, innocently, "What about you, Anne?"

Anne froze.

Lizzy rescued her. "You were talking to Henry, right?"

"Henry," repeated Anne blankly. "Yeah. He's, er, nice."

"Nice?" asked Louisa disbelievingly.


Louisa smiled. "I think he really liked you. You were the only girl he talked to alone."

Anne knew that there was a feeling in the villa that her love life was tragic and needed help. She'd been in a platonic couple for a whole week. Before that, she'd had that fleeting thing with Elliot and a surprising thing with Elton, that had broke down due to intellectual differences, of all things. And unlike Lizzy, who had also been pretty single during her time on the isle, Anne did not have someone secretly in love with her. She had tried to open herself up, to be positive, to be ready for new things. But now, with Fred… she couldn't think about anything else. It was like staring at the night sky and trying to ignore a meteor shower.

She sighed. Her reaction: shock, confusion, a giddy interest, was probably just because she was caught off guard. No way was anything actually going to happen between her and Fred. She'd walked out on that eight years ago.

"Ugh, I'm exhausted," said Lizzy. "Let's just go to bed and think about boys in the morning."

"I can't believe they're avoiding each other," said Tom. "Look!" He pointed at the screen, which was rather unnecessary. "She just walked right past him! And now she's getting into bed. And now they're fast-forwarding to the lights being off… OK, I'm glad George and Emma are happy but we didn't need to see that." He crossed his arms. "I'm disappointed."

"They'll have to talk tomorrow," said Jane. "Fred obviously didn't come on the isle by coincidence."

"I sodding hope not," said Tom. "If your joy-sucking prediction is right and this turns out to be some cheap grab for fame capitalising on his past as Anne's school sweetheart, I'll destroy him myself."

Jane rolled her eyes.

The sun rose; the curtains were opened in the huge bedroom; activity on the villa began.

"You have to talk to him," Lizzy said that morning as she washed her face. "Anne, come on. There's no way you can avoid it."

Anne didn't say anything.

"Anne!"

"I know," said Anne morosely, fashioning her hair into a knot that would stay in place all day. "But what would I even say? This is so strange."
"Just pretend you've run into each other at an event," said Lizzy. "Acknowledge the weird and clear the air."

"I can't," said Anne, collapsing onto a chair. "I can't face him."

Lizzy arched an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"Lizzy, you don't understand," said Anne desperately. "It's not like we were together ages ago and I've moved on since then. He's the longest relationship I've ever had. He's going to think I'm some sad weirdo who's been clinging onto our teenage relationship for the last eight years. And maybe I have! What the fuck would you say if your teenage boyfriend showed up and said he hadn't moved on in eight whole years?"

Lizzy blinked. "Well, I didn't have one, so…"

Anne sighed weakly. "I can't face him," she repeated. "I spent years thinking I'd never see him again, and now he's in here. I can't be near him. I don't even — "

"Be near who?" asked Emma, coming into the room, looking far too perky for quarter to nine in the morning.

"No one!" said Lizzy chirpily. "Good morning." She arched an eyebrow. "Sleep well?"

Emma's face was covered with a violent blush. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"What are you talking about?" said Lizzy, and all thought of Fred was forgotten.

FOR NOW.

Will, George, (old) Mary and Emma were supposed to be having breakfast together, but Emma was late.

"Something's up," Emma declared, sliding into the chair next to George. She kissed him then attacked her pancakes. "Oh, these are really good."

"Told ya," said George to Will, who flipped him off.

"What's up?" asked Mary.

Emma frowned as she drizzled an excess amount of maple syrup over her pancakes. "I overheard something about someone."

"And?"

"I don't know if I should say what."

Mary levelled an accusing eye on George. "You see what you've done to her?"

"What have I done?" asked George.

"Made her all respectful of people's secrets," said Mary in disgust.

"Oh, sorry."

Emma wore the expression of a seasoned general deciding on a plan of attack in a war they were
currently losing.

"I can't," she said reluctantly, looking slightly disappointed in herself. "But I'm going to investigate on my own and get back to you."

"What?" protested George. "Come on, Em, you can tell me."

"No," said Emma, "because you'll tell Will, and Will will tell…"

"No one," said Will, who didn't even seem interested in what they were talking about.

"Well, you'll talk to Will really loudly about it, and everyone will overhear."

"OK," said Mary, dragging out the word. "Well — oh, fuck off."

Edmund and Fanny were walking across the lawn towards the kitchen.

"I can't even look at them," said Mary dully. She flashed a smile at her friends. "Sorry. Right now I'm filled with righteous anger, but it'll pass."

"It will," said Emma. She remembered the possibility that Mary and Frank had something, but judging by Mary's hurt reaction to the sight of Edmund and Fanny, she was far from having moved on.

"Maybe there'll be a public vote and they'll get kicked out," said Will.

Hearing something like that come from Will made even Mary laugh.

There was no announcement that anyone would be going on any dates today — perhaps because Henry was showing that you didn't need to go on a date to get to know people.

He had already had tête-à-têtes with Anne, Lizzy and Louisa within the space of one evening and one morning. He'd left out new Mary because honestly she wasn't that hot and Fanny because she was entangled in drama, and Henry didn't do drama. So from his conversations, Lizzy hadn't seemed interested; Louisa was a maybe; Anne was a yes.

He could turn maybes into yeses, but why would he need to when he already had one?

He found Anne after breakfast inside the villa.

"Hey, let me help you with that."

Anne turned around and dropped the bottles of sun cream she was holding in her hands.

Henry picked them up and handed them to her. She was clumsy. He didn't mind. It was cute.

"So, what are you doing today?" he asked, leaning against one of the bathroom cabinets.

Anne shot him a wary look. "Er, what I usually do."

"And that is?"

"Avoid the sun, avoid the pool, make for really good TV?"

Henry laughed. "I'm probably not supposed to say this," he said, "but back home, everyone loves you. There was even a short-lived campaign to find that ex you talked about."
Anne froze. When she recovered her voice, it was very small and very quiet. "Really."

It was with a dull thud that Henry realised this was not the woman he'd spoken to last night. This Anne was clearly not interested in him.

"Yep," he said. He was going to cut his losses. "It failed, obviously."

"Obviously," echoed Anne.

He shrugged. "Must've been hard on all those girls who think they've got the investigative skills to rival the FBI. Anyway, I'm on lunch duty today, so I've got to go. See you around, I guess."

It was only until Henry was gone that Anne realised what she had, unknowingly, done.

Fred had a number of reasons why he'd come on the isle, but he also knew that it was important he made friends with these people.

After lunch, he wandered around aimlessly until he found the terrace. He opened the door to find Will, alone.

"Hi," said Will. His tone wasn't completely hostile; Fred took that as a win.

"I'm Fred," said Fred. He sat down.

"I'm Will," said Will.

"Will," said Fred pensively. "Short for William?"

"Fitzwilliam," Will confessed.

"Ah," said Fred. He panicked and said, "I'm actually Frederick. I guess in your family I'd be Fitzfrederick."

It was a testament to how badly being friends with George had damaged Will's sense of humour, because he actually smiled at Fred's joke.

"So what's your story?" asked Will. "How did you end up here?"

"Uh," said Fred. "Just applied, I guess. I thought it'd be a laugh."

"Sounds familiar," said Will.

There was a comfortable silence.

"I should probably ask you who you're interested in," said Will. "You know the drill."

Fred wondered how Will had a knack for asking all the questions he didn't want to answer. "Not sure right now," he said. Deflection arouses suspicion. "I guess Louisa's cute," he said, because she was the first name that popped into his head that didn't have a huge red cross over it. "But that's between us, yeah?"

"Sure," said Will. "I'm the least gossipy person in here."

Now for a quick interlude inside the head of new Mary. If asked, she would say that she was
enjoying her time on the isle so far, and liked almost all the other contestants. The first thing Henry had said to her was: "Hand me the salt, will you, sweetheart?" when she had gone to the kitchen to get some water as he and Frank were making lunch. That was a full day after they had arrived on the isle. Of course he hadn't asked Frank to hand him the salt. But she, Mary, a woman, would do. 'Sweetheart', indeed. He probably didn't even know her name.

You will recall her offhand comment last night to the girls, pointing out that Henry was attractive. How she regretted that now. It was pure foolishness to think someone who didn't care to notice your existence was attractive, and Mary Bennet was not a fool.

So file away this opinion for later, and let us move onto the bigger matter concerning the isle…

"Hey, Anne," said Emma, very casually, as they unloaded the dishwasher. "Which one of the boys can't you be around?"

Anne nearly dropped the knife she held in her hand.

"What?" she spluttered. "I didn't — I'm not — "

Emma put her hands on her hips and stared at her stonily.

Anne sighed. "Fine. I guess it had to get out sometime. It's Fred."

Emma's eyebrows went up expectantly.

"Fred and I… we were together when we were teenagers."

Emma gasped. "He's The Ex?"

"Yes," said Anne. "Though there's no need to say it so loudly."

"Oh my god," said Emma. "And now he's on the show! That's so crazy. Wait, no… he obviously came on the isle because he still loves you! Anne Elliot, I declare I'm almost jealous. Do you still love him? This is so romantic."

Anne snorted to cover up the flicker of hope that sparked up at Emma's words. "It's been eight years," she said.

Emma rolled her eyes. "Time is fleeting. Anne, come on! This is huge. How are you not spilling over with anticipation?"

Anne's face was unreadable as she focused on stacking plates. "I don't even know how to — look, can you just not tell everyone? I don't want everyone on the isle knowing something so personal."

Emma looked conflicted. "Full disclosure: I'll probably tell George."

"Fine. But that's it. Please, Emma. I have to have some pride."

Emma looked reluctant, but she agreed.

That afternoon, Lizzy was talking to Will and George, as per her resolution to be friends with Will. Currently George was showing Emma's influence on him by speculating about potential couples on the isle. Lizzy laughed away his suggestion of her and Henry — she'd spoken to him, briefly, and was pretty repelled by his smooth entitled prick vibe.
"Hear me out," said George. "Will and Louisa?"

Lizzy frowned, then wondered why she was doing it.

"We haven't spoken," said Will flatly.

"Then go speak to her."

Lizzy glanced at Louisa, who was talking with Fred and James. She was very pretty, she thought critically. Taller than Lizzy, too. She felt a brief, mysterious flash of jealousy.

George was still talking about the idea of Will and Louisa. Apparently they both went on morning runs, as if that was some rare hobby the sharing of which automatically led to a bond. Plus, anyone could see that Louisa fancied Fred, which needed to be taken apart before it led to disaster. George was mad to think of her with Will.

"What do you think, Lizzy?" asked George.

Lizzy was sitting on the swing at an angle which meant that she couldn't see the glare Will sent in George's direction. But even if she wasn't, she wouldn't have registered it. She was too preoccupied with what was going on in her own head, which was that —

Oh.

"Oh, God," she said out loud.

"Everything all right?" asked Will.

Lizzy wanted to run far, far away from this moment. "Everything's fine!" she chirped, as her heart threatened to beat itself out of her chest. She avoided his eyes. "It's just — I haven't put on sun cream in, like, five hours! And Anne lectures me about skin cancer a lot. So I'll just go inside to do that…"

She made her escape to the villa. Thankfully no one was inside, and she collapsed on the bed she was technically sharing with James, covering her face with her hands.

She was an idiot.

It had been staring her in the face all this time. Of course she liked Will. What else could it have been? She'd stupidly brushed off her flirty feelings whenever Will touched her as normal reactions to a hot guy. But there it was. She fancied him something horrible and she wanted him to want her. Then that thought brought back all the memories of her first few days on the isle: Will choosing her to be in a couple; her anger that she was the third girl he'd been with in barely a week; her insistence that she wouldn't let herself care for him; shouting at each other at full volume in front of the whole villa.

What the fuck was she supposed to do now?

*Hey, Will. Just wanted to let you know that I've got this massive crush on you, so if you could regress a few weeks back to when you liked me, that would be great.*

She wasn't so self-deluding as to think he might still like her back.

"There you are," said George, ducking his head into the room. "You all right? You ran off really quickly there."

Lizzy sat up. "Of course," she said. She hauled herself off the bed. "Absolutely fine. Nothing's
changed."

George gave her a look that was a tad too scrutinising for Lizzy's comfort.

"OK," he said. "Well, see you later."

Henry was sprawled out on the day bed, gathering intel from Emma, who'd condescended to hang out with him because George was preparing dinner with Will. Being rejected by Anne this morning had been an unpleasant surprise, and he wasn't looking to repeat that experience. And Emma, he suspected, was the best person to go to for gossip.

"Hey, what's the deal with Anne?"

Emma, who wasn't so disloyal a friend as to break a promise the first time she was tested, decided to be economical with the truth. "Romantically? I don't know," she said. "She had a thing with Elton for a while, but…"

"Right," said Henry. "But nothing since?"

Emma frowned. "Really? Is that what people back home think?"

"You don't know the half of it," said Henry. He lowered his voice. "They had a moment over a hairbrush a few days ago. It went mad."

Emma's eyes grew as wide as saucers. "Oh?"

"I suppose there's always Louisa," said Henry, moving swiftly on. "But…" he looked over to where she was talking to Fred for what must've been the third time that day. "That would require effort to untangle."

"How about Mary?" suggested Emma. "The new one, of course."

Henry made a face.

"I think she's cute," said Emma defensively.

"She hates me."

"What? She barely knows you. Wait, no, that can't be right. Last night she said you were, and I quote, 'bloody attractive'."

At Henry's smug, delighted face, Emma began to think that perhaps she shouldn't have divulged that piece of information.

"Really," he said.

Emma fumbled to retract her words. "Or maybe it was someone else," she said. "I've always got a
shit memory at night; it was probably someone else. Definitely someone else if you think she hates you."

"Mm-hmm."

She tried to change tack. "Why do you think she hates you?"

"Her entire manner screams it," he said flatly.

"Maybe you're misreading her manner."

"Darling, I don't misread women."

"Well, maybe that's why."

"Why what?"

"Why she hates you," said Emma. She cast a coolly detached look at his handsome, aristocratic face. "Women hate men who think they know everything about them."

Lizzy told herself she couldn't lie on her bed and berate herself forever, so she got up and decided to tie up some loose strings that had recently been exposed.

"James!" said Lizzy, finding him sitting with Fred on the patio. "Can we talk?"

"Sure," said James, looking and feeling confused. He and Lizzy, despite being coupled up, hadn't talked in days.

"Great!" said Lizzy. Fred made his smooth exit, and she sat down opposite James. "Look, I just wanted to say that I'm sorry if you thought I led you on or anything. I should've been more vocal sooner, but I was in a weird place emotionally."

James nodded. "That's all right."

"The truth is," Lizzy continued, "I don't think I was ever really open to this." She made a gesture that signified the two of them together. "You probably already saw this for yourself, but I swear I only just realised. I have feelings for someone else."

"Halle-fucking-lujah," said Tom.

James raised an eyebrow. "You think?"

"Ugh," said Lizzy, her discomfort around the whole situation resurfacing. "But, um, we don't have to talk about that. Are you and I cool?"

"We're cool," said James. "Formally platonic."

"Great," said Lizzy. She added slyly, "And hey, good luck with Louisa."

James blinked. "I don't..."

Lizzy rolled her eyes. "I might be blind to my own feelings, but I'm not daft about everyone else's."
After a dinner dominated by James and Fred telling a story from their early days in the navy, Anne escaped to the villa. Then she saw Fred coming into the villa from the bathroom window, and froze. There was no one else inside so they were inevitably going to cross paths. Her plan, which had been to do nothing and avoid him, had finally timed out.

She told herself she was being dramatic. She would survive this. She stared death in the face on a daily basis. Talking to her ex would be fine.

She heard his footsteps and decided to face away from the door. She resumed looking for a hair clip.

She held her breath as she heard him approach the bathroom, and then... he walked straight past without saying a word.

She blinked.

Perhaps he hadn't seen that she was inside. But the door was very wildly ajar and she was in full view from the corridor. He'd probably seen her and decided to pretend he hadn't. Probably he didn't want to speak to her.

After all, she had broken his heart.

Of course he didn't know that sometimes she felt as if she'd broken her own. For the most part, she didn't mind her single existence — she was perfectly happy with her life and her friends, and she didn't have a hankering to be with someone, to share experiences with another person. But when she was at a particularly vulnerable point — a friend's wedding, usually — she'd decide to give dating another go. Maybe she'd find someone! But she'd never been interested in anyone enough to even consider a long-term relationship, and the horrible truth of the matter was that none of the men she'd gone out with in the last eight years had ever made her feel the way her secondary school boyfriend had.

In her weaker moments, she considered the idea that Fred Wentworth, whom she'd known since she was four, was her soulmate. Then she'd read opinion pieces decrying the useless, sentimental notion of soulmates, and tell herself she was being silly.

The way her heart was beating now did not feel silly.

She sighed and her sensible side kicked in. This was ridiculous. They'd both changed so much since they were kids. Fred coming on the isle, interrupting her serious move to look for romance, was nothing more than a horrible accident of fate. The universe was laughing at her, not doing her a favour.

That thought comforted her. It was a notion she was used to.

*Down the Isle* had promised its contestants the best summer of their lives, but (old) Mary had spent much better summers than watching her kind-of-ex hanging out with his new flame, the girl she'd been correctly suspicious about.

"You all right tonight?" asked Emma, who'd torn herself away from George to babysit Mary for a while.

Mary shrugged and pretended like she wasn't on the verge of making a massive decision. "Yeah, just
They looked towards Edmund and Fanny.

Frank appeared. "Hey, don't look at them," he said, bringing up a stool to sit next to Mary.

Emma looked between them. "I think Will's calling me," she said, then she left.

Mary narrowed her eyes at Frank. "Hello," she said, rather aggressively.

"Hello," said Frank amusedly. "Hey, listen. Fuck Edmund."

"I did," said Mary. "That's part of the problem."

Frank choked on his laughter.

"Come on, it can't have been that good. On one of those beds, in a room full of people?"

"I can't believe I'm talking about this with you," said Mary, though she wasn't embarrassed.
"Obviously you're right. It wasn't amazing."

"So you're just feeling bad about average sex."

"I hate you," said Mary. "No, this is a whole mess of feelings. Not that I'd expect you to understand."

"Hey," said Frank. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Mary rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on. You're the one who ditched his NGO-volunteering girlfriend to come on this stupid show."

"For the record," said Frank, "I've said at least multiple times that she wanted to break up; the break was my idea; she's definitely not thinking about me right now."

"OK," said Mary, unconvinced.

"OK," said Frank. "So I do understand what it's like to like someone more than they like you."

"Jesus," said Mary, wrinkling her nose at the painfully apt description of her situation. "When you put it like that…"

"I guess it's different because he likes someone else," said Frank.

"The more you talk, the more you're making this worse," said Mary, but it was without acid. She stared out at the beautiful night sky. It was a quieter night: no DJ had been hired to liven things up, and the kitchen, where she was sat with Frank, was quite far away from where the rest of the contestants stood. "Why do you care, anyway?"

Frank's response was quick. "Care about what?"

"Me," said Mary. "My life. This mess."

Frank shrugged. "Who said I did?"

"Oh, please," said Mary, rolling her eyes and downing her drink. Luckily, she was in the kitchen, and she got up to refill it. "I mean," she continued, with her back to Frank, "what is this? Are we
friends?"

"Sure, we're friends," said Frank.

"Weird," said Mary, coming back to sit beside him.

He seemed interested by this comment, because he smiled in that 'I'm a good looking guy and I'm going to take full advantage of that fact' way he had, and said, "Why's it weird? Can't handle being just friends with someone as hot as me?"

Mary wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. "I've got much hotter friends that you," she said airily. "For example, Emma."

He didn't even look remotely uncomfortable or offended, which annoyed her. "Well played," he said admiringly.

"Describing what you did to her?" she asked sweetly.

But that comment seemed to cross a line. "I've apologised and explained myself multiple times," he said. "We're not going to be friends if you keep bringing that up."

"Fine," said Mary. "It's a fresh start."

"Is it me," said Tom, "or is there something — "

"Yes," said Jane.

After the night was over and everyone was inside, Emma decided that she'd go mad if she didn't act on at least one pressing matter inside her brain.

"Mary," said Emma to her best friend, when both of them had a spare moment before bed. "Can I talk to you?"

"OK?" said (old) Mary. She followed Emma out to the balcony. "What's this about?"

Emma took a deep breath. "I know something happened between you and Frank. Fanny told us. That's why we voted to save you, not Martin and Harriet."

Mary froze.

"We don't know what, because Fanny won't tell us," said Emma. Mary breathed a silent sigh of relief. "Then I thought maybe Fanny just got it wrong and there was nothing, because you two seemed to have nothing going on yesterday. But then I saw you two talking tonight. And I just want you to know that I love you and completely support you. If you want to date Frank, that's great. I know what it's really like between him and his ex, and you don't have anything to worry about there. I just — "

"Emma," said Mary. "Stop. I don't like Frank, and he doesn't like me. We spend ten minutes agreeing to be friends."

Emma frowned. "Really? OK, well, you have my support for that too."

Mary looked uneasy. "Emma, you don't need to — "
"I know," said Emma. "But I guess being with George is making me super forgiving of everything that happened before to lead me to here."

"Wow," said Mary. "OK, well, Frank and I did kiss a few days ago, but it was literally such a weird moment I don't think it even counts. It's made our relationship less romantic. We're definitely just friends. I'm still fucked up about Edmund, so I'm not even in a position to, you know, be open to anything new."

"Maybe Frank knows that too," said Emma.

Mary gave her a look. "Emma, I love you, but you are literally always wrong about romantic relationships."

"I am not," protested Emma.

"You are," said Mary affectionately. "And I love you, but you're wrong about Frank."

Emma shrugged. "Wouldn't be the first time."

Mary laughed. She knew Emma was completely over Frank from how happy she was with George, but there was nothing quite like an airy joke about an ex to confirm that you were fully over them.

The episode ended on a divided note. Mary and Frank slept with their backs to each other. George and Emma still weren't asleep when the episode ended; Lizzy, too, lay awake for ages. Fanny and Edmund shared a few chaste kisses before drifting off. Nothing was shown of Henry, Fred, Anne, Will, James, Louisa or Mary B — presumably, they weren't doing anything interesting.

"Oh, by the way," said Jane, switching off the TV, "you know Cassandra's coming to visit, right?"

"I can't wait," said Tom.

"I can't think why," said Jane. "She doesn't even like you."

"I'm going to make her like me."

"You say that every time."

"I really mean it this time."

Jane rolled her eyes. "Whatever. She doesn't watch Down the Isle so we're going to have to do a lot of catch up with her."

"We're going to watch this while she's here?"

"Of course," said Jane, and almost sounded offended. "What kind of question is that?"

Chapter End Notes

So I'm having a little bit of a hard time trying to juggle the millions of plot strands I've decided to create, but we're hanging in there. The new people might come across as dull but I maintain that real people make horrible first impressions and no one is how they
first seem. So though Henry sounds really bland atm… just you wait.

Sorry that Anne and Fred still haven’t spoken but I have to remain faithful to the awkward repression of their relationship as depicted in the book :)

Love Island starts today! So if you’re interested in the influence behind DTI, then do check it out! It’s on ITV2 or the ITV Hub. Fair warning: there is a lot less sexual tension on the show, because people just tend to go for it.
If a Great Wave Should Fall

Chapter Summary

oh man this one is a bit of a killer at the end BUT there's a great alcohol pun so you win some you lose some eh

Chapter Notes

Two updates in one week??!! Don't get used to it.

This chapter gave me a lot of trouble because I knew what I wanted to happen but I didn't know how to get there. I kind of figured it out though I had to make some sacrifices. The result is something that might not please everyone, but at least it isn't Game of Thrones.

Today on mammoth-sized hints from the chapter title, this one's from The Calling, Wherever You Will Go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Previously on Down the Isle...

The question everyone's asking is: what is Fred, Anne's high school boyfriend, doing on the isle? But Fred told Will offhandedly that he thought Louisa was 'cute', and no one on the isle knows about his and Anne's history, except Lizzy. Speaking of Lizzy... has she finally woken up, smelt the coffee, and realised there's something with Will? And is Emma right that there's something between old Mary and Frank? There's loads to be revealed and even more to be discussed on tonight's episode of Down the Isle...

"There's too many characters," said Jane critically. "You only need about five or six mains to spin a compelling story, plus three or four extras for comic effect and plot mechanisms. Here, we've got... fourteen."

"It's true we haven't seen much of the new people," admitted Tom.

"They need to kick some people out."

"Brutal."

Jane shrugged. "Sometimes the truth is."

Some rules were sacred. Never borrow anything from Will. Always ask before using Emma's toothpaste. And every new arrival to the villa was given the chance to go on a date. Yvonne, making an early morning entrance, announced that Louisa, new Mary, Henry and Fred were all allowed the
chance to pick one date to go on at any point in the day.

"And don't worry," said Yvonne, which immediately made everyone worried. "I haven't forgotten about the rest of you. I'll be back to announce something very special that's going to happen tonight."

"I'm going to pick Fred," Louisa confided in Lizzy, as they milled around the dressing room before lunch.

Lizzy's head was a mess of feelings, but alarm bells rang loud and clear when Louisa mentioned Fred.

"Oh," she said. "Um. Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure," said Louisa. "I think we get along really well and he's interested in me. What else is there?"

Oh, only if you knew, thought Lizzy darkly. "Please don't think I'm trying to discourage you," she said. "But it's just… well, he's new, and you're new, and maybe it would be better if you picked someone who — "

"Hey," said Louisa, who'd stood up and was now staring at Lizzy with a look of indignation. "Why don't you want me going on a date with Fred?"

"It's not that," said Lizzy. "I just think…"

Louisa narrowed her eyes. "Are you into him?"

"What? No! Definitely not."

"Then why don't you want me going on a date with him?"

Lizzy looked desperate. "I can't tell you," she said. "There's just… there's some stuff you don't know."

"Then tell me."

"I can't. I made a promise."

Lizzy bit her lip and tried to look like she was guarding a very big secret — which she was.

Louisa folded her arms. "I don't believe you. Look, if you like Fred, it's not like you can't talk to him either."

"Oh, for God's sake," said Lizzy, as something in her snapped. "I don't like Fred. Doesn't everyone know? I've been a fool for three weeks, because I've only just realised that I like Will."

Louisa's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh!"

"Yes, oh, " Lizzy snapped. She was quite sure she'd soon regret saying this, but at the moment she was so defensive over Anne and Fred that she couldn't bring herself to care. "So I'm not the one involved in the Fred thing."

Louisa sighed. "Look, Lizzy, I'm sure you're trying to do a good thing, but whatever it is… it's just a date."
"I know," said Lizzy, "but I can't emphasise enough how much of a delicate situation — "

"You're not going to change my mind," said Louisa, admittedly rather brattily. But we must be grateful for her brattiness, because without it things wouldn't have turned out the way they will. "I'm asking Fred, and whatever it is you're hiding, it's going to be revealed." She paused. "Does Will know you like him, because — "

"No," said Lizzy. She stared at Louisa. "I trust you won't tell him."

The author knows, and is apologetic that Henry has been in the background for the majority of his time here. But there isn't a particularly dramatic way, aside from the old soliloquy, to reveal the thoughts he'd been thinking some time after his arrival on the isle… the thoughts that led him to the conclusion that he'd scorn the idea of chasing after Anne or Lizzy. He'd set his sights on a much more difficult and worthwhile challenge.

Fanny Price.

At this moment, which was fairly similar to all other moments Fanny had spent on the isle, she was talking to Edmund. Their relationship, from Henry's perspective, was an odd one. They were definitely some kind of romantically involved — otherwise, old Mary wouldn't be so self-righteous, and also Henry had seen them exchange chaste pecks every now and again. But they definitely hadn't done anything in bed. And that, for Henry, was a definite opening.

He didn't have any other option than to ask Fanny out with Edmund right there, because she was literally never without him.

"Hey, Fanny," he said, casually, as he passed her and Edmund on his way to the kitchen. "You cool to go on a date with me?"

Both Fanny and Edmund's mouths dropped open.

"Let's say, two o'clock," said Henry.

Edmund blinked. "Henry, mate, you can't — "

"I'm not asking you," said Henry cheerfully. "Fanny? It's not a big deal."

"Um, sure," said Fanny.

Edmund's mouth clamped shut.

"Great," said Henry. "See you then."

Step one was complete.

Anne was with Will, George and new Mary when it happened.

"Hey," said Fred, approaching the group. "Er, can I speak to Anne?"

"Sure," said George and Will, preparing to move off the swings, whilst Mary stayed firmly sat where she was and demanded, "Why?"

"Because I have something to ask her," said Fred.
Mary looked at him suspiciously, but evidently he passed because she stood up and left without another word.

"Um," said Fred, as he sat down next to her.

Anne felt this to be the most awkward moment of her life. So finally, he'd decided to talk to her. She was terrified that she was going to look like a fool: surely he'd ask about her dating history, if only to be polite, and he'd probably feel sorry for poor, perpetually single Anne, who was still pining after him. Only she wasn't — she was on this show to find someone who, before two days ago, most definitely would not have been him. And Fred wasn't like that, anyway: if he was anything like he used to be he wouldn't judge her, or anyone, for not having been in a relationship. And once they'd survived the awkward, maybe they could be friends! She'd like that.

"So," she said. She laughed self-consciously. "Er, God, this is awkward."

"I knew it would be," said Fred woefully.

If she'd been a little braver she would've smiled at him, but she kept her eyes affixed on the slightly uneven tile on the floor in front of her.

"Lunch is ready!" yelled Emma, with horrible timing.

"Oh," they said at the same time. Anne went first. "What was it that you wanted — "

"Yeah, just — I think it would be good if we could catch up, you know, since it's been so long — and I thought if you went on my date with me, obviously, then that would be a good time to do that?"

"Oh!" said Anne. "Um, yeah, sure."

"Great," said Fred, standing up. Anne stood up too, since she too was going to lunch.

"I don't pretend it's anything masterful," said Emma, presiding over her cooking, "but Will, if you eat this and still think that avocado is horrible — "

Will held up his fork in surrender as Anne and Fred took their seats at a distance from one another. Anne sat back and let the wave of opinions on avocado wash over her. In her head, she was a panicking mess.

"Surely," said Tom, "he's going to confess his love for her."

Louisa found Fred after lunch.

"Hey, Louisa," said Fred, seeing her approach. "Excited about your date today?"

"About that," said Louisa. She wore a brilliant smile. "I was hoping you'd go with me."

Fred just caught himself from making a hideously obvious shocked face.

"Oh," he said.

Louisa's smile dimmed. "Do you not want to go?"
Fred blinked. He realised suddenly that he couldn't reject her, at least without giving an explanation, and he was sure he'd fuck that up. And it was just a date.

"Sorry, no, I was just surprised. Sure, I'll go. It'll be fun."

"Great," said Louisa, leaning down to kiss Fred's cheek.

"Great," echoed Fred.

Jane and Tom exchanged a look.

Mary B still wasn't sure what madness had caused her to sign up for this show. Furthermore, she was interested in none of the men here, and had already made a lifelong enemy in one. So when the higher ups ordered her to pick a date…

"Will," she said, marching into the living room where he sat with George and Emma. She surveyed the picture before her. "Boy, you do a lot of third-wheeling."

George burst out laughing.

"You don't need to tell me what I already know," said Will.

Mary thought that if he was already feeling prickly towards her, it was about to get a lot worse. "OK, well, you should thank me, because I'm taking you on a date."

George and Emma removed themselves from the situation and silence rained down in the room.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Will began.

Mary rolled her eyes so hard they almost fell out of her head. "Calm down, I'm not making a move on you. I know you and Lizzy have this weird distance pining thing. I'm donating you my date to help make her jealous."

"I don't think that's a good idea," repeated Will, though he sounded less resolute this time.

Mary fixed him with an unimpressed stare and said, "Do you have a better idea?"

A brief pause.

"No," she said smugly. "Great. See you in half an hour, and dress cute."

She marched out as confidently as she marched in.

So, to recap, these were the dates. Fred had picked Anne, Louisa had picked Fred, Henry had picked Fanny, and Mary B had picked Will. Anne/Fred and Henry/Fanny were going first, followed by Mary/Will and Fred/Louisa.

Anne's date with Fred was not, as they say, going well.

"So — what are you doing here?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Same thing you're doing, I bet."
Anne rolled her eyes. "Right, well, I don't know what I'm doing here."

"Mary sign you up?"

He was referring to Mary Musgrove, Anne's younger, pushier and married sister.

"No," said Anne, slightly brittle. "I did."

Fred nodded. "Right. Er, how is Mary? And Elizabeth?"

"Good," said Anne. Of course her first conversation with Fred after eight years would be about her sisters. "Mary's married; her husband's a good guy. He's a pub landlord. Elizabeth moved to New York."

"Oh," said Fred.

On the other side of the small clearing, Henry was trying to get Fanny to open up.

"So you like jazz, right?" he said, falling back on the conversation topic he really didn't want to use.

Fanny nodded. "Yes."

"That's cool," lied Henry, who thought jazz was the dullest thing ever invented. "Who in particular?"

Fanny told him.

"That's really interesting," said Henry. "You'll have to take me to a jazz club sometime. I've got a mate whose dad owns one, but I've never been."

"Which one?" Fanny asked politely.

"Whizz Keys. It's in Shoreditch."

Fanny's eyes grew as wide as saucers.

"You've heard of it?" asked Henry.

"I've always wanted to go there," she admitted shyly. "Edmund — er, I mean…” she trailed off, horrified at her faux pas.

Henry smiled. "It's all right. I'll have to talk to Yates about it."

"Oh, really, I couldn't possibly — "

"You could," said Henry. "What's the point in having connections if I never use them?"

"I'm sure you do," said Fanny faintly. "And for more important things."

Henry smiled again; now, she'd given him an opening. "Is there anything more important than making a beautiful woman happy?"

He looked for signs of pleasure or even delight, but she just looked embarrassed.

"The thing I don't get," said old Mary, with the entire rest of the isle gathered on the giant swing, as they were wont to do when a mystery took hold, "is why Fred picked Anne? I mean — obviously I love Anne and she's amazing. But I don't even think they've spoken."
Emma and George, two of the only people who knew about Fred and Anne's history, froze.

"I think they have," said Emma slowly. "George, didn't we see them together — "

George nodded and said, "This morning," at the same time Emma said, "last night."

"There you go, so they've spoken twice," said Emma. "That's quite a lot."

No one saw any reason for Emma and George to lie about this, so they accepted their weak version of events.

"Still, it's weird," said new Mary. "When he came over to talk to her before lunch, they seemed a little… off. Do you think they're hiding something?"

"Don't be absurd," said Emma, shooting a glance at Lizzy for back up. Lizzy, however, had been distracted all day, and didn't look as if she was going to help any time soon. George gave a supportive nod, which was nice, but useless.

"I think Mary's right," said Will. "Fred told me that he thought Louisa was cute." Then he frowned. "I don't think I was meant to say that."

Everyone looked at Louisa. She'd been a bit deflated when Fred had gone on his date with Anne, but now she suddenly looked more alive.

"Maybe he didn't want to be too full-on and ask out Louisa after she'd already asked him," said Emma. She looked at George and saw the laughter suppressed behind his eyes. God, she was putting on an Oscar-worthy performance here. She hoped the viewers at home appreciated it.

"But when did you say Fred talked to Anne?" asked Louisa. "Because I asked him on the date after lunch."

"He also asked her after lunch," said George.

"Really?" said Will. "I thought it was before."

"It was definitely before," said new Mary.

Everyone turned to look at Emma and George.

*Oh, for God's sake,* thought Emma. Did Louisa want to be miserable?

"OK, fine," said Emma loudly. "Anne told me a few days ago, and I promised her I wouldn't tell anyone else, but… it's too big to not say."

Lizzy returned to Earth several minutes too late. "Emma!"

Emma took a deep breath. They had crossed the point of no return. "Anne and Fred dated for four years."

The news hit everyone like a lightning strike. Four years! And they'd been on the isle together for over two days now (with almost no interaction, because Emma and George had obviously been lying about that) and suddenly they were going on a date together? How long ago were they together? Were they still in contact? Did they still have feelings for each other? Did Fred only come on the isle to win her back?

"I don't know much," said Emma, against the barrage of questions. "All I know is that it was ages
ago, they were teenagers, and they aren't in contact."

"Jesus fuck, that changes everything," said new Mary.

James looked as if he wanted to say something, but didn't for fear of making Louisa feel worse. She sat there, very still, and said, "I guess I've been kind of dumb."

"No! I'm sure it doesn't mean anything," said Emma kindly. George gave her an odd look, which she ignored. "If they were teenagers, then it was ages ago and it barely counts."

"Right," said Louisa uneasily. "And he wouldn't be on here if he didn't want to find someone new."

No one wanted to say that Fred had probably seen Anne on the show before coming on himself.

"It was awful," said Anne of her date with Fred, walking out of the villa and going straight to Lizzy, who sat nursing a glass of lemonade alone. "It was the most awkward conversation I've ever had in my life. And that's including that time I had to explain to a patient's mother what her son had got stuck up his — anyway. Oh my god, I'm babbling. Lizzy, stop me."

"OK," said Lizzy, pushing aside her personal feelings mess to make room for Anne's. "Anne, slow down. Just tell me what happened."

"Nothing happened!" said Anne. "But now I've talked to him and seen him smile, and I feel in this stupid way that I've never really moved on from him. In eight years! God, I'm so pathetic."

"Listen to me," said Lizzy. "Anne Elliot, you are not pathetic. You're feeling a lot of very normal feelings right now, and what you're going to do is take a bath and forget about them."

"Baths waste a lot of water," said Anne primly.

Lizzy smiled, though it took effort. "Now that's the Anne I know. Go on, do a face mask or something. Anything to relax and not think about it."

After Lizzy had forced Anne into the bathroom, she went back outside, full of terror that she'd bump into Will and do or say something stupid, only to find that he wasn't there.

"Where's Will?" she asked old Mary, who was talking to Frank in the kitchen.

Mary gave her a look. "You don't know?"

"No?"

"He's on a date with Mary. The other one, obviously."

"Mary? What?"

Mary C saw the chance to have some fun.

"Yeah," she said. "Mary didn't want to tell you because you and Will have a kind of history, but —"

"What the fuck," said Lizzy. She was almost angry now. She thought Mary was her friend. Surely she should've had the courtesy to at least tell her before she went on a date with her —

What? What was Will to her? The guy she'd had a crush on for God knows how long, but had only
just realised it, and now was avoiding him because she was terrified and didn't know what to do?

"Are you all right?" asked Frank. He turned to Mary. "Babe, do you think she needs some water?"

Had Lizzy been in her right mind, her eyebrows would've shot up at 'babe'. But she didn't see Mary smack Frank's arm or his boyish smile. Her face was like thunder as she said, "Right," and left the kitchen.

Fred and Louisa, and new Mary and Will's dates were taking place at the same time, but only one of them is really worthy of screen time.

"I bet she's pissed," said Mary, drinking sangria with composure. "You'll thank me later."

"It's almost never a good idea to piss off Lizzy," said Will.

Mary shrugged. "Look, I'm not just doing this for you. You think I want to date any of the men here? All the good ones are taken."

"Edmund's taken," Will pointed out.

Mary rolled her eyes. "Trust me, in the real world, he counts as a good one. Henry's the scum of the earth, George is taken, James is too nice, and Frank's got a thing for the other Mary."

"Frank has — what?"

Mary rolled her eyes again. "Can't you see anything? That might've started off as a recoupling of convenience or whatever they're calling it, but Frank's obviously holding a candle for her. Also, they kissed."

"Shit, what?" said Will.

Mary laughed, and it wasn't unkind, but it wasn't warm either. "I keep forgetting you guys don't watch the show."

"Frank and Mary kissed," repeated Will. Then he had a light bulb moment. "Oh, that must be what Fanny saw last week, and the reason why she insisted they stay."

Mary swirled the ice cube around her class. "Yeah, that was really nice of her. She's too good for this show."

"Hmm," said Will. After a pause, he said, "So did you ever see if Lizzy — "

"Fuck off, I'm not telling you that," said Mary. "You're going to have to figure that one out by yourself. Or, you know, just let your feelings explode. George did that."

"He did?" said Will, grinning.

Mary B knew she was in for a confrontation with Lizzy when she got back from the isle.

"Relax," she said. "I did it to make you jealous."

"What? Why would I be — hang on, what are we talking about? I haven't — you don't — "

Mary rolled her eyes. "Lizzy, I've actually seen the show, and that includes every single heart-eyes
you've shared."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Lizzy, backtracking now that she'd got the information she'd wanted.

"Yeah, walk away," said Mary tauntingly.

Lizzy straightened her back. "I am not."

"Oh my god, this isn't fucking primary school," said Mary. "Just tell him you like him."

Lizzy didn't say anything.

"Exactly," said Mary, and made her second stunning exit of the day.

Fred's date with Louisa went well, if you were to ask Louisa. If you were to ask Fred, you'd get a lot of stumbling and avoiding the question.

By the time Anne came down from sorting out her feelings in the bathroom, Fred, Louisa, Mary and Will were back. She wasn't greeted with that, though. When she walked over to the kitchen to get a glass of water, she ran into James, who said: "You're Fred's Anne?"

Anne felt cold dread seep in her stomach. So Emma had cracked, and everyone knew.

"Um," said Anne. "I guess you know about our history then."

"I can't believe I didn't know it was you!" said James, who was entirely too chirpy about the fact that Anne was the girl who broke his friend's heart. "I've seen photos of you with Fred and he talked about you sometimes. But obviously you look different eight years later."

Anne blinked and lowered her voice. "Sorry, Fred talked about me? How long have you known him?"

"We joined up together," said James. He chuckled. "I'm surprised you didn't recognise me — I was always with him in photos and stuff." He stopped. "Oh, wait, this is weird, right? I remember he didn't really mention you after the second or third year. But come on, that's all in the past. You're friends now, right?"

"Er," said Anne.

"You don't have to tell me," James said quickly. "Sorry, that was a really personal question."

"Thanks," said Anne, relieved. "Yeah, it's all a bit… overwhelming."

James smiled. "Sure. Hey, if you ever want to talk about Fred with someone who really knows him, you know where to go."

"You're not mad at me, are you?" asked Emma, her hair splayed out across the bean bag so George could play with it.

"Why would I be mad at you?"

"You know," said Emma, a little uncomfortably. "I told everyone about Anne and Fred. I broke my promise to her."
George frowned. "I don't think Anne really thought she'd be able to keep it a secret forever."

"I know," said Emma. "But still, I broke a promise." She took a deep breath, and said very quickly: "I just worry that I'm not as nice as you — I mean, I know I'm not — and after a while you're not going to find my screw-ups cute or forgivable."

"Hey," said George, his hand stilling in her hand. He sat up so he could look at her. "Firstly, that there was both of us screwing up. A shared screw-up, if you will." Emma's face suggested she wouldn't. "And secondly, I trust you. You always have a good reason behind your screw-ups. If you murdered someone, I bet your explanation would convince me that the poor sod needed to be murdered."

Somehow, that was the most romantic thing anyone had ever said to her. "Do you really think so?"

"I really do," he said, and he smiled at her. "I mean, I'm wildly in love with you, and — "

At that point Emma had clearly decided she'd had all the reassurance she needed, so she pulled him towards her and kissed him.

Tonight, (old) Mary and Frank were cooking dinner.

"What are you doing?" demanded Frank, unable to watch in silence as Mary screwed up his grandmother's Jollof rice recipe. He put down the onion and knife and went to interfere in whatever Mary was doing. "Jasmine rice? What the fuck, Mary?"

Mary set the bag of rice in front of her and crossed her arms. "Sorry, did I do something wrong? You said to get the rice out of the cupboard."

"Long grain rice, Mary," said Frank, sighing dramatically.

Mary couldn't resist. "Eh," she said. "What's the difference?"

Frank looked downright offended. "You didn't just ask me that."

"I mean, rice is rice," Mary continued, wide-eyed and purposefully ignorant. "Jasmine, long grain, basmati…"

"Nigerians use long grain rice," said Frank in a tone of finality.

Mary had to force herself to cover up her smile with a look of annoyance. "You know, you can be a real control freak sometimes."

"I wouldn't have to be a control freak if you didn't keep making mistakes," Frank shot back.

"Me make mistakes? Don't you mean you not making your instructions clear enough?"

"I thought it was so obvious it went without saying," said Frank stubbornly.

Mary snorted, but she conceded and started rummaging around in the cupboard for long grain rice.

"There's something going on between them!" said Tom excitedly. Jane raised an eyebrow at his naïve enthusiasm. "I can hardly wait to see what happens."
After dinner, everyone followed the instructions of Brian the tech guy and gathered around the fire pit. Sure enough, Yvonne appeared, wearing a deconstructed disco ball as a dress.

"You might have noticed that we're low on space in the bedroom," she said.

No one knew how to react to that.

"Of course, that's because we have seven beds in there. But forcing people into bed together is so terrible," she said airily, thereby losing the respect of many a sexist lawmaker. "So this is the only option."

"What's happening?" someone whispered.

Yvonne beamed.

"I'm afraid there's not enough space for all of you on the isle," she said blatantly. "Of course, we'll do it fairly. The boys will be choosing one girl to leave the isle. The girls will be choosing one boy."

The contestants gaped.

"Can't we at least talk about it together?" asked (old) Mary.

Yvonne turned a dazzling smile on her. "Of course," she said. "All of you, gather round. I'll give you three minutes."

"You cursed it," said Tom, once he had recovered from the shock.

"What?"

"You said at the beginning that there were too many people."

"Oh, that's true," said Jane calmly. "Well, this could be a good thing. For example, we might be able to lose Louisa."

Mary C spoke first. "I'll go."

"What?" demanded at least three people.

Mary shrugged. "I don't mind. I've been thinking about leaving for a while now, and — "

"What?" said Emma. "Mary, why didn't you tell me? We could've talked about it!"

Mary sighed. "Well, I wasn't really sure of it, but now seems like a pretty good time. The point of this is to find love, and it's not like I'm in a position to do that any more."

No one looked at Edmund.

"Well," said George. "Mary, if that's really what you want — "

"Hold up," said Frank. "Mary, can I talk to you in private?"

Mary gave him a strange look but she agreed.

Frank exhaled slowly. He had not planned on doing this on a crappy bench with the entire villa ten
feet away and watching, but it seemed as if he had no other choice.

"Don't go," he said.

Mary frowned. "Frank, if you need me to couple up with you so you can leech away time on the isle —"

"No," interrupted Frank. "Come on, Mary. Don't be daft."

Mary raised her eyebrows. "I'm not trying to be?"

"Fucking God, of course you're going to make me say it."

"Say wha —"

"I like you," he said. "A lot. I don't want you to go."

"Good gracious," said Tom, in a voice he probably imagined belonged to a Regency matron. "I do believe my knees are weak."

"No one respectable in the Regency would ever refer to a body part as scandalous as a knee," said Jane dismissively.

Tom scowled. "Can't you grant me artistic liberties?"

Jane snorted at the word 'artistic'.

"What," said Mary. She felt frozen to the spot, unable to do anything but stare at him in the face of this shock.

"You had no idea?" said Frank disbelievingly. He looked almost annoyed.

"Of course not!" said Mary in a shriek. "You denied we ever kissed!"

"You wanted to forget about it," reminded Frank.

"Well, you… you were mean to me about the rice today!"

"I was affectionately teasing, which is very different."

"Why didn't you say anything?" hissed Mary. "Is this why you've been nice to me? You wanted to get in my pants?"

"No, that was just me being a good friend," said Frank. "Look, stay, offer yourself up as sacrifice, whatever. But just so you know: I don't want you to go."

Mary couldn't think about this normally. Frank had feelings for her? This was insane. All her life seemed to do now was snowball into a bigger and bigger mess, and suddenly she wanted to break away from this claustrophobic place.

"You can't be serious," she said desperately.

He smiled a little ruefully, and she knew that he was. Or at least he thought he was.
"Well, I can't — I want to go," she said, the words slipping out of her. "I miss the outside world. I can't get over Edmund when we're living in the same house. It makes sense too: my time in here is done; I've had the romance and it's failed. I love my friends, but I'll still have them after I leave. There's nothing keeping me here."

"What about me?" said Frank.

Mary tried to see him as a potential boyfriend, and not the guy who was kind of shit to his ex, who fucked over Emma… who comforted her when she was crying about Edmund.

But then he'd kissed her, so maybe he'd just been biding his time for when she was ready to date again.

"I can't — you have to understand," said Mary. "I can't base this on a meagre possibility. Not that I don't think you — " she broke off, because couldn't deny the truth. She did think that Frank would be a terrible romantic prospect. And she was still hurting over Edmund, and so tired of only being around the same people even though she loved them, and she really really missed London…

"Fine," said Frank. "If you still don't think I'm serious, then clearly that means I can't convince you."

He bowed out gracefully, and Mary was left with the weight of the decision she'd made.

After the final discussions had been had, everyone dispersed across the isle to make their decision. It was almost charmingly retro, how the verdicts were communicated. Everyone wrote down the name person they wanted to send home on a scrap of paper, and handed it to Yvonne, who set up shop on a table brought in by the tech guys.

"I can now reveal," she said minutes later, "that the two with the highest number of votes who will be going home are…"

"Edmund…"

Of course. He wasn't very sociable and was the most disliked boy.

"... and, regretfully…"

"If it's Mary I'll personally parachute onto the isle and — "

"Mary C."

"NO," screamed Tom. "NO."

There were a few gasps when Yvonne made the announcement. Emma pushed through the crowd towards Mary and hugged her close, then Lizzy and Anne surrounded her. Fanny could be seen sinking onto the bench behind her and clutching Edmund's hand.

"So," said Yvonne. "Edmund and Mary, you have half an hour to pack your suitcases. It's been a pleasure having you on the isle, but I'm afraid we have to say goodbye."
Yvonne stepped back, as if she were about to leave.

"Wait," said Frank. "I'm leaving too."

"What," said Jane.

For Tom, who was still in the midst of processing the fact that old Mary was leaving the isle, this was the finishing blow.

Various cameras panned to various contestants, all of whom wore shocked expressions.

Yvonne, cool and in control as ever, lifted her dark eyebrows. "And why is that?"

"Someone once told me," said Frank, "that I should've left after you all found out about Jane, so the entire country didn't think I was trash personified." He wasn't looking at Mary, but she knew he was speaking to her. She vividly remembered her words. "It took me a while to find it, but I think now is the time."

More shocked expressions — most of them directed at Mary.

"Well," said Yvonne, in a tone of finality. "So there we have it! Edmund, Mary C and Frank are all leaving the villa tonight. Anyone else want to go?"

This joke was probably a little tone-deaf, as Fanny was currently crying into Edmund's shoulder, and Emma was staring at Mary and Frank in half suppressed glee.

"I'll take that as a no," said Yvonne. She tossed her hair over one shoulder. "Well, then. I'll see you all very soon."

Then she left.

Emma made a beeline for Mary after Yvonne left, and the first thing she said was: "I told you so!"

Mary blinked.

"About you and Frank," said Emma brightly. She was clearly refusing to cry, and she smiled forcefully. "I told you Frank liked you! And now you're leaving together!"

Mary coughed. "Em, right now I can't even process — "

"Yeah, I know," said Emma. She wrapped her arms around her friend. "I'm really sad that you're going."

"Me too," said Mary. "But you know that I had to — "

"I know."

A far more tearful goodbye was happening nearby under the sycamore tree. Fanny was crying freely into Edmund's shirt as he murmured soothing words. But neither of them said the thing that hung between them like a flickering lantern: that Fanny could've done what Frank did, and left the isle too. Neither of them mentioned Henry either.
There wasn't a chance for Frank to speak to Mary before they left. Mary was swarmed over by the other girls, and Frank had to pack up his bags too. Eventually, half an hour was up, and Edmund, Frank and Mary were leaving the villa. The last shot of them was of the three figures walking into the night, all three people at a certain distance from one another.

The remaining contestants looked around the villa, sighed, and went up to bed.

"He must really like her," said Lizzy, as she tried to remove her lipstick with a combination of fierce dabbing and micellar water. The other girls bustled around getting ready for bed. "That's really weird that I had no idea there was even anything going on between them."

"That's because you're too involved in your own love life," said (new) Mary sardonically.

One merit of Mary C leaving the isle was that no longer did people have to differentiate between the two Marys.

"I am not," said Lizzy weakly. "I barely have one."

Anne and Mary exchanged a look over the top of Lizzy's head.

Louisa wandered into the room, yawning. "What a day, right?"

It really had been. A brief remind if you can't recall: four dates had happened, Anne and Fred had spoken for the first time in almost a decade, the Louisa/Fred drama had begun its developments, Henry had asked out Fanny, new Mary had given both Will and Lizzy a push in the right direction… and, of course, Frank was apparently smitten with Mary Crawford, enough to leave behind the comforts of the isle for the comforts of a short-lived career as an influencer, probably.

"I'm going to bed," announced Mary. "And you should all too. I don't even have any drama, and I'm tired. I can't imagine what you must be feeling."

And so ended another day on the isle.

"But what next for Frank and Mary?" demanded Tom, as the credits ran. "Are we never going to know?"

"We can track them through Instagram," said Jane sleepily, yawning at least three times as she said it. "Oh, by the way, Cassandra asks if she can come next Tuesday instead of… whenever else it was. Something about a new commission changing her schedule?"

"Sure," said Tom. "I'll get the weird fruity chocolates she really likes."

Jane narrowed her eyes at him. "You two have such a weird relationship."

This was very true. Put simply, Tom liked Cassandra, and Cassandra despised Tom with every inch of her being. But Cassandra loved Jane more than she hated Tom, so she was willing to embark on a four day visit to her sister and her sister's roommate.

"It's playful antagonism," corrected Tom.

Jane would've contradicted him, only she had no idea why Cassandra disliked Tom so much. She'd asked her sister about it numerous times, and Cassandra had merely shrugged and said: "No reason. He's just annoying." Jane let it sit, because this was quite plausible. Happy-go-lucky Tom was a very different person from her serious, wry sister.
"Whatever," said Jane. "Be nice to each other."

"Always," said Tom.

She rolled her eyes, flicked his forehead and picked herself off the sofa to go to bed.

Chapter End Notes

I KNOW, I'm sorry, but to explore the Mary/Frank thing here would probably overpower the canonical relationship of Anne/Fred (and Henry and Mary Bennet) so I cut them loose to give them a future. I am kind of toying with the idea of doing a Frank/Mary spinoff (featuring everyone else of course) in which we explore what happens next without the clumsiness of this TV merging format… but that would be the nicest thing ever so idk if it's worth it.

NB Yvonne says there's seven beds because there are five couples, and then Henry and Fred, and Mary B and Louisa were sharing a bed.

Thanks for reading, leave a comment or find me on Tumblr, and I'll see ya soon!
Previously on Down the Isle…

Listen very carefully, because we're going to try and touch on everything. With the arrival of four new contestants, each one was allowed to go on a date. But none of them turned out how we might've expected. Fred, Anne's first love, asked her on his date… but afterwards, Anne described it as 'awful'. Maybe we should be more encouraged about Fred and Louisa, then, whose date was perfectly pleasant. New Mary went on a date with Will, but she promptly revealed that it was only because she wanted to drum some thoughts into Lizzy's head, and she actually wasn't interested in Will at all. But who is Mary B interested in? Certainly not Henry, who surprised everyone by going on a date with Fanny. That's right, the Fanny who's happily (though boringly) coupled up with Edmund… THOUGH NO MORE, because in the dumping last night, Edmund was the boy voted off the isle. But he wasn't the only boy to leave. Frank, whose quality as boyfriend material remains questionable, shocked everyone by deciding to leave the isle, following old Mary, who offered herself as a sacrifice to be voted off.

Got that? Now, prepare for another wild ride, on tonight's episode of Down the Isle…

"I don't care about anyone except Fred and Anne," said Tom. "And Will and Lizzy. And Emma and George, though they seem safe."

"For now," said Jane darkly.

Tom hummed. "You saw that thing of Frank and Mary leaving the airport right?"

"Of course."

"I'm telling you," said Tom. "Something's going on."

Jane rolled her eyes. "Like you're the relationship master."

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It was difficult, on the isle, to focus on your own problems.
There was no space. Everyone lived together, ate together, slept in the same bloody room. Everyone's drama was your drama. Anne, like everyone else, had been stunned by Frank's words last night, when he'd run his hand through his floppy fringe and told everyone how he felt about Mary. For an entire evening, she had been distracted from the situation with Fred. Now, waking up on a new day, with the perpetually shining sun, everything came flooding back.

Oh, why on earth was he here? She'd asked him that on their terrible, awkward date, but he'd brushed it off and asked her a question about herself. He'd used to do that back when they were together, and eight years later, he hadn't changed.

Well. He'd changed in the way that mattered. Clearly he hadn't been harbouring unspoken feelings for her all these years. And why should she want him to? He was in her past — so long ago in her past, in fact, that she didn't recognise that version of herself any more. Anne was proud of who she'd become in the last eight years. She was exactly where she'd wanted to be. Only, except…

A new voice broke in her thoughts. "How's the situation?" said Lizzy, ducking her head around the door of the terrace.

Anne jumped up and blinked. "What?"

"The situation," said Lizzy, coming to sit down next to her. "Like a situation, except it's shit."

"Very clever," said Anne.

Lizzy grinned. "I try." She laid her head down on her friend's shoulder and they stared out at the villa from one storey up. Emma and George were sharing breakfast by the pool and Mary was slicing toast in the kitchen, but apart from that, it was quiet outside.

"Are you all right?" asked Lizzy.

Anne didn't reply for a few moments, which was how Lizzy knew that she was going to answer truthfully.

"I don't know," she finally said. "There's no normal way to deal with this, right?"

Lizzy laughed. "Going on a reality dating show to find a guy, only one of the guys who shows up is your first love whom you've never really moved on from?"

Anne sighed. "I do hate it when you put things in your own words."

"That's because I'm honest."

"Yeah, right. Why don't you describe your situation?"

Lizzy faltered.

"It's hypocritical for me to ask what are you scared of," said Anne. She added, sardonically, "But if you imagine that I'm Mary…"

"I know," said Lizzy. "I can't do this any longer. If I don't try and tell him, I'll go mad."

Anne laughed. Almost she wished that she was in Lizzy's position. Lizzy was one of those people whose self-possession was so strong it drew other people towards them; the force of her feelings for someone would inevitably mean the other person liked them back. And Will had already carried a torch for Lizzy from the first moment or maybe the second he had met her. They would be happy
Mary (Bennet, which goes without saying) was making toast in the kitchen when the worst person in the world appeared from the villa. She forced herself not to jump in alarm, because seeing a satisfied look on his face would do her physical pain. Instead, she looked up, smiled, and gave him the finger.

"Good morning," drawled Henry. He wasn't wearing a shirt because he was an arsehole. He leaned over to reach the one cupboard that was above Mary's head, and took out an apple.

"Shouldn't you be celebrating that Fanny is single?" asked Mary.

Henry ignored her, biting into the apple and staring at her toast.

"You're doing it wrong," he said lazily. "You should put the butter on before you toast it."

He had chosen to criticise Mary at the same moment she had a knife in her hand, which she considered foolish, though someone like Henry Crawford was probably so used to making foolish decisions that he didn't realise them any more.

"Don't tell me how to make my food," she said. "Anyway, wouldn't putting the butter on before be some safety hazard?"

"If you're not willing to do it," said Henry, "I can show you."

He was standing improperly close to her because he wanted to provoke her. Mary wanted to scream, and she also wanted to run her knife clean through him.

"Come on, Bennet," said Henry, lowering his voice to whisper in her ear, in mockery of a male lead seducing the heroine in some terrible novel Mary definitely hadn't read. "Let me butter your toast."

Mary whirled around and as she did so, punched him in the chest with her elbow. "Sorry," she said casually. "Didn't mean to do that."

In a way, she hadn't. Because unfortunately, she now knew how hard his chest was.

"See you," she said disparagingly, marching off with her breakfast to sit under a tree or something. Of course he didn't follow her.
"Good morning, Lizzy," said Henry. "Will was just telling me about his date with Mary yesterday. I wanted to know if she'd only grown that stick up her arse overnight, or if it was always there."

Lizzy had almost forgotten about that date until Henry had brought it up.

"I like Mary," said Will. "Don't be a dick about her."

Henry whistled. "Should you be saying that in front of..." he inclined his head towards Lizzy, which was in a way even less subtle than just saying Lizzy's name, because he was suggesting as if there was something that he was trying to hide from Lizzy, and oh god did Will mean that he liked Mary?

Will frowned. "What? That I like Mary?"

Lizzy realised that she was an idiot.

"Anyway," said Henry. "Did you want something from us?"

"No!" said Lizzy. Oh God, she had to get out of here. "No, I thought that, er, you had something that I wanted, but, er, I think I misremembered. Bye!"

Of course the guy she liked fancied someone else. She tried not to begrudge Mary going on a date with Will — after all, she had done it to help, and she herself didn't like him. But it had created a disaster.

Fanny never lounged in bed, but she'd never been forcibly separated from someone she was romantically involved in either.

She missed breakfast. Anne and Emma very kindly brought her toast, a smoothie, some eggs and a sleeve of biscuits, but Fanny had only nibbled on some toast before deciding she didn't want to eat.

She felt awfully lonely in here. Perhaps she should've left with Edmund after all. But that was too big a step, too great a risk. If she'd left with Edmund, she'd effectively be stating that she believed in their week-long relationship. Instead, she'd remain on the isle, not being close to anyone... and see what happened.

As she sat in bed, trying to work up the courage and the will to get up and make some new friends, someone came through the door.

Henry.

She started when she realised it was him. She still didn't know why he'd asked her on his date yesterday, when he could've had anyone. It was an absurd prospect to imagine that he: charming, easy, rakish Henry Crawford could be interested in her: quiet, timid, uncolourful Fanny Price.

"Hey," he said, stopping by her bed on his long jaunt to the end of the room. "You all right?"

Fanny shrugged and tried not to look pitiful. "Fine, thank you."

Henry peered at her and saw the red-rimmed eyes, the blotchy face, the unkempt hair. "Usually when women say they're all right but have tear stains on their face, I tend to go with the tear stains."

Fanny blinked — mostly at the fact that he wasn't making a run for it, but also that he cared enough to look closer.

"I'll be fine," she said, because she certainly did not want him to stay. She could start crying again,
with Henry Crawford there to see her, and it would be so humiliating she'd die. "I think you should believe women more."

It was entirely the wrong thing to say, because instead of going away and leaving her with her unfinished breakfast, he came even closer until he was sitting on the opposite bed, with mirth in his dark blue eyes. "I'll believe you when I see you eat some more of your breakfast."

Fanny's instinct was to eat some more, with the hope that he'd believe her and go away. But she suspected that was unlikely to happen. For some reason, Henry wanted to stay.

She examined her own feelings about this. On the one hand, she would rather like to be left alone. On the other, there was something about his presence that made her feel less... serious.

It turned out not to matter, because at that very second, George came in.

"Oh, hey, guys," he said. "Fanny, you might know this." He held up two pairs of sunglasses. "Which of these identical Ray-Bans belongs to Emma? She said I wouldn't be able to get it right, and I want to prove her wrong."

"If that isn't love," said Henry. He inspected the two pairs of sunglasses. "That one."

George raised an eyebrow. "I'd feel more confident if Fanny could confirm."

Henry passed the sunglasses to Fanny. "Henry's right," she said. Then she yawned. "Sorry," she said. "I'm still a bit sleepy."

"Oh, we'll get out of your hair then," said George. Henry stood up too. "Thanks for the tip," he added. "Emma's going to be so impressed."

"That was the fakest yawn I've seen in my life," said Tom.

"Henry clearly wasn't going to buzz off," defended Jane. "She made do with what she could."

"But why would she want him to buzz off?" Tom wondered. "He's attentive and interested in her."

Jane rolled her eyes. "Men," she said derisively, to no one in particular.

After George produced Emma's sunglasses and she whispered in his ear a promise of something we can assume was rather explicit, George decided to tease Emma with some very interesting news.

"So I bumped into Fanny in the villa," said George. "You'll never guess who I saw sitting on the bed opposite."

Emma's eyes widened. "Who?"

"Come on, Em. At least try and guess."

"I hate you," said Emma, without heat. "OK, who's unlikely enough that you'd know I'd want to know? A guy, surely. Oh my god, was it James? Maybe that was platonic; he seems like a really caring guy."

"Nope," said George.
"Ugh, just tell me," said Emma. "Or I won't do that thing I promised," she threatened lightly.

"Henry," said George speedily.

"Henry?" demanded Emma. "Interested in Fanny?"

"Apparently so," said George. "It looked like he was flirting, but he's always flirting, so maybe it didn't mean anything. But to try it on Fanny? He must be feeling really ambitious."

"He must be," declared Emma. "How did Fanny look?"

"Tired," said George.

"She always looks tired," said Emma dismissively.

George arched an eyebrow.

"That was unkind," Emma muttered. Then an idea came to her. "Wait," she said, narrowing her eyes. "Did Fanny tell you which sunglasses were mine?"


Emma gave a triumphant laugh. "I knew you wouldn't be able to tell them apart!"

"Aren't you mad I lied?" asked George.

Emma shrugged. "I would've lied too. Anyway, you did fess up later."

"You're the coolest," said George. "I love you so much."

"I know," said Emma smugly. "I love you too."

We haven't been inside Will's head for a while, hmm? Well, after a disheartened lunch cooked by platonic couple Lizzy and James, Will hid away from the other contestants and told himself to get a fucking grip with his feelings.

If Mary was right — and by God he hoped she was — then he had a chance. And if he had a chance, he was going to take it and use it so wisely that Lizzy never regretted giving it.

After lunch, he found her sitting with Anne under the shade of a huge tree.

"Anne," he said, "can I talk to Lizzy?"

Anne's eyes widened. Will tried to send a message with his expression: if you make a scene I swear to God you'll regret it, but the end result was more ambiguous glaring.

"Off I go," said Anne, and off she went.

Will sat down in the deck chair she vacated. "Look," he said. "About that thing this morning — "

"It's fine!" chirped Lizzy. "No need to explain."

"But I — are you sure?"

"Yeah," said Lizzy. "Henry was being a dick anyway."
"He was," agreed Will. "Why do he and Mary hate each other so much?"

"Conflicting views," suggested Lizzy. Something in her made her say: "Like us."

Will's face immediately went red. "But we're good now," he said uneasily.

"Yeah, of course," said Lizzy. Will didn't even think they were on good terms? She really was an idiot. "So, um," she said. "If that's all…"

"Er," said Will. "Yeah."

"Great!" said Lizzy. She got up so fast she almost hit her head against a tree branch that was shading them. "See you later, I guess."

"They're killing me," said Tom. "No, they've already killed me. I'm dead."

Jane poked his shoulder. "You don't seem it."

Please don't hate Louisa too much for talking to Fred. From her side of things, they had a pretty good date, she found him attractive, and after all, she was on the isle to find love.

"So," said Louisa, settling down next to him. "Right, I know this is weird, but I have to ask… you and Anne?"

Fred had calculated how to approach this topic.

"Yeah," he said, sticking to the facts. "James told me that everyone knows. Um, so we were together when we were teenagers, but we haven't been in contact since."

"Oh," said Louisa, looking relieved. She'd connected the dots and came to the sensible conclusion that Anne and Fred were ancient history which no longer meant anything. "Well then, that's… awkward."

Fred laughed. "A bit."

"But you're on good terms, right?" Louisa continued, somewhat anxiously. "I like Anne; I don't want her to hate me or anything."

"Er," said Fred.

It was at this moment that the Fates had decided to have a right laugh at us weak mortals chained to the earth, because Anne came out of the villa and walked across the kitchen towards the patio, crossing past Louisa and Fred.

Her attempt to pretend she hadn't seen them failed. Louisa, half as a plot device and half from naïve well-meaningness, perked up when she saw her.

"Oh, hey, look who's coming!" she said. "Anne!" she called, and waved her over.

Anne had no choice but to go, and Fred had no choice but to sit there and watch the love of his life join him and a girl he suspected might slightly fancy him.

"Hey, Louisa," said Anne, putting on an admirable front of not wanting to sink into the tiled floor.
"Fred."

"Hey," said Louisa, and patted the space next to her. Anne sat down. "How've you been today?"

"Er, fine," said Anne. "And you?"

"Good!" said Louisa. "Fred and I were just talking — he confirmed that you two used to date." She said this, remarkably, without any spite in her tone. "Look, why didn't you say anything to me? I had to find out from Emma yesterday afternoon. I thought we were close enough that you'd tell me something like that."

Anne blinked. "Um," she said. "Well, last night we were all distracted…"

Fred cut in. "It was so long ago," he said. "It doesn't really —"

"Exactly!" said Anne. "I didn't want to make it a thing when it wasn't a thing — well, obviously we were a thing, but that was a long, long time ago. We're not a thing any more."

"We're nothing," offered Fred, the barest hint of a smile colouring his tone.

Louisa nodded, seemingly comforted by this, whilst Anne fought her urge to laugh. It was absurd, but she wanted to laugh with Fred over their situation. He'd always done this: used his clever, wry humour at horribly inappropriate times, because he'd wanted to make her laugh. Belatedly she remembered that this time, his comment was probably not for her benefit, and that smothered any chuckle that was threatening to burst forth.

"Oh, this is kind of awkward," said Louisa finally. "I feel bad. I didn't mean for it to be like this."

Was there any way to convince someone that an awkward situation wasn't awkward?

"I think Lizzy's getting annoyed of waiting for me," said Anne. It was so obviously a blatant lie to get out of this conversation, but she didn't care. "I'll see you later," she said to Louisa but plausibly including Fred as well, and escaped from the situation.

"Oh NO," said Tom. "But clearly not, right? I'm clinging desperately onto my theory that Fred's here to win Anne back."

"Ancient history doesn't look like that," Jane agreed.

"Anne, what the hell?" demanded Emma. After the impossibly awkward conversation with Fred and Louisa, Anne had fled to the nearest comfortable group she could see: Emma and George. She was third wheeling but she didn't care. Emma and George were a fun couple to third wheel; and Emma's impulsive conclusions were always balanced out by George's steadier thought process. But even George was giving Anne a look of sharp judgement.

"I have no idea why you even went over there," Emma continued. "Firstly, you and Fred have no closure about your past, so it's madness to talk about it with a third party who isn't a therapist. And even if you did have closure and were totally over it, that girl is interested in your ex! You walked straight into a minefield!"

"I hate to say it," said George, "but Emma's right."
"You love to say that," corrected Emma. At George's protesting face, she said, "Look, we can argue about it later. I repeat: Anne, what the hell?"

"I don't know," said Anne miserably. "But now I have to talk to Fred alone, right?"

"YES," said Emma and George at the same time.

"Why is it," wondered Anne, "that when people give you advice, it's never anything you want to follow?"

Henry had wisely decided not to speak to Fanny again today. She was the kind of girl who took things slowly, and he didn't want to overwhelm her.

He decided to have some fun, and sought out Mary.

She was swimming, which made was odd, but as a rule he expected odd things from her. To Henry's memory, no one on the isle had ever actually swum in the pool.

"You want to keep your legs more even," he said, watching Mary's front crawl with an appraising eye. He bit back a laugh when her legs kicked even more erratically. "No, don't sacrifice your technique because of your feelings towards me," he said. "I only have your best interests at heart."

Mary finished the length and trod water to speak to him; she was not going to go through the vulnerability of getting out, wrapping herself in a towel, lying on the day bed to dry off. "I don't care," she said.

"Oh, but you do," he said. "You should listen to me. I was on the team for the Youth Olympics."

"Congratu-fucking-lations," said Mary. It was difficult to remain dignified when treading water. "It's so refreshing to meet a man who's proud to declare his hairlessness."

Henry tutted. "Careful, Bennet." He nodded towards a camera. "You wouldn't want to perpetuate ideals of toxic masculinity on such a platform."

Mary wanted to throw something at him, but was worried splashing him with water would come across as — heaven forbid — playful.

"Find someone else to annoy, Crawford," said Mary, as if she was bored of and not absorbed in this conversation. "I have laps to do."

"Gladly," said Henry, and he took off without another word.

Perhaps he would speak to Fanny again today.

Anne knew she had to do this, but it didn't make it any easier.

After dinner, she'd quietly asked Fred if they could talk. Now they were on the terrace, where no one was going to disturb them, and she had no idea what to say.

"So," said Fred.

"So," said Anne.

They looked at each other, and it was like some memory of their old familiarity slipped something
"I can't believe how awkward this is," moaned Anne, covering her face in her hands. "What's wrong with us?"

"We haven't spoken in a while," said Fred.

Anne glared at him. "I know that."

Then he pulled away. "What you said earlier," he began. "I swear, I didn't know Louisa was going to — "

"No, I know," said Anne. She thought against it, but added, "You looked so uncomfortable; you clearly didn't want to be there."

"Was it that obvious?"

"Frightfully," confirmed Anne.

She didn't know why she expected him to tease her on her use of a word from a long gone era, but anyway he didn't. "You said to Louisa that we were in the past."

"Aren't we? I mean, it was so long ago. We're both very different people. I mean, I know I am. I don't even know you any more."

"I am as well," said Fred.

"For what it's worth," Anne added softly, "I'm sorry. I never gave us a chance for the future."

"I didn't let you change your mind," said Fred.

She nodded and felt the unbearably wide chasm between them grow wider. What else could she say? The time for everything had gone. Their friends were downstairs and she was afraid of what she'd begin to want if she stayed here with Fred too long.

"So that's that, then," she said brightly. "I'm glad we talked."

"Me too," said Fred.

"No," said Tom. "That's not it. SURELY. Anne's just scared! There is NO CONCEIVABLE EXPLANATION why Fred is here, except that he wants to win Anne back. Is there? IS THERE?" he demanded of Jane.

Jane regarded his frustration coolly. "Perhaps he wants a free holiday."

Tom clutched his heart. "Woe betide me if he is so cold."

It was a quieter evening than usual, as most of the drama today has been rather contained. No one had exploded in a burst of emotion. Yet.

Will scanned the outside for any sight of Lizzy, but his eyes couldn't find her. Curious, he slipped away into the villa.
Lizzy was hiding out inside. It was too awful that Will didn't even think they were on good terms. And now, looking back, she realised that he was right. They weren't friends; not like he and Anne. So what was she supposed to do now? She could be brave and march up to him and say that she really liked him, but where would that get her?

She was flicking aimlessly through a collection of famous villanelles when Will flung open the door to the living room where Lizzy sat reading, and strode in.

Lizzy put her book down.

"Hello," she said, her voice hollow.

She almost thought he'd ignored her, or perhaps he hadn't even seen her, and that would be truly embarrassing… but then she looked at him, and his eyes were fixed on her face.

"I don't know what to do about this," said Will.

Lizzy stared at him.

"Mary said that you — no, that's unfair. Lizzy," he said, and she practically shivered with the way he said her name. Her heart was beating erratically fast. "I thought I was fine with keeping it to myself and living like some quiet martyr, but I'm not. I'm not asking anything of you. I only want to say that — fuck, I don't know, I like you. That sounds inadequate. But — "

He broke off, because Lizzy was kissing him.

He pulled back, terrified that what he'd wanted for so long was really happening. "Lizzy," he said raggedly. "What are you doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" she said, making another bid to capture his mouth with hers. "I realised two days ago that I like you enormously."

"Oh," said Will, opening his mouth, and the rest of his sentence was lost.

A while later, Lizzy said, "I was driving myself crazy trying to figure out how to deal with it. No wonder you've been weird for weeks."

"I've been weird since birth," said Will grudgingly.

Lizzy grinned up at him. "Sorry, I didn't let you finish your speech."

He nipped at her mouth. "It's a good thing you didn't. I was about to say some intense things."

She smiled slyly. "Hadn't you already?"

He felt a warmth swell in his heart; he loved it when she teased him. "I'd do anything for you sounded a bit much," he admitted.

She laughed and pressed her head against his chest. "Maybe. But I'm glad you said them."

Tom hadn't said anything when Lizzy and Will kissed, and now Jane was worried. She peered over at his small, stunned face. "Are you all right?"

"No."
"OK…"

"I'm dead."

That was pretty much it for the evening. Lizzy and Will stayed inside for a while longer, but agreed that everyone would be suspicious if they never came out, and also agreed they wanted to keep things between them secret — at least for a bit. Henry and Mary traded barbs with a powerful undercurrent of sexual tension that made everyone else pretend they were having intense conversations of their own. Later, Henry could be seen paying very marked attention to Fanny, who smiled pleasantly and tried not to look uncomfortable. Louisa chatted to Fred and James but was listened to by the one she less preferred; Lizzy and Will stood in the sidelines when Anne talked to George, and stole secretive glances at each other. Finally, everyone gave up pretending they'd rather be outside than in bed, and trudged up the stairs to the bathrooms.

"You seem happy," said Anne to Lizzy, as they got ready for bed.

Lizzy smiled innocently. "I guess I'm in a good mood."

Anne narrowed her eyes at her friend.

"Right," she said. On another day she might've stared Lizzy down and waited for her to confess, but tonight her head was full of thoughts of Fred. She resolved to go to sleep — the final time she'd have to share a bed with Will, she hoped — and return to the situation with a clear head in the morning.

The episode finished. "Oh, by the way, did you see that thing about Lydia and Wickham?"

"Did I?" said Tom. "Of course. What a dickhead."

"Poor Lydia."

"Wickham is the scum of the earth."

"To get cheating in a club is just foolish," added Jane. She sighed. "Well, they were hardly going to last."

"It's nice that Harriet and Martin are doing well," offered Tom.

"Oh, yeah. I saw that they're moving in together."

"That's nice."

"Do you think? Sometimes that can ruin a relationship."

"We live together," said Tom.

"Yeah, but we don't — we're not dating."

"Yeah, I know."

There was an awkward silence. Jane shifted uncomfortably in her seat; she never had awkward silences with Tom. For as long as she could remember, they had been comfortable around each other. Surely any second now they'd burst into laughter at the same time, repelling the awkward silence back to the abyss it came from…
They didn't.

She swallowed. "Well, goodnight."

"Goodnight."

She sealed the unfinished bag of cashew nuts neatly and binned the Snickers wrappers. "Remember Cassandra!" she said as she walked out the room.

Tom's answer was a noncommittal grunt.

Chapter End Notes

It happened!!!!!!!!!! Finally, our main idiots have made out. Obviously they are only at the beginning of their relationship, but at least it's bloody began. So, of course, I ended with the reminder of a relationship that has not begun.

I am so so (not) sorry for that filthy joke at the end of the first Henry/Mary conversation.

Tell me what you thought, find me on Tumblr and I'll see you w the next chapter v soon!
If You Keep Me Next to You

Chapter Summary

lol it's me again, still alive!! Chapter 22 has some sweet sweet REALISATIONS OF FEELINGS so tune in for that.

Chapter Notes

This is horribly late, I know!! Chapter 24 was being a real dick and the writing of that slowed everything down. But it's done now and I have a solid plan for everything that comes after. Eagle-eyed readers will notice that the total number of chapters has been lowered from 33 to 30, which came as a result of this.

Chapter title from Taylor Swift's 22.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Previously on Down the Isle...

The weeks of tension, ignoring each other, repressed longing and meaningful stares between Will and Lizzy finally ended when after a series of feelings near-misses, Will stormed into the room and told Lizzy how he felt. But elsewhere on the isle, things are a little less resolved. Anne and Fred, ex-high-school-sweethearts, seem not to be headed towards a (romantic) school reunion; rather, they've agreed that what they had was a long time ago, and Fred seems to be moving on to Louisa? Charming rake Henry is pursuing a difficult-to-read Fanny, and all the while trading insults with Mary. As we enter the final week of this year's Down the Isle, who will win your hearts with their summer romance?

Jane was a sensible person, and sensible people did not dwell on infinitesimal events a full day after they happened. But she was.

She wasn't fixated on it, but something about the awkward silence last night when she'd stated, perfectly correctly, that she and Tom weren't dating... it rankled her. And then she thought back to the increasingly often weird moments between them — small things he'd said in conversation that seemed to hold a lot of resentment. Tom was sometimes passive-aggressive, but he usually wavered and told her what was annoying him before long. So perhaps she just had to wait for that.

"You all right?" she asked, when she went into the living room that night. The TV was already on and Tom was on the sofa, engrossed in his phone.

He looked up. "Mm-hmm."

She sat down next to him and opened her bag of Skittles.

"I wonder how Lizzy and Will are going to change," she said, after a few minutes of nothing.
Tom looked up again. "Yeah."

Jane raised an eyebrow. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, I wonder too." He flashed her a grin. "So you see, I was listening."

"Did I say you weren't?" she demanded. This exchange felt normal, which was good. The intro started and she settled into a comfy position on the sofa. "OK, right now, who would you vote to win?"

"Anne and Fred," said Tom immediately.

"They aren't even a couple."

"Pshh," was his articulate reply. "Not technically."

So which burning relationship plot should we tackle first on this fine isle morning? Will, looking happier than ever and stealing glances at Lizzy in middle of a busy kitchen? Anne, who claims to have put it behind her, but is still jumpy around her ex-boyfriend Fred? Or even Fanny, who's spent a whole day now without the person she was closest to on the isle, and is currently being pursued by the gorgeous Henry?

The shrill tones of Yvonne Leblanc-Wu's voice said it would be none of the above.

The contestants looked, and Yvonne stood before them, her feathery peach dress fluttering softly in the air. It was by far the most conventional thing she had worn in the entire month of the show.

"Hello, darlings," she said. "I'm just dropping by to announce that in the recoupling that's to happen tonight, the boys will be picking the girls. Obviously that means one girl will be left over, and she will be dumped from the isle as a result, so pick carefully, boys — don't do what my husbands did! I'll see your beautiful faces tonight!"

Well, that changed everything.

Will found Lizzy in one of the bathrooms shortly after Yvonne's announcement. The door was open but he knocked on it anyway, and enjoyed how her face went from startled to happy when she saw it was him.

"Hello," he said, feeling full of things he wanted to say, and unable to say them all. He tried again. "You look nice today."

Lizzy quirked an eyebrow as she finished applying sun cream to her left arm. "So do you." She smiled at him in a way she hoped wasn't completely pathetic, and held out her sun cream. "Want to do my back?"

"Er," said Will, and visibly swallowed.

Lizzy burst out laughing at his expression. "Will, you look terrified. I swear I'm not trying to trick you."

"I didn't think that," said Will. That was a bit of a lie. He'd lain awake in bed last night replaying what had happened earlier in that room over and over; almost, he felt as if he stopped thinking about it, the memory would float away and cease to become real. It didn't feel real that Lizzy, the brightest
and most vibrant person he'd ever met, actually liked him back. He'd spent so long being fine with the death of the possibility, and now to find out that it was very much alive… it was fizzling his brain.

"Anyway," he said. "I meant to come here and ask if you'd — I mean obviously there's no obligation — if you'd like for me to pick you in the recoupling tonight."

Lizzy felt her heart soften as she looked at this gorgeous man standing in front of her and nervously asking her to accept him, like a gentleman suitor from another time.

"Obviously I'd like you to," she said. His hand was on the table and she reached forward to draw it into hers. "In fact, I'd be pissed if you picked someone else."

There was a flash of a smile, replaced by a familiar frown. "Why is that obvious?" he grumbled, as he rubbed circles on her palm. "Last time I did it, you bit my head off."

"That was before I kissed you," said Lizzy, drawing him closer. He was quite a bit taller than her; she had to lean back to look at him when they were this close. "You haven't forgotten that, have you?"

"Maybe you should remind me again," said Will.

Lizzy obliged.

When they finally broke apart, she leaned against him and smiled. "That was smooth!" she said. "Who knew that Will Darcy had it in him?"

"I'm perfectly capable of initiating a kiss," said Will with dignity. "I'll show you…"

Mary marched out from the villa and into the kitchen. "Will and Lizzy are making out," she announced to everyone who was outside, which was… everyone.

Emma gave a piercing scream; George and Anne high-fived, and most of the other contestants looked bored. For them, this would finally mean an end to all that excruciating sexual tension.

"Taken to voyeurism, Bennet?" drawled Henry, who'd appeared in the kitchen just as Mary was walking towards it.

"Shove off, twatface."

Henry placed a hand over his heart. "I'd always pegged you as a sweet talker."

Mary glared at him. "Are you proud of that innuendo? Shall I erect a statue in your name?"

The need to interrogate Mary outweighed the reluctance to wade into the knee-deep current of UST flowing between her and Henry, and so Emma finally burst out with: "What? Where? Did they see you? How long? Was it like angry making out, or did it seem more romantic? Are they together?"

Mary rolled her eyes. "I don't know, I just saw Will pressing Lizzy up against the bathroom cabinet and I thought, 'Shit, better not interrupt that'."

"Oh my god," said Emma weakly. "So it finally happened."

Anne was smiling. "I'm so glad," she said. "Of course they're together; Lizzy wouldn't kiss him unless she wanted something serious. They're going to be really happy."
The camera panned to a shot of Fred pouring orange juice as he watched Anne's face light up.

"It's about bloody time," said Henry. He pushed himself off the kitchen counter and leaned against the fridge. "The guy wanted her for what, three weeks? Even in the real world, it would never take me three weeks to get a girl."

Mary snorted loudly.

All the other contestants exchanged looks. There was a feeling that this was a nice moment — everyone wanted Lizzy and Will to get together and had begun to think it would never happen — and now Henry and Mary were ruining it with their belligerent sexual tension.

"How should we act when they come out?" asked Louisa. "Do they know we know? Should we pretend that we don't know?"

"If they wanted to keep it a secret, they shouldn't have left the goddamn door open," said Mary.

Ten minutes later, Lizzy walked out of the villa. Everyone looked up and immediately pretended to be doing something else.

She stopped in her tracks.

"Hello," she said cautiously. Anne, George, Emma and James were sat ten feet away and hadn't greeted her. Something was off.

Anne looked up. "Hey, Lizzy!"

Lizzy raised an eyebrow and tried to act like she had nothing to hide. "Hello," she repeated, smoothing down her skirt. "You're all acting really weird."

"Are we?" said Emma, in a voice that was a little too high.

Lizzy looked around at the villa, at the pretence of normalcy, and admitted defeat.

"How did you know?" she asked, slumping into the bean bag next to Anne.

"I saw you," piped up Mary.

"Jesus," said Lizzy. "Will!" she called. "Don't even try to hide; they already know."

Will trooped out of the villa to the sound of hoots and laughter.

"My brother!" said George. "No, actually, I'm really glad for you."

"Thank you," said Will tightly, but he looked pleased.

Emma rolled her eyes. "It's about time too. Do you know how difficult it was to not say anything? And now there's another couple, it means that George and I don't have a clear shot at fifty grand, which does make it more exciting."

"Yes, we're only in it for the money too," said Will.

This was quickly disproved by the way he smiled at Lizzy when she raised an eyebrow.

"Anyway," said Lizzy, tugging onto Will's arm, "we're going to go back inside now."
"Be safe," drawled Henry.

Will gave him the finger as he followed Lizzy back inside.

As usual, on a recoupling day, tensions were high. The fact that the girl left over would be going home made it extra tense. The girls gathered around the swings after lunch — they'd left the boys to argue between themselves who was washing the dishes — and tried to delicately discuss the fact that one of them was leaving tonight.

"It's going to be me," declared Mary. "I'm going to be gone without even snogging someone."

"No, don't say that," said Louisa. "It could be any one of us!" She looked at Emma and Lizzy. "Well, maybe not Emma or Lizzy, but… it could be me, or Anne, or Fanny…"

"No, it's going to be me," said Mary.

There was a silence.

"I think it'll be me," said Fanny, suddenly.

Everyone turned to look at her. Though she'd been on the isle for almost two weeks, most people could count on one hand the number of times they'd spoken to her. They knew it was difficult for her without Edmund here, and some of the girls had offered to talk, but she hadn't taken any of them up on it. They included her in conversations like these, but she rarely participated. This was the first time she'd volunteered something.

"Are you sure?" said Mary, who seemed to relish her role of becoming the only single person on the isle. "Henry's been going after you."

"I don't think he really means it," said Fanny.

Mary blinked. "But he's making an effort. He's being nice to you. What more do you need?"

Again, everyone around Mary exchanged significant glances.

"I — don't know," faltered Fanny. "I just don't think his heart is in it."

Mary rolled her eyes, oblivious to everyone else's thoughts. "Right."

Anne dove in to rescue the situation. "It might be me going home," she offered. "Look, I'm still technically coupled up with Will, but obviously that isn't happening any more." She gave Lizzy a meaningful look and everyone laughed at Lizzy's blush.

"Maybe James will pick you," suggested Emma. "You get on well as friends."

"Oh, fab," said Anne. "Another platonic coupling for me."

It was unlike her to be self-pitying, but she allowed herself to indulge in it today.

"Well," said Louisa. "I think — I hope that Fred's going to pick me. We're only just getting to know each other, but I really fancy him and I think he might like me too."

Opinion was divided on the isle about Fred and Anne. Neither of them had given the impression that their relationship was anything more than that of two long-ago exes, but actions spoke louder than words, and Fred's actions had been to abandon his summer plans to come on a TV show where he'd
be living with his first love. Louisa, after the awkwardness of yesterday, had evidently decided to believe that there was nothing between Fred and Anne any more.

"That's nice," said Emma, not entirely sincerely. Her own shining romance had led her to have gloriously romantic hopes for everyone, and she was completely convinced that Fred's arrival on the isle was because he still loved Anne even after eight years, and wanted her back. Consequently she found Louisa a bit of a pest.

"Anyway," said Louisa. "Why are we all sitting around talking to each other? We should be talking to the boys!" She looked behind her to the kitchen and saw that Fred and James were still finishing up the dishes. "I'm going to go inside, make myself look nice, then talk to Fred."

"I'll come with you," said Mary. "Not that I'm looking nice for anyone except myself."

"I need to get out of the sun," said Anne.

"And me," said Fanny. "I feel a bit hot out here."

This was a gross overstatement: it was at least 30°C. The girls dispersed in various directions, each thinking through different scenarios for tonight. But who will turn out to be right? With an appropriately unthreatening level of tension created, let's now move onto the second burning relationship plot on the isle…

James saw Fred watch Louisa and Anne go inside the villa. He'd also seen Fred watch Anne laugh this morning, and smile to himself when Anne told a story about a recovered patient over lunch. And that was only after he'd started looking out for these things. He was sure that before he'd noticed, there had been countless moments on the four days Fred had been on the isle where it was quite obvious he was transfixed with his ex.

"OK, mate," said James. "What's going on?"

Fred turned around and placed the dried plate in the cupboard. "What?"

"You and Anne," said James. "You keep staring at her and it's getting kinda weird."

Fred scratched the back of his head. "No I'm not."

"Fred, I listened to you talk about her every day for eighteen months. Why are you pretending to be cool?"

"I'm not pretending anything."

"Right," said James. He decided to change tactics. "So you're not going to pick her for the recoupling tonight?"

Fred shrugged. "Nah."

"Nah? The girl you thought was the love of your life, of whom you once said you'd do anything to get back? Are you out of your mind?"

Fred looked torn between dismissing James's questions and spilling his guts.

"We've barely spoken since I've been here," he said in a low whisper. "I can't just pick her and put her into a position where she has to do all this relationship stuff, like share a bed with me. It would be cheating the path to our reconnection. And — ugh," he said. "I want her to choose me, you know? I
can't be that pathetic guy who keeps begging for her to take me back."

"She can't choose you if you haven't even told her that you're an option," said James.

"Obviously I'm an option!" Fred burst out. "What does she think I'm bloody here for? A career as a reality star?" He laughed in spite of himself. "Look, tonight at the recoupling I'll just — I don't know. But I know Anne and I can't just tell her everything — at least not before knowing what she's thinking." His face took on a different expression and he smiled reflexively. "When I asked her out in Year 9, she was so freaked out she avoided me for a week. Finally we were paired together in PE so she had to speak to me."

James frowned. "That was… you're what, twenty-six now? Fred, that was twelve years ago."

"Oh, I know."

"So what?" demanded James. "You want Anne, but you're too afraid to say, so you're going to pick some other girl and lead her on?"

"It's not — it's not as simple as that," said Fred falteringly. "I'm not here to win Anne back, exactly — it's been too long for that. If we did get back together, it would be a completely different relationship. But I did a dumb impulsive thing coming on here and only when I saw her did I realise… maybe there's nothing there any more."

James closed the cupboard for the dishes. "Does Louisa know all this is going on?"

Fred froze. "Oh, God."

"Yeah."

"Shit."

"Yeah."

"These past few days, we've just been friendly," said Fred. "We haven't kissed or anything. You don't think that she — oh shit, you don't like her, do you? I know that at the beginning there was something."

James waved a hand. "Nah, I'm over it. But you need to fix that."

"I have to pick her," said Fred. "I can't let her go home without any opportunities for love because I've been friendly with her and she's put effort into our relationship… oh, fuck, James, I'm a shit person."

"Not really," said James. "So if you pick Louisa, what are you going to do about Anne?"

"Shit," said Fred again. "I've made a right cock-up of everything. Christ, what was I thinking, coming in here on some weird impulse without any idea of what I was doing…"

"I'll tell you what," said James. "Because I'm such a good friend, and because of what happened in the Caribbean, I'll offer to pick Anne."

"Why do you think she'll want to be coupled up with your sorry face?"

"That's the spirit," said James, punching Fred's shoulder. "Obviously I'll ask her. You best hope she likes my face and says yes."
"Not too much," said Fred.

James rolled his eyes. "Chill, I'm not making moves on your girl."

"She's not — "

"She kinda is."

It was hard work, trying to get Fanny Price to like you. Henry was quite sure he'd never worked so hard for a girl in his life, and they were only in the beginning stages.

One could wonder why he was even trying. But he knew perfectly well why he wanted her to like him. Apart from his love for a challenge, Fanny occupied an idea in his head of the woman he needed. What was that saying? A man's darkest fantasy is a good girl? He'd thought that was a load of shit when he'd heard it, but having met Fanny…

He wandered down the corridor on the first floor, looking for her. She spent a lot of time indoors now that Edmund had left, and she was often alone. Henry didn't mind.

She was reading in the living room. He knocked on the open door and smiled when she slammed her book down and looked up at him.

"Hello," he said, leaning against the doorframe with his hands in the pockets of the chino shorts that screamed 'all-male privately educated'. "Good day?"

Fanny smiled, though Henry knew that meant nothing with regards to her feelings for him. She'd smile at Mephistopheles as well. "Fine, thank you."

He smiled back with charm and intent. "Anyway," he said, idly flipping a coin he'd found in his pocket. "With the recoupling tonight, I thought I'd pick you."

She parted her lips. "Oh."

Is that all? Come on, give me something to work with. "Do I take that as a yes, or…?"

"Oh," she said again. "Er, yes, I suppose so. You're the one who gets to choose after all."

"I am," agreed Henry. "But I'd like to know what you're feeling."

"Oh, right. I, er… don't know."

In fact, Fanny did know how she was feeling, but she would sooner tell the whole world than Henry Crawford. It wasn't that she disliked him. He was very kind to her and she appreciated that he was making an effort that most of the other contestants were not. But…

"It's not that I don't like you," she said, and looked down at the book in her lap, wishing that he hadn't come into the room at all.

He nodded stiffly. "I see."

She added, haltingly, "But I wouldn't mind if you picked me tonight."

"You wouldn't mind." He felt an unpleasant taste in his mouth.

"I'd prefer you out of anyone else," she conceded.
Henry knew when he had pushed as much as he could, and somewhere in his mind he felt that the whole endeavour had been a great mistake. "Thank you for telling me," he said. He pushed himself off the frame of the doorway and bowed out. "I'll let you get back to your book."

"Oof," said Tom.

As it happened, Fred didn't need to go and find Louisa, because Louisa found him.

"Hey!" she said, approaching from the villa, as he was dithering in the bedroom trying to work out what to say without revealing too much of the regrets and emotions he'd been carrying around for eight years. "I've been looking all over for you."

He looked up. "Oh, hey. Yeah, I wanted to say something to you too."

She nodded eagerly and sat down on the bed next to him. "I'm listening."

He cleared his throat.

"So it's been really nice getting to know you," he began. "I think you're a really cool person and even if nothing romantic happens between us, we could definitely be friends."

She smiled. "And?"

"And, well, obviously there's the recoupling tonight and the girl left over is going home. I'd hate for that to be you, especially since we've spent all this time together I feel that you've really — well, as I said, I'd hate for you to go. If I pick you tonight… I think it's sensible just to see where things go, you know? It's only been a few days and I know we get along, but I'm perfectly happy if you still want to get to know the other guys. Everything feels so intense in here, but in reality we've only know each other four days."

Louisa nodded. "Of course. You're right, it's only been four days. It's too early to commit to anything."

Fred smiled. "I'm glad you agree."

That was what he thought, and who can blame him, when Louisa had so believable a face on? But as she told him she agreed, in her head she was already imagining scenarios six months into the future, then one year, a diamond ring and a nice house in Wales.

Tom's face looked uneasy.

"I mean," he said. "It's not just me — everyone keeps saying he's on the show for Anne. Isn't he? He can't be serious about Louisa — at least, not in the way she's clearly serious about him."

"But it's the right thing to do to pick Louisa," said Jane.

"Is it?" demanded Tom. He sighed. "I suppose it is. But… ugh."

"Ugh," agreed Jane.
Henry was not in a good mood when he walked out of the villa, and decided to swim a punishing butterfly set to distract himself. He was in an equally bad mood when he finished and dragged himself out of the pool and upstairs to shower, but that was because every muscle in his body ached like the devil. He was towelling his hair and on his way to the kitchen for a mid-afternoon meal when he heard his name being called from behind him inside the villa.

He turned around, and there stood Fanny.

"I haven't been completely honest with you," she said nervously.

He said nothing.

"I really appreciate that you've tried to get to know me," she said. "But I don't think you should pick me tonight."

"OK," said Henry, crossing his arms. "Who do you think I should pick then?"

"I think you should pick Mary," said Fanny.

Henry doubled over in laughter.

"You can't be serious," he said, when he'd recovered enough to talk. "Bennet? She'd castrate me for even trying. No, wait, she'd behead me, then hold my disembodied head at a nice angle so I could watch my own castration." He gave another laugh. "Bennet. You must be joking."

"I'm not joking," said Fanny very calmly. "Henry, I see you when you talk to Mary and it's clear that she commands all of your attention."

"She commands my attention because if I don't give it to her, she'll..."

"She'll what?" asked Fanny softly. "Win the argument? That's important to you, isn't it?"

Henry stared at her. Who knew that quiet, unassuming Fanny Price had such an insight into everyone's feelings?

"And," added Fanny, with the knowledge that she was about to deliver a killing blow, "I miss Edmund."

Well, that clinched it. Henry might have a masochistic streak if he truly did fancy Mary Bennet, but he wasn't going to couple up with a girl who still had the hots for someone else.

"Jesus, OK," he said, holding up his hands. "You don't want me, I get it. That's all you had to say. But there's no need to fucking push me towards Bennet."

"I'm not pushing you anywhere you don't want to go," said Fanny. She smiled kindly at him. "You're a good guy, Henry. I know you aren't mean to her because you dislike her."

Henry had known good guys and was quite sure he wasn't, but whenever Fanny said something, it had the ring of truth. He pushed the disturbing thought of his feelings for Bennet to one side, only for it to bounce back to the front of his mind. Irritated with Fanny and with himself, he made himself a bowl of cereal and ate it broodingly.

When he finished it, he knew what he was going to do.

Will and George, founding members of the sad terrace pining group, now had good reason to
dissolve the society. They still sat on the terrace most evenings anyway.

"I can't really believe it," said Will. His face seemed to be stuck in the expression of a man who couldn't quite believe his luck. "She actually likes me."

"Sap," said George.

"Says you," Will shot back. "How's it going with Emma?"

"Amazing," said George, smiling broadly. "I haven't told her this yet because I'm saving it for a nice occasion, but I really, truly think she's the one. No, wait — I know she is." He looked down at the kitchen. Lizzy and Emma were cooking dinner tonight because it was going to be the last day for one of the girls, and as the two most secure girls on the isle, they wanted to do something nice for the rest of them. "No, wait — I know she is." He looked down at the kitchen. Lizzy and Emma were cooking dinner tonight because it was going to be the last day for one of the girls, and as the two most secure girls on the isle, they wanted to do something nice for the rest of them. "Not," Lizzy had said earlier that day, "because I'm now dating someone and it's my girlfriend's duty to feed him, or any bullshit like that, OK TV audiences?"

"What do you think they're talking about?" asked George.

"Definitely not us."

"No, definitely not."

"Maybe they're talking about the girl who'll be going home today," offered Will. "Who do you think it'll be?"

George hummed. "Mary? I don't know if she's, er, involved with anyone."

"I'm glad it isn't Anne," said Will. "She told me James came up to her earlier and offered to pick her. Apparently it was a really weird moment."

George frowned. "James and Fred are good friends, aren't they? Not as good as us though."

"Definitely not."

"And I know Fred denied it, but there's no way he's not on the isle because of Anne."

Will's brow furrowed as he considered the point. "Are you saying that James is keeping Anne in as a part of an elaborate plot to keep the hope of her and Fred alive?"

"It's like you read my mind."

Tonight's recoupling had a rather bittersweet feel. Everyone had discussed everything, and it was clear that it was between Mary and Fanny. With Henry's interest in Fanny known to all, most people reckoned it would be Mary.

Yvonne appeared attired in her usual flamboyant style and with a flip of her hair, began.

"So," she said. "As I announced earlier today, the girl who is left not in a couple at the end of tonight's recoupling will be going home. Without further ado, if the girls could line up on either side of me?"

George went first, picking Emma, of course. Will picked Lizzy and looked as if he would burst with joy when he said it. Then James picked Anne and Fred picked Louisa, leaving Henry to choose either Mary or Fanny.
For the sake of building up tension, let us take a detour into the mind of Mary. She had long since been prepared for her fate, and short of packing up her suitcase she had been acting to all intents and purposes as if this were her last day on the isle. It would be a cold day in hell when Henry was even nice to her, not to mention saving her from leaving the isle at the price of coupling up with her, Mary, whom he hadn't even dignified with a pretence of romantic interest from the beginning of his time on the isle. Anyway, he was interested in Fanny: he was trying to get her to like him and actually acting nice as a result, which she supposed was good for his character. He was a right arse whenever he was around Mary. Fanny might still be hung up on Edmund, though why him Mary had no clue—but she was still on the isle, wasn't she? If she really liked him then she should've pulled a Frank and left. Speaking of, Mary wondered what was happening with Frank and the other Mary. Were they taking pretty pictures for Instagram together? Had they parted ways the minute they landed in the UK and pretended that Frank's shockingly romantic speech had never happened? She hoped they were happy. If Down the Isle's only success story was Harriet and Martin, whom Mary feared would be together until death came to us all, she'd be very disappointed.

All this thinking meant she missed what everyone else had heard, and heard with shock: Henry Crawford saying her name.

Fanny gave her a gentle nudge and Mary jumped. "What?"

Fanny whispered, "Henry chose you," at the same time Henry drawled, lazily, "I've just saved your arse, Bennet. Wake up."

Mary's head snapped up. "What?"

"Oh, Christ," said Yvonne, stepping forward to take control of the situation. "Mary, darling, Henry has chosen your lovely self to share a bed with tonight, and for many more, we hope. Surely it can't be a great shock. All that delicious sexual tension must be resolved somehow."

Mary's mouth dropped open, but she had an override function which stopped her from making a further mess of an already disastrous situation, and seconds later she was hugging Fanny. Yvonne bowed out gracefully, and all the other contestants stood up and were as affectionate towards Fanny as they felt comfortable being. Most of these interactions were standard, but I'll draw your attention to one I think is especially interesting.

"Thank you," said Fanny, when Henry released her. "You made the right choice."

Henry looked dubiously to where Mary stood with her back to him. "Do you think?"

"Absolutely," she said firmly. "She's just shocked. You haven't been very nice to her, you know."

Being gently criticised by Fanny Price had all the awfulness of being cursed by an angel of God. "I know," he said awkwardly. "Take care, Fanny."

Mary hadn't interrogated the emotionally delicate Fanny for fear of looking like a terrible person, but after Fanny left and the group dispersed across the villa, Mary pulled Henry to one side with the intention of getting a straight answer.

"What the fuck, Crawford?" she demanded. Her cheeks were blazing and she realised that she was actually quite angry. She'd been rather enjoying her bitterness over being the only person on the isle to leave without coupling up, and now… she couldn't be. And that it was Crawford of all people, her nemesis, who'd saved her? It was almost humiliating. This was utterly unexpected, and she needed an explanation. Quickly.
"What the fuck what, Bennet?" said Henry.

Mary told herself that getting angry would just play into his hands. "What the fuck just happened?"

He looked bored as he said: "I picked you, sending dear Fanny home. Don't feel sorry for her. She rather wanted to be gone."

Mary blinked. Of course. Now she felt like a fool, imagining that there was some greater explanation behind it all.

"Well," she managed to say, "you could've told me you were doing it for Fanny."

Henry rolled his eyes. "Can't your low self esteem countenance any other reason?"

"I do not have low self esteem," snapped Mary. "And if I did, it wouldn't be any of your concern."

"Of course not," said Henry amusedly. "Well, if that's all?"

"That's all," said Mary, gritting her teeth.

She knew she shouldn't, but she watched him saunter off anyway. Tonight, she decided, she was bringing an army of pillows to bed. Nothing would get past that barrier.

Lizzy, Will, George and Emma had watched Mary and Henry's chat with eager-eyed interest, and now they (or more accurately, Emma) were dissecting the situation. Meanwhile, George had never taken Will for a demonstrative boyfriend, but he was playing with Lizzy's hair as Emma spoke.

"I should've known something was going on between them!" she said. Her head was against George's chest so she turned around so she could look at him. "George, didn't I say ages ago that Henry was different when he was talking about Mary?"

"I'm sure you did," said George blankly, who had no idea if Emma had said something like that or not.

Emma gave a dramatic sigh. "So you don't hang onto my every word," she said. "Lies, damned lies. You've got this to look forward to, Lizzy."

Will scowled and Lizzy laughed.

"There's definitely tension between them," Lizzy agreed. "You can't hate someone as much as Mary claims to hate Henry without actually liking them."

Will tugged on one of Lizzy's curls, done specially by Emma. "Speaking from experience?"

"Maybe," admitted Lizzy. "But you were showing me romantic interest, whereas Henry and Mary have been mutually sniping at each other since they arrived."

"Maybe you should've been meaner to Lizzy," suggested George. "Then she might've realised she liked you sooner."

Lizzy felt her cheeks go warm. "I don't think that would've worked," she said. She looked up at Will. "Speaking of Mary… you know, I actually thought you liked her."

"Mary?" said Will bewilderedly. "Why?"
"Oh, come on," said Lizzy. "At least I didn't say someone impossible like Louisa."

"But Mary," persisted Will.

"You went on a date!" Lizzy protested.

"Right, but that was just — "

"And you said you liked her! Right in front of me!"

"As a friend," said Will, laughing. "Lizzy, I had no idea you were in so much turmoil."

"Well, I was," she said, laying her head against his shoulder. Then she shot up. "Hang on. During that conversation, Henry was being unnecessarily arsey about Mary."

"So he does like her!" said Emma triumphantly, with what was definitely a non-sequitur. "I knew it."

"And I always thought that going after Fanny was a bit of a weird move," said Lizzy. "It makes much more sense that Henry likes Mary."

George and Will exchanged a look of confused amusement at these conclusions drawn about Henry from two people who barely knew him.

"So," said Lizzy. "What do we do?"

Emma sighed. "Nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing? Emma, don't you love getting involved in people's business?"

"I do," said Emma mournfully. "But I think I'm cursed. Anyway, this won't be nearly as hard as not getting involved in you and Will."

Lizzy was sure that her cheeks had an embarrassing red tinge to them. "What?"

"They knew," said Will. "Well, they knew my side."

"Anne knew about Lizzy too," said Emma.

"Splendid," said Lizzy into Will's shoulder. "So everyone knew what an idiot I was being."

"You weren't. Between us, I was the idiot," said Will.

Emma yawned, and George looked around at the now deserted outside and checked the time. "It's pretty late," he said. "I think it's time we headed up."

"You two go on ahead," said Lizzy. "Will and I are going to stay a little longer."

"All right, see you up there," said George. He nudged Emma and she made a dissatisfied noise, which he took to mean she wanted him to carry her all the way upstairs. Sighing performatively, he hoisted her legs over one arm and tucked the other under his neck. Lizzy laughed as he marched away into the villa.

And now it was just her and Will.

"This has been my favourite day in here so far," he said softly.

She leaned against him and felt him move against her so she fit more snugly. It was remarkable how
quickly they were at ease with each other. "Mine too," she said. "I don't think I've said it in so many words yet, but I like you quite a lot."

"That's lucky."

"It is." She smiled up at him. "I'm sorry I was such an idiot for so long."

"Don't be," he said firmly. "If you weren't, we wouldn't be where we are now."

"Ha!" said Lizzy. "So you admit I was an idiot!"

Will looked horribly conflicted. "Well," he said finally, "maybe a bit."

"A lot."

"A bit," he said in a tone of finality. "I'm not usually fond of idiots."

"It's nice that I'm the exception," said Lizzy.

"You always were," said Will.

In the villa, people were getting ready for bed. Fred was worrying over how to behave with Louisa; Emma and George had snuck away to a camera blind spot; Mary was approaching this night as if it were a military campaign. But the camera chose for its final shot the picture made by Will and Lizzy, still sat outside and bathed in a warm glow by the electric candles, whilst around them everything was still.

Tom wiped an imaginary tear off his cheek. "That was quite lovely."

"I do like Will and Lizzy," said Jane. "Of course, now they're going to be resolutely happy."

"Do you think?"

"They have a way about them," she said. "And Lizzy seems like someone with a talent for happiness." She sighed. "I almost envy her."

Tom booped her nose. "Don't say that. I'd pick you over her any day."

"Oh, wonderful, the validation of a man," said Jane sarcastically. "On that low note, I'm going to bed."

"Have a good one," said Tom.

Jane had already rounded the corner outside the living room door, but she ducked her head back round. "What?"

"Have a good one," said Tom. "A good night's sleep. Can't I wish you well?"

I threw in that closing Will/Lizzy moment just for all of you who kept telling me the slow burn was killing you.

I'm super into Henry Crawford/Mary Bennet even if no one else is, and I'll drag this dead horse around with me whether people like the smell or not. But I hope you do. I've tried to leave enough out that it has an element of intrigue, though it's pretty obvious.

Anyway, it's my birthday on Tuesday, so if you want to send me any nice messages… my inbox is always open xoxo
This Burning House, There's Nothing Left

Chapter Summary

Hello folks I am back after a shorter delay than last time with a chapter that will shock your socks! Someone explodes about unresolved feelings from an old relationship, and it isn't Fred!!!!!!

Chapter Notes

God I know the delay between chapters is horrible but at least I won't abandon this.
Title from Miley Cyrus and Mark Ronson's collab Nothing Breaks Like a Heart because it's a banger.

Previously on Down the Isle…

With six girls and five boys, the girl not chosen in last night's recoupling was going to be sent home. Aside from our established couples (George and Emma, and Will and Lizzy) Fred picked Louisa (for noble, not feelings reasons), James picked Anne, and Henry, who'd been paying Fanny not a little amount of attention, shocked everyone by picking Mary. Some will say that he was just doing what Fanny wanted (having been split from Edmund, Fanny decided her time on the isle was up). Some will also say that Fred didn't go on the isle on an Anne-related impulse, and now he's making a mess of things because he went in without a clue of what he was doing. Who knows? At any rate it's another day in paradise, and anything could happen…

"I don't get it," said Cassandra, folding her arms. "I thought Fred and Anne used to go out and he came on this ridiculous show to win her back."

"He did," said Tom. He popped a grape into his mouth.

"That's just what we think," said Jane. "Though he basically said as much last episode."

Cassandra ate her apple dispassionately. "So why is he with another girl?"

"Because," said Tom, exhaling loudly, "last episode it was the recoupling and the girl left over would get dumped from the isle, and Fred realised he had to pick Louisa because he'd been unintentionally leading her on and didn't want her to get dumped."

"As ridiculous as it sounds," said Jane, "Tom's right."

"Right," said Cassandra icily. "But why couldn't the guy who picked Anne just pick Louisa?"

Jane and Tom looked at each other and blinked.
"Hmm."
"Good point."
"No, well, because…"
"Oh, because Fred didn't want to be too obvious about Anne," said Jane.
"Jesus," said Cassandra, slouching down the sofa.

Anne was third wheeling again this morning. She'd just settled down to have breakfast with Lizzy when Will appeared all freshened up from his run, and Lizzy had patted the seat next to her. So now Anne had to answer questions about her feelings in front of Will as well, but really she didn't mind, because it probably would've got around to Will anyway.

"So it was silly of anyone to ever think that he — that he came here with me in mind," she finished.

Lizzy and Will exchanged a look, and Anne felt a weird pang of jealousy that Will and Lizzy had only known each other for a month and had been together for three days, and already they were having entire conversations through looks.

She pushed it aside. "What?"

"Well," began Lizzy. "How do you know? Have you asked him?"

"Have I — are you insane? I can't just ask him how he feels about me!"

"Why not?" said Lizzy, eating her toast. "That's what I should've done with Will."

Will nodded stoically and Lizzy grinned.

"That's different," said Anne patiently. "Everyone knew that you two liked each other. Fred obviously doesn't care for me any more if he's coupled up with someone else!" She clamped her mouth shut — she'd said too much. Put simply, she didn't want him if he didn't want her. And he clearly didn't, so…

"Anyway," she continued. She sipped her peppermint tea. "Maybe when we leave the isle, I'll meet a perfect guy who's fallen in love with me through the small screen, and I'll just — "

She stopped, because Fred and Louisa had suddenly appeared in the kitchen from the villa, and he was leaning in to whisper something in her ear — what, was she hard of hearing? — and then Anne forced herself to look away.

"Morning," Fred called to the group at large.

Anne was forced to respond.

Lizzy launched into a monologue on Fanny's surprising exit last night as Will watched Fred and Louisa with the eyes of a hawk. In between Lizzy's stream-of-consciousness about the Henry/Mary situation, Anne caught glimpses of Louisa's laugh and Fred's low, warm voice saying ordinary things to another girl. Eventually they left for the patio, and Anne relaxed.

"What an arsehole," said Lizzy fiercely. "That was so clearly, so shamelessly demonstrative — he clearly wants to make you jealous."
"Or," said Anne, "he's happy in his new coupling and wants to normalise the idea of me seeing him in a relationship with someone else."

Will looked between the two of them and frowned. "Anne, didn't you say you and Fred were long over? I don't understand why there's a problem."

"Of course you don't, Fitzwilliam," said Lizzy affectionately. She had discovered that Will's full name was Fitzwilliam last night, had been equal parts horrified and delighted, and decided that she would use it as often as possible. "But our dear Anne is in a spot of denial."

"I'm not still in love with Fred," said Anne calmly. "It's just difficult to see him again, and for him to have someone else."

She considered the truth of this statement as Lizzy squeezed her hand consolingly. Of course she wasn't still in love with Fred. But being on the isle with someone was a closer intimacy than even living together — of course she and Fred had never lived together, but the way she was coming to know him now was much more intense than if they'd merely met again in the course of their normal lives.

She hadn't been in love with Fred for most of the last eight years. But here she was in horrible danger of falling in love with him all over again.

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"I don't like this Fred," said Cassandra as she ate her takeout noodles with disdain. "If you two are right and he likes Anne, why is he going around with that other girl?"

"Because," said Tom emphatically, "he's trying to make her jealous."

Cassandra gave the most disdainful snort Tom had ever heard in his life.

"Jane?" she asked sarcastically. "Can you come up with anything better than that?"

"Unfortunately not," said Jane. "Tom's right. Fred obviously feels something for Anne, otherwise he wouldn't try to catch her eye all the time, but — "

Cassandra held up the hand not currently holding chopsticks. "I've heard enough."

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After breakfast, Mary found that she couldn't hold it in any more, and dragged Lizzy away from where she was laughing about something with Will.

"What," said Lizzy.

Mary cleared her throat. "So. There was, a bit of a, ahem, situation this morning in bed."

Lizzy raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, come on," said Mary. "You know what I mean."

"I assure you I don't."

"Fuck you, Lizzy. Fine. I woke up and Crawford had a boner, his arm was around my waist and also his face was mushed into my neck."

Lizzy drank her juice very calmly. "So?"
"So?" demanded Mary. "This is Crawford. We can't be waking up all —" shudder — "affectionate."

"Yes, a boner is so affectionate."

"He murmured something into my neck as he was waking up, Lizzy!" said Mary. "That means something!"

Lizzy frowned. "Does it?"

Mary hadn't quite realised that Lizzy was employing psychological tricks on her designed to probe to the root of her feelings for Henry, but she sensed something was going on nonetheless. "Fine, be unhelpful." She started to storm off. Lizzy snatched onto her shirt sleeve and dragged her back.

"Could it be, Mary," said Lizzy, "that somewhere, deep down, you fancy Henry?"

Mary felt her blood run cold in her veins at the very thought. "No."

"No?" Lizzy shrugged. "I'm just saying, there's a lot of unnecessary antagonism for a really hot guy. I know part of why I was so furious at Will in the beginning was because I desperately wanted him to like me and didn't want him to know I cared."

Mary scoffed and tilted her chin up. "That's hardly what's happening here. It's very necessary antagonism. I don't like Crawford because he's an arrogant dickwad who only cares about himself."

"He cared about Fanny, since he let her leave the isle."

"Let her leave?" demanded Mary. "Oh, yes, so magnanimous of him, to not hold a girl hostage."

Lizzy stared at Mary and said nothing.

"You're insane," said Mary dismissively. "All anyone on this bloody show thinks about is romance. Hate is a perfectly valid emotion that we're all ignoring."

Lizzy deemed it useless to argue any further with Mary. She'd obviously sought out Lizzy's opinion for something, even if she couldn't admit it to herself. Clearly nothing Lizzy said would go through to her head.

"Good talk," said Lizzy, slapping Mary on the shoulder like a basketball coach trying to show support after a team huddle. "Now I'm going to go and make a boozy lunch for everyone."

They ate a late lunch on the usual long table. At Anne's end were James, Fred and George. Fred hadn't sat next to Louisa, but neither was he next to her. He mostly spoke to Will who sat on his other side.

"I wonder what's happening with Frank and Mary," said James, who was next to her. "It feels like ages but actually it was only three days ago. Do you think it's going to work between them?"

"I think it could!" said Anne, as she sipped her third mimosa of the hour. She was in a bright, chatty mood now and felt much better than the abject misery of last night and this morning. "He cares about her and they've got loads in common."

"But they don't have much of a basis," said James. "The point of this show is to create an environment where you can focus on a relationship, right? Then you go out into the real world together. Frank and Mary didn't even have that before they left."
"Come on, relationships aren't that logical," said Anne, laughing. "People make it work in the real world all the time."

"I'm just saying, they've kind of missed their opportunity to —"

Fred had been listening to them and now he cut in, saying: "I think you're forgetting one thing. Does she even care about him?"

Anne missed the glance George shot in her direction because she was staring at Fred. "That isn't the only reason why a relationship might not work," she said, feeling surprisingly heated. "There are external factors."

"Are they as important as love?" he demanded.

"For some people, yes!" This was the first time since forever he was really looking at her, clear-eyed and challenging, and after four days of being around him and not saying anything, she finally lost it. "We can't all be like you, Fred." Her heart was hammering and the words spilled freely out of her mouth. She'd rehearsed this moment thousands of times in her head and finally, finally, he was here and listening to her. "Some of us are sensible and practical. And you were the idealistic one — why didn't you do anything?"

She took a deep, gasping breath, and heard silence. Suddenly she realised that all talk on the other end of the table had stopped, and everyone was listening to her yell at Fred. A cold bead of sweat ran down her back, and in front of her was the disaster of what she'd done. She couldn't look at him — couldn't look at anyone. Oh, this was too awful. Anne Elliot: sensible, responsible, level-headed paediatrician was screaming at her teenage ex-boyfriend on national television. The entire country, and more importantly her younger sister, would finally know how things ended between her and Fred. And he would think — oh, god —

But she did have wonderful friends, who swooped in like the emergency services to distract everyone from the fuck-up she had executed. "Shit," said Lizzy, smiling genially at everyone. "So the mimosas were a bad idea."

"I told you so," said Emma. "But you didn't listen."

Lizzy rolled her eyes. "I wasn't going to make mocktails. This isn't a family gathering. There are no aunties to judge me here."

Everyone was so relieved that someone had drawn the attention away from the clearly huge emotional disaster going on with Anne and Fred that an argument about the best cocktail immediately sprang up; simultaneously, they tried to finish their lunch as fast as possible.

For her part, Anne spent two more minutes at the table wishing for a pit to open beneath her chair and welcome her into its muddy depths, before Lizzy stood up and Anne could honourably flee the table. She went straight inside to the living room that no one really went to during the day, and buried herself under all the sofa throws she could find.

What the hell had she been thinking? No, that was the wrong question to ask: she hadn't been thinking at all. She had been quite tipsy and already emotional from seeing Fred with Louisa that morning, and suddenly all her habits of burying her feelings and pretending they'd decomposed under her pride decided they'd had enough.

She had to do some damage control, of course. She'd talk to Fred, say that she was drunk, she was feeling weird being holed up in this place and she'd said things she didn't mean. Because she didn't
mean to say them. She didn't want to drudge up the past. She wanted to pretend it had never happened and that it had no impact on her any more.

It was all so difficult, and she wished Fred hadn't come, and she wondered if Mary C had done the smartest thing by leaving.

After the drama of that lunch — Anne was the last person Mary had expected to get drunk and rant about her feelings — Mary went inside to freshen up her eyeliner. She stopped in her tracks when, on the way to the bathroom, she stepped into the bedroom.

"Hi," she said warily. Henry was laying on their (ugh) bed and looking… glum. She swallowed and approached the bed. "Are you all right?"

"Fantastic, Bennet," said Henry, sarcasm dripping from his words like chocolate syrup over ice cream.

And just like that, all of her trepidation fled. "You're obviously not," Mary shot back. "Spit it out, Crawford. What's wrong?"

"Fuck, Bennet, with a bedside manner like that, who could resist telling you everything?"

Mary shrugged and acted as if she didn't care that he'd rejected her offer to help. "Suit yourself. I'm not your therapist."

There was something in the way she said it that made Henry not want to dismiss her, so he said: "You really don't know?" Her blank face indicated that she didn't. "I'm sad about Fanny leaving. Obviously."

Mary blinked. "Oh."

His lip curled. "You thought I didn't care about her."

"No, I just — I didn't think you were screwing with her or anything. I just didn't know you cared enough to be sad."

Henry propped his arms behind his head and lay back against the pillows. "Shockingly, Bennet, someone as carelessly attractive as myself does indeed suffer from feelings."

Mary felt that somehow, despite his vulnerability about his feelings, Crawford had the upper hand in this conversation. "I don't know why you're trying to make me feel guilty for not thinking you cared deeply about Fanny," she said. "It's not like you were ever expressive about it."

"So because I didn't talk about my feelings in front of the whole isle, it means they weren't real?"

"That's not what I meant," she said, and was surprised to find herself almost angry. "If you really liked her, why did you choose me?"

"If you love something, let it go."

A beat.

"You just can't resist fucking with me," she said, glaring at the sarcastic smile that was spreading over Henry's face. "See you later, Crawford."

She sailed out and shut the door behind her.
Emma and George were talking about their future in the way of two teenagers waxing rhapsodical about ruling the world.

"Two girls, one boy," said Emma, retying her ponytail as she lay partly on George, partly on the bean bag. "That's my final offer. And I'm going to be doing the pregnancy-having, so I think I should have the final say."

George laughed. "But you can't control it anyway."

"I can," said Emma, and her face looked determined. "But not until I'm at least twenty-eight, OK?"

George sighed. "I'll be thirty-six. That's practically ancient."

Emma shrugged. "Your problem, old man. And you'll move to London, right?"

"Right," said George, laughing. "Come on, York's beautiful. There's Norman ruins and a medieval street right in the town centre…"

Emma's cheeks had taken on the slightest red tinge. She moved away from him as she said, "You can't seriously expect me to leave London for York."

George raised an eyebrow. "Or vice versa for you."

They stared at each other.

"I can't believe we've never talked about this," said Emma, in a tone of almost wonderment. Things had been so easy, so effortless between her and George, that she'd almost forgotten how difficult a relationship could be. It didn't help that they were living in a beautiful summer villa away from all their responsibilities.

"We're talking about it now," said George. "London, Emma? Really? It's so claustrophobic and loud and busy, always."

"Oh no, it's busy," she teased. She did a purposefully bad imitation of his voice. "I'm George Knightley and I like peace and quiet."

"I'm serious," he said. "I hate London. I went there for uni and never want to live there again."

"But you can't expect me to give it up for you," said Emma slowly. "That's where my firm is, it's where my friends are. My dad lives just outside in Surrey. It's non-negotiable."

"No, that's not — of course I don't want you to give up something important to you," said George. "But how is this going to work in the real world? We've got just over a week here; we have to think about it."

"We'll figure it out," said Emma, though she only saw one solution. The thought of her leaving London was impossible. "Maybe you can start off visiting me, and you'll change your mind."

George gave her a very hard look.

"So in your mind, I have to make all the sacrifices."

"Sacrifices?" spluttered Emma. "It's not a sacrifice to live in the best city in the world."

There was a silence.
"So what?" asked George. "That's it?"

"I — I guess so," said Emma confusedly. For once, she had no idea what to say.

He looked at her very sharply again, then got up and left.

"George!" she said, but his retreating figure didn't slow. Everyone was looking at her but she didn't care. "George!" When he showed no sign of stopping, she got up and ran after him. She reached him just as he went into the villa.

She pulled him by the arm and turned him to look at her. "George," she said. "You can't just leave in the middle of a discussion."

"I don't think that was a discussion, Emma," said George. "I think it was you expecting to get your way, as always."

He didn't need to shrug her off; her hand left his arm and he went into the villa.

"Oh no," said Tom, looking despondent. "Not George and Emma! But I have faith they'll work it out. I have to. If they don't, there's no hope for any of us."

Cassandra flattened her empty box of noodles and tossed it in the bin. "So these people have known each other for less than a month, and they're already in love and planning their lives together?"

"Well, not all of them," said Tom. "But Emma and George are so clearly it for each other. And a month isn't that short."

"When would you say is too long, Tom?" asked Cassandra. "About five years?"

Jane couldn't tell why, but something about this squabble was different from the usual disagreement between her sister and her best friend. "Be nice, Cass."

"I'm being an angel," said Cassandra.

Tom shook his head exaggeratedly when she turned away from him; Jane tried to hide her smile.

Upstairs in the villa, Anne had stopped wishing she could erase that lunch hour from everyone's memory. After Lizzy's pep talk in which she'd tried to convince Anne that she actually hadn't irrevocably embarrassed herself in front of everyone she knew, she'd wrapped herself in layers of humiliation and regret until she felt paralysed, at which point she went to have a nap. Two hours later she'd woken up resigned to the mess she'd made.

Then Fred knocked on the door, and her resignation was replaced by panic.

"Hi," he said, clearing his throat awkwardly. "Um, I came in to talk to you earlier, but you were sleeping and I didn't want to disturb you."

"That's OK," said Anne, whose voice felt very tight in her chest. "Er. Obviously we should talk. Or at the least, I owe you an explanation."

He smiled beautifully and Anne felt her heart slowly ease away from the safety of her grasp. "We can chalk it down to a moment of madness, if you want."
"I do," said Anne miserably. "But you wouldn't believe me, would you?"

Fred smiled at her wryly.

Anne took a deep breath. "Um, so I obviously — have a lot of feelings about our breakup. Probably because it was so sudden and we never talked after it happened."

Fred didn't say anything.

"But I only said those things today because I was tipsy and it was so strange to see you with someone else, and being here is so difficult and intense. I'm not still — you know. I'm a different person from who I was eight years ago."

It was hardly an explanation. Anne knew very well that from the way she had spoken at lunch, it sounded as if the wound was still open. But she wasn't ready to have the open conversation she knew she probably ought to have with Fred, and sticking a plaster over it would do for now.

"You were always terrible when you were drunk," said Fred, smiling ruefully. "Do you remember in Year 12, Charlie M's New Year's party?"

Anne covered her face in her hands. "Nothing will ever erase that memory."

"You were amazing," said Fred. "I've never heard Taylor Swift sung with so much…"

"Poor decision making?"

"So much charm," he said softly, and Anne blushed.

She couldn't just leave it there.

"We used to be so close," she said quietly. "I know it's mostly my fault for ending things. We both knew, though, that you were the idealistic one — why didn't you do more? For us?"

It would've been so easy to drop his voice, to ask: "Do you wish I had?" and wait as she held his fate in her hand. But he couldn't be sure of what she'd say and he couldn't face the possibility of being shut down again. So he said, "I was proud. I thought if you didn't want me, I didn't want to beg."

Anne nodded.

"Anyway," she said, backing away, again. "I'm just feeling a bit crazy today. What I said earlier, that's all — that's all in the past. And you have something with Louisa, so that's good." She smiled at him and hoped he could no longer see through her. "Anyway, now we've finally talked about it, it'll be much easier to be friendly around the villa."

Fred smiled and said everything that was appropriate. When he left the room, instead of going down to the garden, he went upstairs to the terrace. He liked to sit here and look at the glittering sea, and further inward was the villa: the luxurious, private, warped place he'd been living in for almost a week.

Foolishly, he'd felt hopeful during Anne's drunken outburst at lunch. She was too kind to hate him for in some ways goading her on, but he needed to hear what she wanted to say; he wanted to hear it. He wanted to know if she'd felt shit for months after their breakup too. He wanted to know that she cared enough to still blame him or herself, or both.

If all she wanted was to be friendly, then clearly she didn't.
At the same time Fred was standing on the terrace and brooding, Louisa — I trust you, unlike Fred, have not forgotten about her — had had enough. The guy she was coupled up with, i.e. the guy she was supposed to be getting to know and forging the path to a romantic relationship with, was all over another girl. Well. She corrected herself. Fred wasn't all over Anne. But Anne clearly still had feelings for Fred, and Louisa wasn't going to chase after a guy who wanted someone else.

It would've put too much pressure on what she had with Fred if she went to talk to him about it, so that late that afternoon she went to find Anne instead.

"Can I talk to you?" she asked, when she saw Anne come out of the villa.

Anne looked surprised but she nodded. Louisa led her to the empty swing set.

"So I'm not like, trying to challenge you or anything," said Louisa. "If you want to pursue things with Fred, that's fine. But I just wish you'd told me! I don't want to go after the guy you want, and obviously you and Fred have history, and I just feel like I can't compete with his first love that he never got over, you know?"

Not for the first time, Anne felt the overwhelming demand of having to talk about your feelings in this place, though she supposed it was her own fault for signing up to it.

"Louisa," Anne began. "Fred hasn't — no one's said anything about us getting back together. That's so far away from where we are right now. Anyway, he's coupled up with you."

"Sure," said Louisa, "but he doesn't act like it. I know I've asked you before, but are you sure there's nothing going on between you? You don't still…"

"Positive," said Anne weakly. "My outburst at lunch — I was a bit drunk and just said some stupid things. We talked about it afterwards and agreed we're friendly."

"Right," said Louisa uncertainly. Then she put on a bright smile. "Well, good! It would've been so awkward if you were still in love with him or something."

This, Anne could deny with a clear conscience. She certainly was not. But she hadn't told Louisa the complete truth — and how could she? She didn't even know the truth herself. She was nervous and embarrassed and terrified, and wished awfully that Fred would just ignore her and fall madly in love with someone else. That would hurt, but it would be manageable. Instead, sometimes she felt him looking at her, and sometimes she couldn't help but meet his eyes, and memories of what it used to be like came flooding through her mind and washing away all her sense.

Eight years ago, she'd done the sensible thing. Who would bet on a teenage relationship going the distance? If they'd stayed together, Anne knew they'd drift apart, and lose time for one another, and grow to resent each other.

Only now… those obstacles were gone, weren't they?

Dinner was slightly tense, but no one got drunk and made a scene. Anne and Fred sat very far from each other.

"Do you think," Lizzy said to Will that evening, lounging on the day bed, "that I should talk to Anne?"

Will frowned. "Because she got a bit drunk at lunch?"
"Yes," said Lizzy, sighing dramatically, "and because she all but said that she still wasn't over her breakup with Fred, which happened eight years ago. Like, what would you say if your school girlfriend asked you hysterically why you didn't stop her from breaking up with you?"

"Is that rhetorical, or do you actually want me to answer that?"

Lizzy grinned and propped herself up on her elbow to look at him. "Yeah all right, let's hear it."

Will scratched the back of his head. "Er, well, actually, Cressida dumped me."

Far from the jealousy any sane woman might feel about her boyfriend talking about his ex, Lizzy's only response to this was delight. "Cressida?"

"It's not her fault," said Will. "It was a family name."

"I don't know why I should be surprised," said Lizzy, shaking her head sadly. "Fitzwilliam is far worse."

"Anyway," said Will, feeling they ought to get back to the matter at hand. "What were you planning on saying to Anne?"

"I don't know," said Lizzy. "It's obviously not 'all in the past' if she got that fired up about the breakup. I mean, I've never seen Anne like that, ever."

"I don't know what you can do," said Will. His face softened and he said, almost shyly, "When I was pining for you, no one could've talked to me and actually convinced me to do something."

"The repression was that deep, huh?"

"It was a burden."

Lizzy laughed and Will felt the familiar kick in his stomach at the sound. I'm afraid for them, all thought of Anne's upset over Fred was momentarily forgotten.

And so the night passed without great event: Anne and Fred stayed away from each other as usual; Henry and Mary were, for the first time, not openly argumentative; and Emma went up to bed early. She was already tucked in when George went up to bed, also quite early. She idly considered pretending to already be asleep, but fifteen seconds in and she couldn't take it. Only she and George were in the room when she sat up.

"Are we fighting?" she asked.

George looked taken aback for a moment, and then his face slid into a cautiously affectionate smile. "Only you would say something like that."

"Are we?" asked Emma, and her voice sounded much more fragile than he'd ever heard it. "Because you walked away earlier, and I don't know what that means, other than you don't want to talk. But if you don't want to talk, what does that mean for us?"

"I do want to talk," said George. He added, wryly, "But only if you stop and let me."

Emma stopped.

"We don't have to decide everything immediately," he said.
"Of course not!"

"We have only known each other a month. It's been a weird month, but still. In the real world, it would be crazy to talk about moving in together."

"I know," said Emma quickly. She'd thought and thought about what she'd done wrong earlier, and now she was determined not to be pushy. "It's crazy. I was too forward and demanding, and I'm horribly embarrassed about it. Let's just take each day as it comes."

George raised an eyebrow, clearly suspicious of Emma's sudden transformation into a relaxed, easygoing person. "Really?"

Emma teetered: her being herself was what had landed them into this argument in the first place. But this was George — if she couldn't be completely herself around him, what was the point?

"No," she admitted, and he nodded expectantly. "But I know I shouldn't have assumed what you wanted. I'm sorry. I'm not a very empathetic person," she added cautiously. "I have a hard time thinking outside of myself."

"I know," said George, smiling. "And I'm sorry for saying that you always get your own way, as if you were some spoilt child."

Emma sighed dramatically, and they both knew everything was good again.

"But," said George, "we are going to have that conversation again some day."

Emma smiled reflexively. "We are?"

"Of course," said George. "I mean, I would've only wanted to have today's awful conversation with you."

"I love you," said Emma, and feeling like her heart would burst.

The rest of the isle traipsed into the bedroom about half an hour later, and were relieved to find Emma and George in bed but only talking. The lights went off at midnight as they usually did, and everyone went to sleep.

Mary lay next to Henry and forced herself to do what she'd been thinking about for hours.

"Crawford?" she whispered, low enough that no one else would hear, and low enough that if he was just pretending to be asleep, he could conceivably pretend not to hear as well.

He didn't say anything back, and she felt like a fool.

Oh, fuck it. She'd been in an apologetic mood all day and needed to get it out of her system. If he couldn't hear her, then so much the better.

"I'm sorry," she whispered softly.

On the other side of the bed, turned away from where she could see him, Henry smiled.

"So, Cass," said Tom. "Your first episode of Down the Isle! What did you think?"

"Don't call me Cass," said Cassandra.
Tom shrugged.

"Well," said Cassandra, "firstly, the title is stupid. They're not getting married at the end, are they?"

"It's a highly sophisticated pun," said Tom with dignity.

Jane snorted. "Tom thinks sophistication is when you pour beer into a glass," she told her sister, who laughed cruelly. Tom folded his arms and glared at Jane.

"The whole thing is just very... unlikely," Cassandra continued. "I'm still not convinced Fred isn't a fraud, but also: what's Anne's problem? She's clearly wracked with jealousy and confusion. Just unleash it."

"It can be hard to talk about your feelings," said Tom with dignity.

At Cassandra's eye roll, Jane sensed another argument incoming, and interceded. "But I think Emma and George's story this episode was really good. Touching on how it's meant to work outside the isle."

"I suppose," said Cassandra, suppressing a yawn. "Do we really have to watch this every night?"

"Yes," said Jane and Tom in unison.

Cassandra rolled her eyes. "Fine. But I'm going to make judgemental comments the whole time. Anyway, I'm shattered. Goodnight."

After Cassandra was gone, Tom flopped into the sofa and said, "I think she's growing to like me."

Jane snorted. "In your dreams."

He grinned. "Cassandra isn't the Austen sister I dream about."

Jane blinked. That was too cheesy — surely he didn't —

"Didn't I tell you about the time I dreamt you locked me out of the flat for three days and I learnt guitar and busked just to survive?"

Oh. "Prat," said Jane, swatting his head. Then Cassandra shouted that she was done in the bathroom and someone else could use it. Tom yielded to Jane, who went, and left him sat on the sofa by himself.

There had been something about the look on her face when he'd said that about her in his dreams; she'd looked shocked, but in a kind of guilty way, in the way of someone who'd held back thoughts they didn't want anyone suspecting.

Of course, it could just be nothing, and Tom would be making a horrible fool of himself if he ever said or did anything.

Chapter End Notes

Much love to both London and York.

If it isn't already clear, my Fred and Anne are rather different to the book. The reason
why Fred isn't full of bitterness is because I find it hard to see how that emotion would fuel him to go on Down the Isle. Also, being young and in love in the early 21st century is very different to being young and in love in the early 19th, and I think in this version a part of Fred agreed with Anne that they should break up at the end of school.

Find me @loversinfiniteness on Tumblr and I'll be back soon!
I Saw You Dancing in the Gym

Chapter Notes

So this chapter was a bitch to write. But like the prodigal son, I am back. This chapter is dedicated to marinams and the dear anon on Tumblr who replied to my calls of help regarding Spanish translation. Title from Don MacLean's American Pie.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Previously on Down the Isle...

After a recoupling two nights ago when Fanny decided to go home, leaving Henry to couple up with Mary, things haven't exactly been romantic with the new couple. In fact, Mary seems to hate him, and Henry doesn't seem to want to correct her. But by far the most dramatic thing to happen yesterday was when, a little tipsy at lunch, Anne blew up at Fred and demanded an explanation why he accepted their breakup eight years ago. The two of them talked about it later, but Anne retreated from the position she'd thrown herself in; instead, she blamed it on the alcohol and said she hoped they could be friendly from now on. You decide if you buy that or not. Elsewhere, Emma and George fell out over their future, but made up before the day's end. And Lizzy and Will's new relationship is going swimmingly. But with only a week left on the isle, time is running out for our contestants to find and declare their love. So why are so many of them acting like it isn't?

Cassandra was not pleased when she entered the living room at 20:58 to find Jane and Tom sitting abnormally close together and about to watch tonight's episode of Down the Isle.

"You came!" said Jane jubilantly, patting the seat next to her. "I knew you'd end up liking it."

"I do not," said Cassandra, as she sat down and sipped her tea. "I just go where the society is."

"This episode will win you over," said Tom. "I promise. It took me a while to get into the show too —"

Jane snorted. "It took you five minutes."

"Five minutes?" he demanded, his voice high and outraged. "It was two episodes at least."

"Absolutely not, I distinctly remember —"

"Children!" snapped Cassandra. "Are we here to bicker or watch?"

Everyone else on the isle had had enough.

How long had it been now? A week? It felt like a bloody year. Fred had entered the isle, obviously to reconnect with Anne, in chapter eighteen. This was now chapter twenty-four. A week had passed, and needless to remind you, a week on the isle was like two months in real life. It might be fun for you readers to watch the torturously slow dance between Anne and Fred, but for many of the contestants who hung out with them and caught the shifts in magnetism whenever they were around
Take this morning. As she came downstairs from the villa, Emma looked at Anne, eating her cereal, and Fred sat fifteen feet away drinking a protein shake, and she despaired.

"I've had it," she said, marching towards the swings where George sat with Lizzy and Mary. George rearranged his limbs so Emma could sit on his lap, and through this she continued her rant seamlessly. "We all saw Anne's meltdown yesterday at lunch, and we all thought it would lead to something. But then she and Fred talked and I bet Anne went all cautious because they were back to being awkward at dinner, and then Fred and Louisa slept in the same bed."

Mary raised her eyebrows significantly.

Emma dismissed her suggestion with a wave of the hand. "Nope, Louisa complained to me when we were getting dressed today that she couldn't take another night of this platonic bed sharing and no matter what the Anne thing is about, she's done with him."

Lizzy gave a low whistle. "Yikes."

"No, this is good," said Emma encouragingly. "Because then no one gets hurt about Anne and Fred!"

George sighed. "I thought the first part of this speech was that there wasn't any Anne and Fred?"

Emma held up a finger very close to his face. "Not yet." She booped his nose. "But maybe if we gave them a little push…"


"I know," she said, splaying out dramatically over him on the seat. She looked up at George and clutched his arm. "I just want them to be as happy as we are."

"Gross," commented Mary, as Emma and George kissed.

Lizzy sighed. "Anne hasn't said anything about it. And even if she did, she won't appreciate meddling."

"Will she appreciate being happily in love?" demanded Emma.

"Em, I love your ambition, but are you sure there's actually something there and you're not misreading awkwardness as feelings?"

"Yes!" said Emma. "We were all there at lunch yesterday. I've never heard Anne speak to anyone like that. She's obviously scared of repeating the past, but her feelings are still there! And so are Fred's, otherwise he wouldn't have come on the show." She shrugged. "They're endgame."

George blinked, Lizzy laughed and Mary demanded, "How do you know what that is?"

"Why wouldn't I?" said Emma defensively. "Of course I know about shipping. My Harry Potter phase went deep."

The normie explanation made Mary relax a bit.

"So," said Emma, pulling the conversation back to where it needed to be: "Anne and Fred? Thoughts?"
"Emma," said George patiently. "What did you realise, not too long ago, that you shouldn't do?"

"Meddle in other people's relationships," Emma mumbled.

"So?"

Emma's face fought a tense battle between obstinacy and sense.

"Fine," she said. "But if things are weird at lunch, I'm not going to sit back any longer."

George sighed and accepted this was the furthest his girlfriend would compromise.

"OK, maybe this is crazy," said Tom, "but I kind of think that would be a good idea."

Cassandra's face was blank.

"You know," said Tom. "Fred and Anne need to be pushed towards each other. Locked in a cupboard together, metaphorically. A machination."

"Do people still say machination?" Cassandra wondered.

"Or," said Jane, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "they could just take a leap of faith and communicate."

If there had been a camera in the living room, Cassandra would've stared into it.

Mary was feeling like an idiot. Last night she'd actually apologised to Henry, only she had no idea whether he'd actually been asleep or had only been pretending. She'd tried to stay awake for long enough that if he had actually been awake she'd be able to catch him falling asleep, but it was rather warm and very comfortable in bed with him, and she fell asleep. In the morning when she woke, he wasn't there. And why should he be? She didn't care what he did.

At Dan the producer's persuasion, she told this to Lizzy and Louisa. "Not that I care," she added airily, once she'd finished ranting. "Nothing's changed; everything is still frosty. Cooking dinner together is going to be a blast. Anyway, so, not a big deal, I'm just telling you what's going on in my life. You know, since we're almost onto the last week and all."

"Right," said Lizzy, which was the first word she'd said in three minutes.

"It's just so weird in here," said Mary, in the flow of ranting. "Everything's so geared towards romance that it messes with your fucking head! Everyone around you is in a couple so you can't stop thinking about having a boyfriend, and you end up imagining the stupidest — " she stopped herself far too late.

No one else said anything.

Mary recovered. "But you have to remind yourself that it's just a load of psychological tricks," she finished, though she knew as much about psychology as she did about horse breeding. "It's not real."

Louisa felt bad for Mary, and changed the topic to her equally disastrous love life. "I'm ending it with Fred," she declared.
"Oh?" said Lizzy, trying to act like she didn't already know this from Emma.

"Yep," said Louisa. "I just don't think he's that into me, and I deserve someone who is. Also the Anne thing is a lot."

"It is," agreed Lizzy neutrally.

"Anyway," said Louisa, a smile creeping back onto her face, "I think I might have a better prospect."

"Oh?" asked Mary.

At that moment, James walked past, waved, and went into the villa.

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"Poetic cinema," breathed Tom.

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Later, Louisa, with excellent timing, broken it off with Fred. (It hadn't been dramatic enough to warrant writing down; Louisa had sat him down, told him she was ending it for both of their sakes, and they'd hugged and walked off in separate directions.) Then it was lunch, cooked by Will and George, which was quite light in order to accommodate for the pot roast they'd be having for dinner.

"I've always wanted to go to Barcelona," said Lizzy, when they got onto the topic of travelling. "We almost went second year uni, but something dramatic happened and we went to Berlin instead."

Will made a face. "Barcelona's dangerous. I went there years ago and someone stole my phone."

Lizzy laughed. "What was it, a Nokia 3310? You were better off without it."

"We should all go!" exclaimed Emma. "We should do a trip together next year or something. But not Barcelona, for Will's sake."

"Thank you," said Will dryly.

Emma tapped her fingers. "How about… Lisbon?"

"Does anyone speak Portuguese?" asked George.

There was a silence.

"I speak Spanish," Anne offered.

Emma nodded enthusiastically. "OK, one person who speaks Spanish. We can make that work! Alicante, or Lanzarote, or…"

From the other side of the table, Fred cleared his throat. "I speak Spanish too."

Emma's eyes widened. "Oh! Did you learn it at school? Were you two in the same class or something?"

Anne cleared her throat. "Yes, we both did it at A Level." Her eyes flickered and she looked directly at him. "I didn't know you kept it up. ¿No dijiste que nunca volverías a hablar español después del examen?"
Fred's mouth tugged into a wry smile. "Dije muchas cosas que no eran verdad."

No one else at the table spoke Spanish — Will's 40 grand-a-year education had only taught him French, German, Latin and Greek — so no one else knew what was going on, and although that hadn't sounded as if Fred and Anne were declaring their love to each other, it was difficult to say...

This was becoming a regular occurrence during group dinners. Someone with a big personality would be talking, and then somehow Anne and Fred would get embroiled in the conversation and talk to each other, and then everyone at the table would fall away to background characters as the two of them sat at opposite ends would talk, and every word each of them said was so highly charged that a vaguely embarrassed silence diffused around the room.

Anne cleared her throat again and looked at someone who wasn't Fred. "Anyway. So…"

Emma felt the danger of this track ending and swooped in. "So did you go on a school trip?" she asked, all innocent in her interest. "I remember the girls who did languages at my school spent a week in their foreign country and talked about the experience for months afterwards."

"Er, yes," said Anne. "We went to Madrid."

"Together?" asked Emma. "I mean, like a whole class thing?"

Someone should probably have stopped Emma's shameless crusade for information, but everyone at the table was far too interested to have any mercy on her victims. The idea of Anne and Fred re-falling in love on a Spanish island after already sharing that linguistic connection was storybook lovely.

"Yes," said Fred, slowly.

"Oh, that's so cool!" said Emma. "Where did you stay?"

"You know," said Anne. "A terrible hostel."

"Sounds cosy," said Emma, who obviously had no intention of staying in a hostel for the future Down the Isle trip to Madrid.

"It was," said Fred, and on his lips flickered a smile that in another century would've been rakish. "Wasn't it, Anne?"

Anne turned as red as a tomato, and suddenly everyone knew what had gone down on Uppercross School's Year 12 Spanish trip, Summer '11. And also… surely this was flirting? Fred was almost grinning (something which didn't happen often) and Anne was looking down and playing with the tablecloth, as if everyone hadn't already seen the blush staining her cheeks.

For Anne and Fred, God interceded in the form of George. "Or we could actually go to Barcelona," he said. He punched Will's arm. "Maybe you need immersion therapy."

"I won't go," said Will warningly. "It was a traumatic experience."

"It was years ago," said George.

"We'll protect you," said Lizzy.

I'm sure you're interested in the fact that Anne's face was still a charming shade of pink, and every few seconds Fred looked in her direction.
"So it's settled," said Emma satisfactorily. "We're doing a huge trip to Barcelona."

Everyone haggled over the minor details of the trip until lunch was over. Fred took Anne's plate, and Anne gave him an awkward smile and turned away. Fred cleared his throat and went to the other side of the kitchen. The other contestants dispersed across the villa, and Anne and Fred went their separate ways as if he hadn't just outrageously flirted with her in front of the whole group.

Two, three hours passed. Emma, who hadn't stopped watching them since lunch, noted that Anne and Fred crossed paths five times during the afternoon, but at no point did they exchange anything more than a friendly, hurried smile.

She felt that she would actually explode if she didn't do anything. Within minutes, a plan sprang up fully formed in her mind. Tactfully and quietly, she gathered Lizzy, Henry, George and Mary up on the terrace. Then she locked the door.

"What are you doing?" asked Lizzy.

"Just preventing unwanted surprises," said Emma. She took a dramatic breath. "I have an idea that I need you all to help me with. And before you say anything… just hear me out."

"Why do I not get a good feeling about this?" said Mary.

Emma shot her a look. "OK, so it's about Anne and Fred."

Several groans were emitted. Lizzy said, "Emma, do you really think…"

"You were all there at lunch!" Emma protested. "You saw the tension between them. And clearly neither of them are going to do anything about their feelings and we can't just let them do nothing! That's not being a good friend. A good friend helps out their friends when they obviously need it, even if their friends are too shy to ask — "

"Fucking hell," said Henry, cutting through Emma's speech.

Emma sighed.

"Why am I here?" asked George. "You know I'd disapprove."

"I figured you'd disapprove less if I didn't try and keep it a secret from you," said Emma blithely and George felt himself smile at her words. "Come on, guys. I'm not saying lock them in a wardrobe together… although…"

"Is this one of my sister's guilty pleasure novels?" drawled Henry.

Emma glared at him.

"I just think that we should try to help," she reiterated. "For their own good."

"And for ours," said Mary. "I would like to have one communal meal in this place without a side helping of unresolved longing."

"Exactly," said Emma.

Mary looked at Henry in that way she reserved exclusively for him: head tilted, smile plastered on. "There you go. A selfish motivation ought to appeal to you, Crawford."

"Bennet, you don't know the first thing about my — "
"OK!" said Emma loudly. "One problem couple at a time, please." This rendered them quiet for a second, and Emma continued. "Come on, I'm not proposing anything crazy. I just think that Anne and Fred are literally hopeless and we owe it to them to help."

Lizzy felt herself being drawn into this impenetrable logic. "I can't deny they clearly have feelings for each other," she admitted. "So what's your grand plan?"

"I wouldn't call it grand," said Emma. "It's to have Anne and Fred cook the three hour dinner tonight, instead of Henry and Mary. We'll be giving them time and privacy to talk to each other, which is difficult to get in here."

"Fine by me," said Mary immediately.

George frowned. "Em, I don't doubt that it's a wonderful plan that will definitely work, but... why?"

Emma sighed. "Because they're in love, George! Are we supposed to just let love drift away because two people are too bull-headed to see it?"

"No?" said George.

Emma smiled. "Exactly! So we're all in?"

For reasons that were different for all, everyone was.

Emma snapped into action. "Henry, get Fred to switch with you. Mary, can you pretend to have asked Lizzy to cover for you, and then Lizzy, get Anne to do it in your place. George, be cool and don't tell Anne and Fred anything."

George raised an eyebrow. "Be cool?"

"I know you can do it," said Emma. She pecked his cheek and linked her arm through his on the way out, and he smiled before he realised he was doing it.

"This has to be a new low," said Henry, as he and Mary trudged out from the terrace together. Emma had ordered everyone to disperse in separate directions after their meeting. "Helping with other people's love lives because they're incapable of doing it themselves."

Mary laughed, only half mockingly. "We can't all be like Henry Crawford, who only has to snap his fingers and women come running."

"Sometimes I'm crushed in the stampede," he agreed.

Mary rolled her eyes and walked faster.

"Why does Emma care anyway?" Henry asked, adjusting his speed to match hers. "I've never understood why some people meddle in other people's lives."

"Some of us care about other people," said Mary loftily.

Henry paused before the door. "Come on, Bennet, an indirect hit isn't your style."

Mary rolled her eyes and pushed open the door. "What do you know about my style?"

She didn't wait for him to answer and walked outside. Henry watched her briefly before tossing on a disinterested expression and sauntering out too.
A suitable amount of time later, Lizzy found Anne in the living room.

"Anne?" she said croakily, entering the room. She coughed a few times to set the tone. "Um, I don't feel great, and I wondered if you could — " cough — "tell me that I'm not dying?"

Anne looked at Lizzy, who had dragged herself into the living room and collapsed rather dramatically onto the sofa. "I don't think you're dying, Lizzy."

"I feel a bit woozy," said Lizzy. "I was fine earlier, but then my throat started to feel all dry and Will insisted I should ask you. You know how he is," she said, and smiled dopily. Then a coughing fit — a long one, to really drive home the point — took over. "I'm so sorry, I'm probably spraying germs everywhere."

"Well, it seems like you have a cough," said Anne dryly. "Do you feel feverish?"

"Er, not really," said Lizzy. She coughed again. "Just a bit tickly in my throat."

"Right," said Anne. "Well, I don't think it's anything serious, so you should just rest and drink plenty of water."

Lizzy blinked. "Rest?"

"Yes? Were you not expecting that?"

"Er, well, no, not exactly," said Lizzy. "But… oh, shit. Mary didn't want to spend three hours with Henry so she asked if I could cook dinner tonight, by now… I guess I don't want to be coughing over the food and pass whatever this is onto everyone else."

"I'm sure you can find someone else," said Anne.

"Well, no one here knows how to cook," said Lizzy. She remembered she'd forgotten to cough for a few minutes and gave a nice strong one for good measure. "Except Emma and Will, but Emma cooks all the time and Will did lunch today…"

"I can cook," said Anne slowly.

Lizzy's face lit up.

"Can you? Pot roast?"

"Yeah, fine," said Anne, whose next three hours would now be spent in the kitchen. "I'm not doing it alone, am I?"

"Oh, no," said Lizzy. "Mary was meant to do it with Henry."

"Great," said Anne again. She hadn't spoken much to Henry apart from his first few days on the isle when they'd briefly flirted, but it would be fine. And if they really had nothing to talk about, there was a book of Sudoku she could be doing instead.

Despite his belief that the whole thing was embarrassingly childish and also unnecessary, Henry had agreed to participate in the plot to force Anne and Fred to spend more time together mostly because he didn't fancy kicking up a fuss with Emma when she was carrying out with a scheme.

The target was sat with James by the pool.
"Got a favour to ask," said Henry, slipping into the space next to Fred. He clapped his shoulder. "Can you do dinner tonight? If I spend any more time with Bennet, things might get ugly."

"Oh," said Fred, who only knew that Mary was supposed to be making dinner tonight and nothing else. "Sure."

"Excellent," said Henry. He got up. "I owe you one."

James, who did know what was going on, held his tongue.

"Mission accomplished," said Lizzy to Emma.

"Nice," said Emma.

"Yep," said Lizzy. "I pretended I had a cold and didn't want to infect the food."

Emma blinked. "You could've just said because you're vegetarian you didn't want to cook meat. Or know how."

Lizzy paused. "I didn't think of that."

Emma shrugged. "It doesn't matter." Then Fred entered the kitchen, and Emma stood and watched her handiwork. "Look! It's all falling into place."

Anne realised what Lizzy had been up to when she walked into the kitchen and saw Fred with his back to her as he turned on the oven.

She was about to go in search of Lizzy and demand she tell her what was going on right now, when Fred turned around.

"Oh," he said. "I thought you were Mary."

Anne let out a strangled sound. "Right. Yes. Lizzy said Mary asked her if she could cook tonight, because Mary didn't want to cook with Henry, but then Lizzy said she'd caught a cough and didn't want to infect all the food."

Fred didn't say anything.

"So," said Anne brightly. "Pot roast, right? We can do this."

Over by the pool, Emma and Lizzy were still watching Anne and Fred, whilst George and Will sat next to them and pretended they weren't also interested.

Anne and Fred hadn't spoken much at first, but it helped that they had a task to do, and gradually between washing vegetables and preparing the meat, they started talking. Then Anne laughed — really laughed — at something Fred said, and Emma sat back, pleased.

"I'm a goddamn genius," she declared. Fred darted a glance at Anne when she was focused on chopping celery, and it was vividly clear to everyone who caught it that his feelings ran on the side of pining.

"Do you remember," said Anne, as she chopped carrots, "that Christmas when you came over and
Elizabeth had an allergic reaction to — coriander, was it?"

Fred doubled over laughing.

"Your dad was too drunk to drive to the hospital, so I had to do it," he said, between laughs. "Oh yeah, and I'd only just passed my driving test. I was terrified that I'd make a dumb mistake and embarrass myself in front of your whole family."

"Oh, there was nothing you could've done to make my dad like you," said Anne reassuringly. "He only likes himself and Elizabeth."

She clapped a hand over her mouth, but the words were already out. Fred whistled softly and said, teasingly, "Is this the same Anne Elliot who told me to learn all about American coinage so I could impress him?"

Anne smiled in spite of herself. "I was a teenager! You can't blame me for trying."

There was a silence, as both of them remembered that in the end, she didn't try at all.

"Anyway," she said hastily, clearing out space to fry the vegetables. "We should get back to — "

"Yeah," said Fred. "Um, but it's good to talk about old times, you know?"

Anne smiled softly. "I know."

Tom felt personally offended to see Cassandra looking at her phone during such an emotionally intense moment on *Down the Isle*.

"It's boring," said Cassandra, not looking up from her phone. "Everyone's just circling around each other. Pull yourself together and confess your undying love or whatever."

"I knew you wouldn't like it," said Jane. She relayed this to Tom. "I told you she'd hate it."

"I don't *hate* it," said Cassandra unconvincingly. "I'll watch it since you two have a weird cultish adoration for everything that happens."

"But?"

"But I don't care about any of them."

Once the casserole was in the oven and the onions were cooking gently over the hob, Anne sat down on a barstool and said as casually as she could manage, "You haven't changed as much as I thought you might."

Fred leaned against the cupboards, his sleeves still rolled up. "You haven't either."

Startled by the directness of both his words and the way he was looking at her, she veered back into safer territory. "But obviously we have," she said, smiling. "Look at us. Eight years ago being a doctor was just something I dreamt about, and you… actually, you haven't told me about this. What have you been doing since school?"

"Well, the navy," he said.
Anne laughed. "Details, Fred."

He obliged, and began to talk about all of it: his training, his first shipments, the best moments of his career. As he talked and she listened, it was impossible to ignore how easy it still was to be around him. He laughed in the same way: eyes first, mouth last, and he still mimicked other people's voices when he told a story. She'd nearly forgotten he did that. He kept going and she kept laughing, and she felt that understanding, that accord, that she hadn't felt in years. She'd almost forgotten that there was someone out there so like her it was impossible to describe it by any other name. As Fred took her through the last eight years of his life and the touch of restlessness that had accompanied him, Anne's traitorous brain wondered: was that because she was missing?

"And after that illustrious career," said Anne, "you decided to come here."

Fred wrinkled his nose. "It's a free holiday."

"It is not free," protested Anne. "There's the strong possibility of severe public humiliation."

"I have a plan for that," said Fred. "New identities. Relocate to Estonia. We buy a house by the beach — I mean, not we, but anyone who needs…"

"Estonia's nice," said Anne quickly. "They have the world's longest paid maternity leaves."

Fred smiled.

"What?" said Anne.

"Nothing," said Fred quickly. "That's just — that's so you. To offer a random socioeconomic fact."

"Oh," said Anne, feeling eminently self-conscious. "Well, er…"

She was saved by having to reply when the timer rang and she flew to caramelise the onions. Fred was occupied by the beef and Anne was making the gravy, so they didn't talk again until they were done.

"Dinner's ready!" she called, and everyone trooped in from various corners of the isle to sit down at the table. The number of compliments on the food made it feel as if she and Fred were entertaining, together. Absurd images of weekend dinner parties flooded her mind and made her so distracted she hardly said a word at dinner, let alone to Fred.

If Lizzy and Emma's intentions were to make Anne think she was precariously close to falling in love with Fred all over again, they'd succeeded.

In the years after she and Fred had gone their separate ways, she'd entertained numerous ridiculous daydreams in which they reconnected and realised they were never meant to be apart. These were safe because they were ridiculous, and Anne Elliot was never ridiculous. But in this strange, disconnected place, it had happened, and now she was in the absurd position of being terrified about something she was quite sure was already happening.

She would've spent the entirety of dinner in a haze if not for one small interruption.

"Oh no, don't get up," said Yvonne breezily, as she swept into the villa accompanied by a ominous drumbeat. "I'm just dropping by to announce that there's going to be a recoupling tomorrow night. It's going to be the last one, so choose wisely!"

After she left, everyone erupted into discussion of how things were going to go. Louisa, who had
dumped Fred only that morning, looked as if she was regretting the haste of her decision. And Anne very deliberately avoided everyone's eye and instead focused her attention on the carrots before her.

Emma, Lizzy, George and Mary regrouped after dinner to discuss the success of their mission. Henry wasn't there because he didn't want to be, and Will was there because of Lizzy.

"So," said Emma after a while, "there is the possibility that I may have made things worse."

Four of the other survivors of that dinner nodded.

"In my defence," said Emma, "what else was I supposed to do?"

"Nothing?" volunteered Will.

"Thank you, Will," said Emma testily. "I don't get it!" she said. "Why didn't they talk? They were talking when they were cooking."

"Maybe they said something that made things worse," offered Lizzy.

"Maybe," groaned Emma. "But the feelings are there. They just need to communicate. Should we lock them in a room together?"

"Emma," said George.

Emma slumped down in her seat. "I know. Fine. Mission abandoned."

"Great," said Mary. "We agree that we failed. Can I go now?"

That would have been that, if only Anne hadn't pulled Lizzy aside just before bed and said, "I know what you and Emma were doing, and I think it's worked."

Lizzy, who hadn't properly rinsed the toothpaste out from her mouth and was very cold on the terrace because she was wearing pyjamas that teetered on the sexy side tonight, blinked. "What?"

"You know," said Anne, as irritated as Lizzy had ever seen her. "Me, Fred, cooking dinner? To bring us into proximity?"

"Oh," said Lizzy.

"I don't know what to do," said Anne, suddenly desperate. "How I even — I don't know what I want! This was so much easier before I knew that I…"

"Oh, honey," said Lizzy. "I know. But Anne, I swear to God if you don't tell Fred how you feel, I'll kick you out of the villa myself."

"I can't do that," said Anne miserably, with the full knowledge that not only she could, but that she had to.

And one more matter… that night, Henry was greeted by an even frostier Mary Bennet than usual.

"Aren't we going to kiss goodnight?" he drawled, well aware that almost everyone was in the room and might overhear this conversation.
She turned a page of her book. "Sorry, did you say something?"

"Pretending not to hear me? Come on, Bennet, you can do better than that."

"You flatter yourself," sniffed Mary disdainfully. "I won't exert myself for you."

"No?"

Henry waited for a reply, but she maintained her feigned interest in her book. Suddenly he felt stupid for trying. If she was determined to hate him, then that was what she could do. He didn't care.

"Do you love it yet?" Tom demanded, when the episode was over.

Cassandra's 'no' was a chilling deadpan.

Tom flung the remote dramatically in the air and only just caught it when it landed back down. "I give up," he said, stretching as he stood up. "Also I have a fucking boring meeting tomorrow, so I'm going to bed now so I won't tomorrow."

"Night," said Jane and Cassandra.

When Tom left the room, Cassandra turned to Jane and raised an eyebrow.

"What?" said Jane, feeling weirdly antsy under the stare of her older sister.

Cassandra heaved a sigh. "Nothing."

"Obviously it's not nothing if you're saying something — "

"Christ, Jane," said Cassandra loftily. "If you really can't figure it out, then there's nothing I can say to help you."

"I hate it when you're cryptic," grumbled Jane. "Is it about Tom? I promise he's not trying to be annoying; that's just his personality."

"I realised that," said Cassandra dryly. "You don't need to apologise for him."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Oh GOD this chapter was a pain in the arse but now it's done and we can all move on!!! Let this be a reminder to myself that I HAVE TO PLAN EVERYTHING.

I don't think Lisa Kleypas is going to sue me for plagiarism with the phrase 'a vaguely embarrassed silence diffused around the room' but the allusion to the moment in 'A Wallflower Christmas' when Simon Hunt comes back to the Stony Cross Park for Christmas and reunites with Annabelle is PURPOSEFUL.

The exchange that Anne and Fred have translates to: "After your exam, didn't you say you were never speaking Spanish again?"
"I said a lot of things which weren't true."
I'm going on holiday for a loooooooong time next week but I'll cram in another update before then. Also Love Island finishes on Monday, and updates should come quicker after that.
Figure Out Where We're Growing

Chapter Summary

ooooh 5/6s of the way there!!!

Chapter Notes

Title from Khalid's Talk because that's exactly what our main idiots don't do in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Previously on Down the Isle…

No one's forgotten Anne losing her temper at Fred two days ago. Emma led a five-person plot to force Fred and Anne to spend time together by making them cook dinner, its success was hard to say. Elsewhere on the isle, Mary and Henry are still refusing to play nice, and Louisa broke up with Fred. Now with the final recoupling of the series to happen tonight, there are sure to be some surprises in store…

Jane was yawning when the episode started.

"Go to bed," said Cassandra.

"I can't," moaned Jane in protest, just as Tom said, "And miss Down the Isle?! This is worth forgoing sleep over."

"It really isn't," said Cassandra, examining her nails with clear disinterest.

Jane yawned again. "I'm fine. It's been a — " yawn — "long day, but I can definitely stay awake another hour."

Cassandra shook her head in sisterly disapproval as Tom looked smug.

As we gradually wind down into the final days of Down the Isle, we come to the last recoupling. Two couples are assured: Emma and George, and Lizzy and Will. We all know what we want to happen with the others, but such is the nature of reality that they don't. Furthermore, it had not been announced whether the boys or girls were picking in the recoupling tonight, to add to the drama and to encourage everyone to make their move.

It was a slow, languorous morning. Fred, who'd slept on the sofa owing to his and Louisa's (anticlimactic) breakup, woke up at 6. Everyone else slept in until much later. Today was the final recoupling and it was suspected, though not openly declared, that a dumping would soon follow, as there were just a few days left and historically only four couples ever made it to the final. Though, as
an afterthought, we would be hard-pressed to find four couples in the current mess of *Down the Isle.*

After breakfast, groups of people came together and drifted through the villa. Over by the sun lounger, Lizzy and Anne were arguing over Paris vs London, only Anne's heart wasn't really in it and she was instead darting glances at Fred, who was sat with James by the patio.

"You all right?" said Lizzy, remembering how yesterday she'd told Anne she *had* to tell Fred how she felt.

"Yes," said Anne tightly. A silence. Suddenly she said: "I'm going over there."

Lizzy raised an eyebrow. "Where?"

"To Fred," said Anne. "I've been thinking a lot about it, and I simply can't — do nothing."

"Go Anne!" said Lizzy. "Tell that boy how you feel!"

Anne might have been about to do that when she set off, but by the time she reached Fred and James by the deckchairs and asked James if she could talk to Fred, her courage had significantly waned. Also, she sensed that every conversation on the isle had stopped in order to watch hers, and she was now deeply wishing that she'd chosen a more covert time to do this.

"So," she said. "Er, look, I know this is weird — it's just that I need to know some things."

Fred nodded. "All right?"

Anne tucked her hair, which was loose to let it air dry, behind her ears. "Not to be blunt, but — why are you here?"

If you recall, Anne had asked Fred this on his compulsory first date almost a week ago. Fred had played it off like it meant nothing and then it got too awkward for the question ever to be answered.

He took a deep breath, and Anne's heart pounded so hard she thought her microphone must be catching it. She looked at him then looked away, her eyes moving to the sycamore trees that stood behind the pool. Fred smiled wryly and said what he'd prepared.

"Obviously you can't know this," he said, "but everyone watching the show really loves you."

Anne coloured and tried to change the topic. "Are you even — isn't saying that breaking some sort of fourth wall?"

Fred shrugged. "Let them edit it out. When you told Lizzy about your, um, first boyfriend, me — " he smiled self-reflexively — "people went crazy. They thought if they searched hard enough they could find him — me. The producers got to me first and asked me if I wanted to go on the show."

Anne let out a breath. Of course. That made perfect sense. Her idle fantasies that Fred had seen her on the show and demanded to be sent on the isle were just that — fantasies. He was here because other people had wanted him to be, and he was enjoying a nice holiday with his mate from the navy.

"I see," she said, and it came out much colder than she would've liked to sound.

He didn't like the coldness in her voice. Anne should never be cold towards him. Without thinking he added, "And I wanted to see you."

"Oh?"
"Of course," said Fred. "We completely lost contact and I wanted to — to know how you were."

You could've called, Anne wanted to scream. I kept the same number for years. But she supposed she hadn't called either, and Fred had taken the risk of coming on the show. She hadn't done anything.

The air felt heavy with the questions she wanted to ask, but she was afraid that if she asked them some doors would be closed to her forever. If she said everything right and was very lucky, she thought the two of them could become friends. She just had to be careful to squash those feelings she was terrified were coming back.

And then there was the recoupling — she had no idea what on earth she was going to do about that. Or what he was going to do. Everyone knew that Louisa had ended their fledgling relationship, but today would she realise what a mistake that was and go back to him?

"Good luck for tonight," she said softly.

Fred smiled at her, warm and slow. "You too."

Anne took her leave and returned to Lizzy, who was now sat with Will and looking very curious. "How did it go?" she asked.

"Terrible," said Anne.

Lizzy clucked her tongue. "Will knows what that's like," she said sympathetically. She nudged her boyfriend. "Come on, babe. Offer Anne some advice."

"I don't have any," said Will grumpily. "I just waited for two weeks and tried again."

"My… thing — " she pulled a face — "is so much more complicated than that. Everyone knew you two liked each other; you just didn't see it."

Will and Lizzy gave Anne the same meaningful look.

"You think Fred — no," she said assertively. "Can we not talk about this? I don't even know what I'm feeling. We've only got four more days here — do we have to spend it on making me confused and nervous?"

Lizzy sighed and wished that Emma were here. Emma would have the boldness and unique single-mindedness to ignore Anne's protests and just say what she thought. Maybe she should set Emma on Anne later… or would that be too cruel?

"I'm just saying," said Lizzy, "that there's a recoupling tonight, and you're going to have to pick someone."

"I will pick Will," said Anne weakly.

Lizzy laid a possessive hand on his shoulder at the same time as she grinned at Anne. "I'd like to see you try."

Anne laughed as Will's robotic face shifted into a smile. "Or maybe Henry," she said, a little madly. "Though God knows how Mary would take it."

Mary, who was conveniently inside the villa, did not hear this. However, Henry did, and as he was doing weights in the gym alone, no one saw him smile.
Such is the miracle of plot that occasionally things do go right for our idiot characters. Accusations of deus ex machina be damned, so it came to pass that Louisa, far from regretting her decision to sever the romantic lifeline of Fred under the new circumstances of a recoupling, found a lifeline tossed towards her: that of James.

I don't suppose anyone is much interested in hearing how this came about, but quite simply James had met Louisa, fancied her, decided he didn't when she started to get close to his friend, then decided he did when that fell apart with all the spectacle of sparklers in a damp evening. Now that she was free, and there was the helpful dawn of a recoupling, James felt now was an appropriate time to announce his feelings.

"Louisa," he began, as they swung listlessly on the giant swing, "I want to say something."

She turned to him expectantly — for Louisa was no fool, and had no intention of taking any chances in this recoupling. She might have been hurt over Fred, but she was moving on. "Yes?"

"Stop me if I say too much," he began, "but obviously there's the final recoupling tonight and no one knows what's going to happen, and I just thought... look, there isn't much time left, and shouldn't we act on our feelings?"

Louisa's eyes widened in not-entirely-surprise. "And what feelings do you have?"

"I like you," said James. "I think you might like me, and if you do, we should give this a shot."

Louisa smiled. "I do too. To both of those things."

A short interlude now as we go to Emma, George, Will and Mary. Notable absentee Lizzy was taking a nap with Anne. Everyone had seen Anne talking to Fred earlier, and Emma was currently lording it over everyone as her own personal victory.

"I knew it!" she said triumphantly. "So my plan yesterday was actually a total success, and now I'd like to say, in front of all of you: I told you so. I'm a success!"

George smiled in that half-disapproving, half-besotted way he usually did when Emma was being her most Emma-est. "Did you?" he said. "It doesn't look like they're happily together."

"Well, the goal was only to get Fred and Anne to talk. I never promised miracles."

"I know you," said George affectionately. "You always dream bigger than you say."

"Darling, that's sweet, but stop derailing my argument."

"You wouldn't love me if I — "

Will interrupted George and Emma's flirting with a loud cough, just as Mary demanded, "Why do we have to be here?"

"You don't really," said Emma. "I just wanted an audience to talk in front of." George laughed. "But now that I've had a taste of success..."

"It isn't success," said Will curtly. "Anne can't even bring herself to pick Fred in the recoupling tonight, if the girls end up choosing."

Emma scrunched up her nose. "Will, why do you always have to be so..."
"He can't help it," said Mary. "It's how he was raised."

"Thank you, Mary, for your insight into my childhood."

"But we love you anyway," said George. "Emotional stuntedness and all."

"Can we get back to interfering in Anne and Fred?" grumbled Will, feeling both uncomfortable and secretly pleased by his friend's affectionate teasing. "I'd much rather repress my childhood than have it aired on national television."

"Yes, exactly," said Emma. "Look, I'm thinking this. Yesterday's plan was the first step and it worked. Today, we go for the same thing, but more subtle; maybe we talk a lot about the recoupling. We're running out of time anyway because we only have a few more days left here. And this is the perfect setting for Anne and Fred to fall in love! After this they're never going to be living in the same house with nothing to do but talk about their feelings!"

No one said anything as it was universally felt that Emma was actually making a good point.

"They're so clearly meant for each other," she continued. "And what is even the point of us being here if we aren't going to help them?"

"We have our own issues to work on," drawled Mary, nodding towards Will. Emma waved a hand. "We can do that in our own time."

"This Emma girl is annoying me," said Cassandra in a low whisper. "Can't she focus on her own life?"

Tom laid a hand on his heart dramatically. "How dare you insult Emma, the life, the soul of the isle."

Cassandra shrugged.

"That's a part of her charm!" he whispered back. "And also, she's right. Anne and Fred are moving so slowly they're actually drifting apart."

"So let them," said Cassandra. "It's their life."

They looked at Jane, half asleep beside Cassandra.

"Jane?" asked Cassandra.

Jane's eyes shot open. "Yep?"

"Go to bed," said Cassandra.

"No," said Jane, setting her mouth in a stubborn line that only appeared when she was around Cassandra.

Tom looked away. "Well, if you fall asleep on the sofa, we're leaving you here."

"So," said Lizzy, dropping into the seat next to Will as he sat nursing his lemon water on the terrace later that day. "Do I have anything to worry about tonight?"
Will blinked. "Oh, the recoupling. Yes, I'm leaving you for George."

"Knew it," said Lizzy lightly as she pecked him on the cheek. Then, like a gushing tap she couldn't turn off, she said: "Betrayed by the man I love. 'Tis a sad story, alas, but a familiar one."

Her heart thundered, but she still looked at him in her usual jubilant way and waited for a response.

"That's new," said Will finally. "Did you mean to say it, or — "

"Of course I meant to!" cried Lizzy. "Do you think something so artfully crafted just slipped out by accident?"

"Oh," said Will. There was a pause, and then his face softened in that way Lizzy loved. "Of course, I love you too."

"That's not of course," Lizzy protested, but she let herself be drawn into the warm circle of his arms. "I really didn't know," she said, resting her head on his chest.

"You really didn't know?" Will repeated, amused affection lacing through his voice. "You were just going to say it and expect nothing back?"

"I'm a very giving person," grumbled Lizzy. She shifted around to look at him and smiled. "It's part of what you love about me."

"The only reason I didn't tell you sooner is because it would've made me sound like a psycho," admitted Will.

"That early, huh?"

"From the moment you told me you didn't like me."

"No!" gasped Lizzy. "But I meant it! I really didn't like you!"

"Well, something happened the first time I saw you," said Will. "It's difficult to say what, but in hindsight I think it was love."

Her heart melted and she kissed him softly in response.

"I wanted you to like me when I was yelling at you," she admitted. "That's why I was so angry about it. I hated you for not feeling the same way about me as I did about you."

Will covered his face. "Can we not talk about my moment of idiocy?"

"But it's so fun!"

"No," said Will. "You know what is fun?"

"What?"

An indie song that had been on low volume since midway through the conversation was suddenly turned up — the universal sign, I hope you know, for a hardcore makeout session. Neither Will nor Lizzy knew the song: Will, it may surprise you, listened to classic rock; Lizzy listened to eighties pop, Bollywood and early 2000s boybands. But they probably weren't thinking about it.

Emma had decided against carrying out her nefarious plan to push Anne and Fred together and
neither Anne nor Fred were people to confide in others about their emotions, so unfortunately for you, you will only be able to speculate on the thoughts whirling around their heads as the recoupling drew closer and closer. James told Fred that Louisa had been happy when he suggested they recouple, which Fred listened to with confused enthusiasm for his friend. Frankly, it had entirely missed his attention that Louisa and James might've liked each other. He was completely preoccupied with something else.

Anne was prepping vegetables for dinner as Lizzy stared into space and got lost in the most mundane of tasks.

"Will and I told each other we love each other," she said suddenly.

"Oh," said Anne, almost dropping her knife. She placed it on the table safely and smiled brightly at her friend. "That's great! I'm so happy for you, Lizzy."

"Me too," said Lizzy, who hadn't stopped grinning for an entire hour. "I can't really believe — " she stopped, remembering Anne's situation. "I'm just really lucky."

Anne nodded and smiled.

"How about you, are you all right? Not thinking about the recoupling, are you?"

Anne didn't say anything.

Lizzy put down the peeler and turned to her friend. "Anne. What are you waiting for?"

"I don't know," said Anne miserably.

"I'd never tell you what to do," said Lizzy. "But I have a lot of belief in seizing the day and all that."

"I don't want to be pushed into doing anything because of the circumstances of living here," said Anne slowly. "You know, how there's nothing to do but deal with your love life?"

Lizzy refrained from reminding Anne that that was the exact reason she had chosen to come on this show.

"I — I can't," said Anne, her eyes wide and almost panicked. "I'm not like you, or Emma, or even Louisa. I don't take risks, I don't make leaps of faith. I analyse and calculate and do the cautious thing. Which is, in this case, nothing. It's so fragile I'm terrified of doing anything to change it. And I know what you're going to say — I can't be terrified, I'm here for a reason, I have to take the risk." She smiled at Lizzy sadly. "I just — can't."

"Right," said Lizzy, her tone sharper than usual. She felt frustration at her friend kick up inside of her. Anne had this brilliant, dreamy, romantic opportunity in front of her, and was hashing out some fake excuses because she was scared — of what? Love? Love was the reason why she was here!

"There's no use talking about this if that's all you have to say," said Lizzy with a burst of frustration. "So let's just — not."

Anne nodded and they finished preparing the vegetables in silence.

Mary had tried to be patient, but it was now six in the evening. She had been hoping that Henry would be the bigger person and come over to her, but as expected he was playing it cool and evidently didn't care at all about the recoupling tonight. But she did, because she had to, and because
as much as she would die before she admitted it, Emma's speech about Anne and Fred had actually somewhat resonated with Mary.

"Crawford," she barked, as she strode across the kitchen en route the patio. "Can I talk to you?"

Henry said, "Whatever you want, darling," and followed her towards the patio with a lazy gait.

Mary sighed as she sat down on a deckchair. "As much as I don't want to do this — " she saw Henry was smiling and she stopped, self-conscious. "What?"

"Nothing," he said, still smiling.

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever. I don't want to do this, but with the recoupling tonight, because Louisa and James have allianced themselves and there's still the whole Anne and Fred thing, I think you and I should agree to pick each other."

Henry's smile grew and her heart dropped.

"So what I'm hearing," he said, "is that you want to couple up with me."

"That is not what I said," said Mary, her face growing hot. "Twice I said that I didn't want to do this."

"And yet here you are, proposing it."

He was enjoying this, the monster. Mary wanted to do him serious physical harm.

"Don't flatter yourself," she said in her most airy, dismissive tone. She looked at him dispassionately as she said it and ignored the dryness in her throat. "I'm making a sacrifice."

Henry caught onto her gaze and held it. A staring battle commenced.

Finally he looked away. "Very noble of you, Bennet."

"I know," she retorted. "It's noble of anyone to take you on." She stood up before there were any more long, lingering looks, and marched away.

Lizzy and Will were in the kitchen, Anne having gone upstairs to fetch something or other and taking forever to do it, and gave each other enquiring looks as Mary stomped towards them.

"Hello, Mary," said Will warily.

"I hate him," said Mary, angrily pulling a glass out of the cupboard and filling it with water. "That's all."

Lizzy and Will waited.

"He's just so — ugh," said Mary. "He's so convinced that he's hot shit and every girl wants him. I tell him I don't, I insult him, I give every indication of hating him — and he still thinks I want him! What the fuck is that! How can your head be so far up your arse that you think that!!!"

"Ahem," said Lizzy delicately. She tried to think of a gentle way to phrase it but came up with nothing. "Do you not think that the lady doth protest too much?"

"No," said Mary, glaring daggers as she said it. "What the fuck, Lizzy? If a woman says she doesn't like someone, it means she doesn't like them."
"Don't pull that shit on me," Lizzy snapped. Will raised an eyebrow and she took a calming deep breath. "I just mean… look, Mary, if you really hate him, why don't you just stay away from him?"

"Because… because… that would let him win!" Mary declared. "I can't freeze him out."

Will stepped in. "So you want to continue interacting with him," he said.

Mary grimaced. "I suppose… when you put it that way… yes. But it does not mean I like him."

"Of course not," said Lizzy soothingly, but it came out with a rather mocking edge.

"It makes me angry just talking about this," said Mary, apparently forgetting the fact that she had started the conversation. "I'm going to take a nap." Then she marched upstairs into the bedroom and forced herself to think about anything else.

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Dinner was survivable, though it was clear that there was some tension between Lizzy and Anne, as well as the ever-present tension between Fred and Anne that just sat there even as both of them pretended it didn't exist. Emma saw it and revisited her decision to not get involved any further; James saw it and felt for his friend; Louisa saw it and wondered how on earth she hadn't before.

Later that evening everyone sat down around the fire pit for the recoupling, with a sense of foreboding in the air. Anne had been very quiet all day; Fred had spoken very little as well. The rest of the isle could put together what was (or wasn't) happening, but if Emma wasn't doing anything about it then no one could. Then Yvonne swept in fifteen minutes late and addressed them all with familiar grandiosity.

"And so the final recoupling is about to take place!" she said. She wiped away an imaginary tear. "Darlings, I can hardly believe it. Tonight, to end things on a progressive note — " she turned to wink at the camera, rather unnecessarily — "I think we should let the girls choose who they'd like to end their Down the Isle journey with! So boys, if you could surround me — "

"I know where I've heard that before," Lizzy and Mary muttered.

Yvonne beamed at them. "Took the words right out of my mouth! Gather round, boys!"

The boys dutifully stood beside Yvonne and she began firing out names of girls to pick. Emma chose George, Lizzy chose Will, Louisa chose James, and Mary, as promised, chose Henry.

It was with an unreadable expression that Anne chose the last guy standing, who just happened to be Fred.

"Splendid," said Yvonne, smiling widely at the awkward moment of her own construction. After all, she had chosen the order in which the girls were to pick, and the fact that the girls were picking at all. "Well, I'll see you all bright and early tomorrow morning for an interesting surprise! Until then!"

She disappeared in a cloud of sequins and perfume.

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Sleeping arrangements were weird that evening. To be more precise: they were weird for Anne and Fred.

They didn't speak after Yvonne left and they didn't speak in the bathroom when everyone got ready for bed. Anne was avoiding him. She knew she was probably being cowardly. But she hated the whole show for putting her in this position, for sending in the guy she'd spent years of her life trying...
to forget, for forcing her to confront something she simply didn't want to confront. And then everyone was so invested in it, and it was so much pressure and attention, she just didn't want to deal with it. Was that so wrong? That she wanted to hide from it?

Only she couldn't, because there was nothing to hide behind. No work, no family, no responsibilities...

She and Fred faced each other with the bed on her right. "So I'll just —"

"Yep," said Fred, going over to the other side.

They climbed in together and suddenly Anne felt eighteen again, only this bed was much nicer than either hers or Fred's had been at that age. Awkwardly she pulled the covers up around her, also very aware that the entire villa was pretending not to watch them.

"Goodnight," she said softly.

He sighed next to her. "Goodnight, Anne."

"I will fling myself off a bridge if they don't get together," Tom whispered fiercely. Jane was still maybe-sleeping on the sofa and this was the only possible method of communication. "I swear it."

"Well, get flinging," said Cassandra. "Or don't; maybe they're playing up to the cameras and are dragging this out to frustrate us to the max."

"They are not playing up to the cameras!" said Tom in another fierce whisper. "They are honest, reunited high school sweethearts who just need the courage to admit to each other they never stopped loving the other."

Cassandra snorted. "For such a helpless guy, you sure know what other people should do romantically."

There was a short clip just before the episode finished.

"Hello, darling viewers!" said Yvonne, facing the camera head-on. Behind her was a badly calibrated green screen. "Whew, what a thrilling episode! Was that recoupling what you expected? Anyway, it's time for you to have your say! So click onto our app, and vote for the couples in the next half an hour. The least popular couple will be dumped from the isle tomorrow. Enjoy!"

When it finished Cassandra changed the channel with the speed of lightning, and Tom yawned and stretched, and saw that was Jane fast asleep on the other side of the sofa.

He reached over Cassandra and poked her shoulder. "Jane?"

"Shh," said Cassandra irritatedly. "She's sleeping."

"I know she's sleeping," snapped Tom. "She's been sleeping for the whole bloody hour. I'm trying to find out how asleep she is."

"Obviously quite, or your whispering would've woken her up."

"You whisper just as loud as me!"
"Your tone is more grating."

Tom smiled amiably. "Thank you so much. Now, I'm going to vote for tomorrow's dumping."

"You're just going to leave me here?" Cassandra demanded. "And let Jane sleep on the sofa?"

"Er, yeah," said Tom. "It's not like she's passed out by the bins of a dodgy restaurant."

Cassandra huffed. "Maybe I was wrong about you."

"What, because I won't drag Jane from her peaceful sleep to her probably unmade bed? Yeah, I'm such a reprobate."

Cassandra's lips thinned. "At least give her a blanket."

"Of course I'm going to give her a blanket," snapped Tom. "I'm not a monster."

He ducked into his room, threw at Cassandra the first blanket he saw, and collapsed into bed himself. It had been a long evening.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not even going to pretend that James and Louisa aren't the couple that is leaving next episode. CLUE UP, FOLKS.

But I am considering actually having you guys vote for the winning couple. Just so I can get an idea: are you all going to vote for Lizzy and Will? Because if you are then there's no point. Frankly I'm a control freak and reluctant to relinquish the finale of my darling, high maintenance fic to anyone — even you, dear Reader.

Much love to everyone for reading, my Tumblr inbox is always open, and I'll see with chapter 26 very soon! It's a bit of a spicey one!
Chapter Summary

oh BOY OH BOY is this one filled with DRAMA

Chapter Notes

This time, it isn't late because of my laziness! A fair warning that this chapter is a LITTLE bit risqué (but not enough, I think, to warrant an M rating).

I usually pick innocuous titles but this one (from The Vaccines's I Always Knew) is actually hilariously relevant to something that happens in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Previously on Down the Isle...

Yesterday, with the recoupling looming, our contestants put spur to their love lives. Anne asked Fred why he was on the show, and he told her some rigamarole about our producers tracking him down and persuading him to come into the villa. Then he said that he'd wanted to see her, and we all held our breaths only for Anne to reply with, "Good luck for tonight." Ugh? Perhaps they need to take a leaf out of James and Louisa's book — these two decided very quickly yesterday to give things between them a shot. With everyone else spoken for, Mary was tragically forced to make the sacrifice of recoupling with Henry, so as not to disrupt the other couples. Circumstances pulled themselves together during the recoupling and Anne was left with no choice but to pick Fred, meaning that this morning they'll have shared a bed together. Now, with only two more days before the final, your votes tonight will result in one couple leaving the isle and missing out on a possible fifty grand...

Jane said, "Not that I was able to cast mine."

"Are you still angry about that?" demanded Tom. "I already made you two apology cups of tea."

"I meant it when I said I wasn't tired! I was just taking an intense nap."

Cassandra and Tom exchanged a glance — their first shared look of mutual doubt, which was something of a milestone for those two. "Jane, you fell asleep on the sofa."

"I would've woken up if I knew what was happening."

"You're impossible," said Tom flatly. He faced the screen.

"You love me," she teased.

"Obviously," he said, his teeth on edge. "Otherwise I wouldn't tolerate your moods."
"Moods?" she demanded. "I'm not a Georgian matron with a conflagration of the vapours."

Cassandra barely restrained herself from giving a low whistle. But Jane and Tom smiled and joked as if nothing had happened, as if they couldn't recognise the implications of what had just been said.

Then Cassandra looked closer. She saw Tom's eyes flicker back to Jane when she was focusing on her drink — that was to be expected. But she also saw Jane slyly glance at Tom just at the point when he turned away from her, and a dull thud of resolution sounded in Cassandra's brain.

This nonsense had gone on for too long. She really had to talk to her little sister.

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There's no time left to waste now that there's only three days left of *Down the Isle* (or two days, depending on whether you count the final) — though would someone please tell this to Fred and Anne? Because I regret to inform you that no funny business happened last night as both kept religiously to their side of the bed. And then there was no chance to hear Anne opening up to Lizzy about her feelings regarding last night, because early this morning everyone was roused out of bed and taken to the fire pit.

"Good morning, darlings!" Yvonne said, appearing from the villa entrance. She sounded much more chipper than she usually looked at this hour as she walked towards the fire pit and stood in front of the contestants. Then she cocked her head. "Well, it won't be a good morning for two of you. With just three days left the public have been voting on their favourite couples, and I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but..." She sighed dramatically. "In a few minutes, one couple will be leaving the isle for good."

At Yvonne's words, Anne started and reached for Fred's hand. She remembered where she was and stopped herself, but her cheeks turned slightly pink and she tried to settle in her mind the fact that her instinct was to seek Fred for comfort. Instead she gripped her skirt tightly and looked ahead.

Yvonne surveyed the line before her. "I will now reveal the couple who have received the fewest votes and who will be leaving *Down the Isle* immediately."

Mary felt sure that she and Henry were going: they were the only 'couple' who didn't even like each other (no matter how much Fred and Anne pretended, everyone knew there were feelings there). And then she felt a strange, uncomfortable kick at the thought of leaving. She rebuked herself: of course the idea of leaving was sad — she'd made good friends, she liked the easy routine here, the sense of community — and it had nothing at all to do with Henry Crawford.

He whispered in her ear, "Bonne fucking chance to us."

She smiled thinly.

"The couple leaving *Down the Isle* due to receiving the fewest votes is..."

A dramatic pause for everyone to hold their breaths...

"Louisa and James."

---

"See?" said Tom. "It wasn't such a disaster that you didn't get to vote."

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There were sighs and exclamations as the other contestants went forward to comfort the two people
cruelly snatched away from a possible fifty grand. Mary turned to Henry and said sardonically, "I thought it would be us," before going off to hug Louisa and James. With the swiftness of a political downfall, the unlucky couple said their goodbyes and left the isle.

Yvonne smiled at the remaining contestants.

"Just as a fun titbit," she said, "would you like to know which couple garnered the most votes?"

"Yes!" said Lizzy, Emma and unexpectedly, Fred.

Yvonne arched an imperious eyebrow at Lizzy and Emma. "It was Anne and Fred."

She made the most of the dramatic silence that befell her revelation by quirking an eyebrow and swanning off into the distance. Shortly afterwards, the other couples dispersed and went to eat breakfast as well as reflect on what had just happened.

One has to give the theoretical producers credit for this plot device. As well as removing one final couple, the mention of the public vote reminded everyone what they were doing here: being judged on their love lives by millions of complete strangers. Their being saved by the public was a kind of confirmation that there was something in their romance that was interesting and real, and if strangers watching the show could see it, wasn't that the strongest indication that there was something there? And Yvonne's bombshell revelation about Anne and Fred was a very clear message that the two of them could not escape the romantic tension of their relationship…

But we will temporarily leave these things be, because now Lizzy and Will were navigating the thorny issue of families over fried eggs and toast.

"So my mum's insane," said Lizzy cheerfully as she stole food from Will's plate. "She wanted me to come on this show and I signed up because what the hell. The race thing should be OK because of your granddad and I don't think she thought this place would be swarming with Indian guys anyway. And appa should like you because I do, but if he doesn't it's on you to change his mind."

Will nodded, fairly certain that Lizzy was joking.

"Then there's my sisters," Lizzy continued. "Jane's the most well-adjusted so you should probably meet her first; to ease you in, you know." She frowned. "Wait, actually, maybe we should throw you in the deep end and unleash my youngest sister on you. Like an initiation. If you survive two hours with her, you're allowed into the family."

"Into the family?" teased Will.

Lizzy felt her cheeks grow hot. "Not that — I'm not saying — you asked for this! You wanted to know what jungle environment I was raised in!"

He grinned at her and she grinned back, feeling that Will-induced happiness flood through her.

"And Charlotte?" said Will, pushing toast around his plate instead of looking at Lizzy.

Lizzy blinked. "Oh, God."

You remember, of course, that in the very beginning Will had been with Charlotte, thrown her over for Caroline whom he didn't like that much anyway, then been on the receiving end of Lizzy's wrath when she entered the villa after Charlotte had been unceremoniously dumped.

"No, um, I honestly think she'll take it well that we're together," she said. She pulled a face. "It's so
weird that being in here makes you forget you have a whole other life in the real world."

"I should apologise to her," said Will. "I'm sure she's not bemoaning my inconstancy, but she
deserves one."

Lizzy smiled at him and took another bite of toast.

My family is much less... intense," Will said presently. "I have one insane aunt and one sister.
Georgie probably already loves you for being mean to me in the beginning — "

"I wasn't mean to you," Lizzy protested.

Will raised an eyebrow. "What did you want, Will? Me to fall into your arms? Well, it's not fucking
happening!"

"That's not mean," said Lizzy, her non-utensiled hand settling in his as she tried to justify the actions
of her foolhardy youth. "It's just straight-up. And untrue!" she added. She tugged at his hand. "Look
what happened."

"I would be hard-pressed to describe this as you falling into my arms," said Will dryly. "There was a
lot more complicated manoeuvering than I ever would've imagined."

"Which is why," said Lizzy triumphantly, brandishing her fork, "you value me so much." She
grinned and said, half-ironically, "I made you work for it."

"You may have a point there," said Will. "If you'd never heard that stupid thing I said to George, I'd
never have had to wait and realise just how much I wanted you."

She winked at him. "Oh, you would've figured it out sooner or later."

______________________________________________________________

"I like them," said Cassandra suddenly.

"Oh?" said Tom, very interested in this rare positive opinion from Cassandra.

"They don't have any nonsense," said Cassandra. "They're very honest with each other."

Jane cut in. "That's because you missed the first few weeks, when all they did was explosively
argue."

Cassandra sniffed.

______________________________________________________________

Now, back to the idle seeds that had been planted by the revelations of the public vote and the eager
shoots that had then sprung up. Fred and Anne may have been good at avoiding their feelings, but
Yvonne's revelation and Emma's subsequent nudging had made a talk between them unavoidable.

Anne stirred yoghurt into her granola. "So the public saved us," she said, when she felt she couldn't
take the silence any longer.

"They did," agreed Fred.

Anne cleared her throat. "Not only that, but we were apparently their favourite couple."

Fred said, "Must be the whole high school sweethearts thing."
Anne nodded tightly and wished that there was a smooth and easy way out of this conversation. "I suppose — but we aren't — do you think Yvonne was joking?" she finished, a little desperately.

"It didn't sound like it," said Fred, a little dryly. "No, I think we really have stolen the public's hearts. She would only lie to create drama, and for that she ought've said Henry and Mary."

Anne smiled in spite of herself. "They are quite…"

"Exhaustingly discordant?"

"Inflammatory," she said.

He smiled and looked away in an attempt to hide it.

She tried again; perhaps she thought that by continually skirting the subject, Fred would miraculously come out with professions of undying love. "I don't know why people voted for us," she said, and laughed as if to say: "But I'm cool and unshaken by it and everything else."

Suddenly he looked at her and she couldn't hide away. "Don't you?"

She felt herself holding her breath. She realised glumly that she couldn't pretend to be cool and unshaken — not about this. The deep mortification and unabiding regret if she turned out to be wrong would never leave her. It was so much worse to want things than to not care either way, and Anne had always kept her feelings closely guarded because the possibility of loss hung over her like a heavy, determined cloud. To let her feelings out into the world was like releasing a doe into a forest overrun by wolves.

But the intensity of how she felt pulled at her heart, and when he looked at her that way she could almost imagine herself throwing caution to the wind for the promise of what this might be…

Fred smiled ruefully, and Anne blinked. She'd missed her chance. "Sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have — um." He scrunched up his nose and rubbed it with his palm. "This is awkward."

"No!" said Anne. "No, it isn't. We're friends, aren't we? We can be friends about this."

"We can be friends about the fact that the great British public thinks we belong together?"

"They never said that," said Anne.

"YES WE DID," shouted Tom.

"And as you said," Anne continued awkwardly, "people love me. Perhaps they were afraid I'd be kicked out because we're not… you know… so they rallied around us in their numbers."

Fred smiled wryly. "And because Louisa and James have been on the show for less time, their fanbase is reasonably smaller than the other couples'."

"Exactly," said Anne, relieved that he'd grasped at her proffered lifeline.

They both cleared their throats awkwardly.

Anne tucked her hair behind her ears and stared into her breakfast bowl, her mind filled with nothing but confusion about what she was supposed to do. Before they shared a bed and she found herself...
miserably wishing he'd fallen asleep just a little closer, she'd really thought that she and Fred could at least be friends. But what was the use in trying so hard to be friends when she — and she had admitted it to herself now — so desperately wanted more?

Though her hesitation earlier had made her decide not to act while they were still on the show. It would only be for a few more days anyway. Wouldn't it be better to table it, then make her ridiculous declaration and risk rejection somewhere not being filmed for a TV audience and preserved on video for generations to come?

"Anyway," she said abruptly, "I think Mary said she wanted to talk to me, so I'll just — "

"Of course," said Fred.

On another part of the isle, a very different couple was having a very different conversation.

"Bennet!" said Henry, coming out from the villa and seeing Mary sat by Lizzy and Will in the kitchen. "Can I talk to you?"

Lizzy waggled her eyebrows as Mary rolled her eyes. "Sure."

They went inside, into the sort-of-private living room.

Henry opened with an incendiary, "So, why the fuck did you say to me that you thought we were going home?"

Mary's eyebrows shot up. If she hadn't known better, she would say that he was angry.

"Er," she said, laughing nervously, "because it was the truth? I thought we were going home?"

"Fucking hell, Bennet," said Henry, dropping carelessly onto the sofa. "If you want to be rid of me then just say it. Because I can't — I'm not here to…"

"OK, you are reading way too into this," said Mary reasonably. She sat down too and crossed her arms. "I just didn't think we were that popular. We're no Will and Lizzy. We're not even together, for God's sake!"

"I fucking know that," said Henry. "I don't want us to be Will and Lizzy, that's fucking nauseating. I just want — "

"What?" said Mary, not noticing that she had turned completely towards him. "Why are you so hung up on this? Jesus Christ, it was a passing comment. It doesn't mean I hate you, it doesn't mean — "

"Oh, so you've finally admitted that," said Henry. "Good."

Mary's blood went cold. "Sorry?"

He smiled. His tone was more similar to the arrogant, mocking drawl Mary was familiar with when he said, "No longer pretending to hate me, Bennet?"

"I don't hate you," she said, avoiding his eyes. "I merely find you incredibly irritating, aggravating, difficult — "

"Please, continue."

" — presumptuous, arrogant… so you see, it's much simpler to say I hate you."
Henry continued to smile, which Mary found downright fucking baffling. Had he *heard* what she'd just been saying?

"Crawford!" she snapped. "Stop smiling."

His smile grew, and suddenly in that moment Mary knew she had to get out of this secluded room with a nice springy sofa before she did something she'd regret.

He stood up and so did she, thinking that she had to be standing to run away. But she just stayed standing.

"You know, this final dumping has really put things into perspective," he said. "We're only in here for a few more days. Mary… be not coy, but use your time."

"What the hell are you talking about?" is what Mary had planned on saying — nay, demanding — had not Crawford closed his hand on the side of her neck, pulled her near and — to put it archaically — claimed her mouth.

"Christ," said Cassandra, thirty seconds later. "So that's why this is on after the watershed."

Mary Bennet had never imagined she would come so dangerously close to hate-fucking someone on national television — under daylight hours, no less — but the sexual tension had been there for days, and days in here felt like weeks, and now she'd discovered that Henry Crawford kissed like it was the main act. There were cameras all around her and she knew this was stupid, stupid, stupid, but what wasn't stupid was the way he was pressing wet kisses up her neck and simultaneously undoing the crucial buttons on her light cotton blouse. She felt his hand slide in and she shifted to make the access easier. He didn't go for her breast like she'd expected; instead, his hand danced up and down her back, taking his time, making her wait. She pulled them down onto the sofa and scooted backwards to make room, and he sat above her looking at her with want in her eyes, and when he leaned forward she wondered where his mouth would go next.

Then he ruined it by talking.

"Still hate me, Bennet?" he whispered, low and seductive, against her ear.

She shot up. Well, she was lying underneath him, so she shot backwards and pulled herself up. His words rang in her ears and she looked down at herself, filled with a horrible flood of embarrassment.

So that was what this was about. Not because he wanted her or found her attractive. But because she hated him, and he was trying to win.

"More than ever," she said with ice, and with as much dignity as she could, did up the buttons on her shirt. She swallowed. "Please would you get off me?"

For a few unbearable seconds he didn't move and just looked at her. Then he smiled charmingly and sat backwards.

"Perhaps another time," he said.

"No," said Mary, horrified. "There will be no other time. This — " she gestured between them — "was a temporary madness. I don't know what I was thinking. I don't like you! So — no." She glared at him for good measure.
"You've made your point," said Henry coldly.

"Good."

"Marvellous."

"Wonderful."

"Excellent." He paused. "Spiffing."

Was he trying to make her laugh? She wouldn't do it, of course. She wouldn't let him under her skin. It was a mistake to even be in the same room alone with him. And now she needed to leave.

"I'm going," she announced, straightening her shorts. "If you tell anyone about this, I will slit your throat."

And then she left.

Emma and George had begun by arguing over how much credit Emma could take for Anne and Fred's having captured the public's romantic imagination, and had somehow landed on the feminist takeaway of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, when Mary appeared from the villa, bad-tempered and generally in a funk.

"Mary!" said George. "What's your knowledge of late-nineteenth century Norwegian drama like?"

"Not extensive," said Mary, stalking over towards them. She flung herself down on a bean bag. "Why? Has Emma threatened to slam the door?"

"I would never," said Emma, scandalised. "For Nora to abandon her children and leave them in the tender clutches of — " she stopped, seeing that Mary wasn't really listening. "Is everything all right?"

"Fine," snapped Mary. "Why shouldn't it be?"

George and Emma exchanged a look.

"Did something happen with Henry?" Emma ventured.

"Fucking hell, I'm my own person," said Mary. "Not every problem I have has to be about Crawford. There's loads of things that could be wrong in my life."

"I saw you go into the villa with Henry," said Emma calmly. "It was only natural for me to assume."

"Men are idiots," added George, hoping that it would help.

Mary knew that they meant well. She also knew that they'd guessed correctly, and the problem was Crawford. But George and Emma were the last two people she wanted to talk to about her fucked up love life (or maybe those places went to Will and Lizzy; it was a tough call) and so she shrugged and pretended like nothing was up.

"I'm fine," she repeated. She stood up. "I'm going to the kitchen. You want anything?"

"No thanks," said Emma.

"An apple, please," said George.
When Mary left, Emma opened her mouth to say something, but George beat her to it. "Don't."

"It's so obvious!" said Emma miserably.

"I know it is, sweetheart."

Emma pulled a face. "Don't call me sweetheart when you're telling me something I don't want to hear."

George grinned. "It softens the blow. Sweetheart."

"They're all being so stupid," said Emma, her voice breaking pitifully. She sighed. "And Anne and Fred too! Christ, it's like they don't want fifty grand."

"Catch!" said Mary from the kitchen, and she tossed George an apple from twenty feet away. He caught it one-handedly, tossed it in the air and winked at Emma when he caught it again.

She rolled her eyes. "Was that your move before you met me?"

"It worked," said George, tossing and catching the apple in increasing degrees of performatively. "The ladies love a cricket player."

A few weeks ago Emma would've rolled her eyes and scoffed, but now she loved George and everything about him. "I'll have to bat them away," she said, and her heart warmed when his eyes lit up at the terrible pun.

"Are you a jealous girlfriend?" he asked curiously.

"I haven't been in the past," said Emma. She shot him a warning look. "But I think I might be with you."

George laughed. "I look forward to it, sweetheart."

For some of you it might have felt like James and Louisa leaving the isle was the biggest non-event of the century, but do recall that James and Fred were friends, and James was the only person Fred confided in vis-à-vis Anne. Now James was gone, Fred didn't have any close friends to talk to. He knew many of the contestants would be happy to listen — Emma, most definitely — but he had joined late and didn't have a friendship like Will and George's. He thought about Henry, but the thought of talking to such an unruffled guy about the tender feelings of his heart was not exactly appealing.

Then later, as the day dipped into early evening, Fred and Henry were cooking dinner together. They'd maintained a comfortable atmosphere of minimal speech, but now Henry was cutting up carrots far too aggressively for Fred not to ask him how he was.

"You all right, man?"

Henry looked up. "Yeah."

Fred nodded.

Henry went back to chopping carrots.

"You might want to be careful with that," said Fred, watching Henry from the corner of his eye as he focused on preparing the pasta. "Don't want you to hurt yourself."
Henry's mouth twisted in a smile. "If I do, I'm sure your girlfriend could patch me up."

Fred froze. "Anne isn't my girlfriend."

Henry shrugged, finished chopping carrots and moved onto tomatoes.

"But speaking of… romance," said Fred, as artfully as he could manage, "how are you and Mary?"

Henry stopped chopping tomatoes and laid down the knife. "Who told — what the fuck do you know about that?"

Fred had the feeling that he'd waded into a secret compound, blindfolded, and had just discovered that there was a lot more going on than he'd previously imagined.

"Um," he said.

But Henry too looked awkward and resumed chopping tomatoes. "Never mind."

Fred waited for him to say more.

"Women are fucking exhausting," Henry muttered.

Fred took a leap and asked, "Did something happen?"

Henry gave him a derisive look. "Obviously."

Fred watched the pasta cook and stirred it ad hoc as Henry, saying nothing, continued to prepare ingredients.

Mary walked past with Lizzy in tow. "That smells good!" said Lizzy, sounding surprised. "Especially that sauce."

Fred raised a spatula in thanks. "The sauce was Henry."

"It's not done yet," said Henry, but Lizzy was already dragging Mary over to taste the sauce. Lizzy made an impressed sound. "Not bad for a white boy."

Henry shrugged. "I've been to a lot of good restaurants."

Lizzy rolled her eyes, but Mary was looking at Henry rather strangely.

"Huh," she said, almost aggressively. " Didn't know you could cook."

Henry smiled glibly. "Who would've guessed? I'm good for something."

Fred and Lizzy cleared their throats uncomfortably and Mary left with Lizzy to have a conversation we will cover in just a moment. Before that, though, Fred looked at Henry, who was staring resolutely down at the saucepan.

"Hey man, if you need to talk — "

"Thank you," snapped Henry. "I'm fine."

And now we go over to Mary and Lizzy. "So?" said Lizzy. "What did you want to talk about?"

Mary looked around and saw that the nearest person was George, who was doing laps in the pool.
Satisfied that the surroundings were free from danger, she said in a low whisper, "Crawford and I kissed."

Lizzy barely stopped herself from yelping in surprise. "You what?"

"Kissed," repeated Mary. "Like, three hours ago. It happened in that weird living room no one goes to and it was a complete mistake. He doesn't want me, he just wants the satisfaction of winning over someone who rejected him."

"Mary, that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. Henry's clearly —"

Mary crossed her arms. "No, it's perfectly reasonable. I dislike him. He baits me and fills the room up with sexual tension. I'm fooled into thinking he might actually like and want me. Then I get crushed when he turns out to never have given a shit."

Lizzy put her hand against her head as if she were suffering from an intense migraine. "OK, I'm not even going to let's put your theories about him aside. Do you like him?"

Mary's face scrunched up at the word. "Absolutely not." In the interests of full disclosure, she added, "But the three minutes of making out were quite good."

"Right," said Lizzy. "So why did it only last three minutes?"

"He said something that made me realise he wasn't in it because of his feelings."

Lizzy felt a potentially disastrous idea take hold of her. She knew she shouldn't, but it was just so tempting… "I see," she said. "But I thought you felt nothing but ambivalent hatred for him? Why does it matter about his feelings for you if he's a good kisser?"

Lizzy held her breath as she dropped her bait, but she didn't need to at all because Mary swallowed it effortlessly.

"You're right," she said slowly, as if receiving enlightenment. "Screw this place and its emphasis on emotions. Love is vastly overrated. You know what isn't overrated? Orgasms."

Lizzy had not prepared to see it go that far. "Wait, no, I'm not saying that you should have sex with Henry —"

"Neither am I," Mary shot back. "But if I wanted to, I could. I'm in charge of my own sexuality, Ofcom complaints be damned. I'm attracted to the guy I'm coupled up with but I don't like him as a person or as a potential boyfriend. And that's perfectly acceptable. Thanks, Lizzy. Great chat."

Then she got up to go into the villa for a pre-dinner nap, and Lizzy was left sat on her bean bag feeling a tiny bit responsible for events that might later transpire.

Dinner was as awkward as everyone had come to expect on the isle, and Lizzy talked a lot about the *Lady Chatterley* trial of 1960. Mary and Henry didn't snap at each other which was unusual, and though neither of them had said anything about what had transpired in the living room, something was clearly different between them. Will and Lizzy cleaned the dishes and everyone retreated into the villa to get ready for the evening.

Half an hour later, Mary was sitting with Lizzy and Anne outside. Her mind buzzed with visions of tabloid headlines screaming the radical event of a woman having sex with someone she didn't want to date. Whilst she wasn't exactly planning on doing it, she was realising it as option, and her visions
drew closer to a possibility when Henry strode up to their group and said, "Can I talk to you?"

"Gladly," she said. "Where?"

"Somewhere without everyone in this fucking place listening in."

"Go inside," said Lizzy. "The living room is quite private."

When Henry turned around to head inside, Mary glared daggers at Lizzy. Lizzy grinned.

"I suppose Henry's finally going to make his move," said Anne, once they had gone. "It's about time."

Lizzy raised an eyebrow. "Look at you talking about slow-moving romances."

Anne turned a charming shade of scarlet. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Lizzy rolled her eyes and glanced over at where Fred stood with Will, George and Emma in the kitchen. She made a nodding motion with her head. "That? There's not much time left, Anne. What are you waiting for?"

Anne knew that Lizzy wouldn't understand that she was scared Fred didn't feel the same way. Lizzy was effortlessly confident and assumed that her self-possession extended to everyone else too. So Anne stammered out that she wasn't waiting for anything, but: "I just don't know if I want to say anything in such a **public** way. I don't want to — cheapen it. Or make him think I'm doing it for fame or money or anything that isn't real. And also…"

"Oh, Jesus Christ," said Lizzy. "I can promise you Fred won't think that. Anne, the two of you have been apart for eight years. Are you really going to waste any more time?"

Anne did not have an answer.

Now let us follow Henry and Mary into the villa. Henry had been wavering between talking to Mary and freezing her out all day, but when it came down to it he'd always rather talk. And so after a day of pretending in front of everyone else that nothing had happened, he sought her out.

Owing partly to Lizzy's comment and perhaps to some subtle direction on both their parts, Henry and Mary found themselves back in the secluded living room.

"Should we really be here again?" asked Mary with a veneer of ice when he shut the door.

Henry scowled. "Don't worry, Bennet. I won't assault you."
She leaned against the door and crossed her arms. "So. What did you want to say?"

And there was that tension again, humming between them whenever they were together. Bennet was mad to think it didn't exist, was mad to deny it like she'd done that morning. "Why did you run away this morning?"

Mary swallowed, but she kept her eyes on him and her bored expression in place. "Hmm? I thought we agreed that didn't happen."

"Bullshit," said Henry. "We know it did. Why did you run away?"

Mary lifted her chin a little higher. "Because I didn't want to be there."

Henry's face stilled, and then all of sudden it took on a much less angry, much softer look. Mary felt that they were moving into dangerous waters.

"Really," he said idly, playing with the tassels of his shirt, twirling one around like a gymnast's ribbon. "I'm not convinced. Should we re-enact the scene?"

"No," said Mary, and was relieved when her voice came out clear and strong. If this was going to happen (and she was no fool, they were in this room for a reason, if all he'd wanted was to talk then they'd be up on the terrace) she had to get some things straight.

"Look, Crawford, I'm not interested in your game. However good you are at kissing, I'm sure it's not worth being made a fool of in front of the country."

He stopped playing with the tassel. "What?"

Mary rolled her eyes and continued. "You didn't think I'd caught on? Obviously you're only going after me because it's some privileged male pride thing that I'm one of the few women who've ever rejected you. I was pretty late to realise, but I figured it out when you said — "

"Jesus, Bennet," he said, and his voice came out all low and prickly. Mary's traitorous body shivered and she felt a terrible, undeniable lurch of desire. "You've figured out nothing."

"Actually, I think — "

"Stop thinking."

And then she did, because he'd backed her against the door and his mouth was on hers, hot and demanding and insistent, and it felt so good she chose instead of pushing him away to pull him closer.

"Wait," she said, tearing her lips away. "Do you swear this is real? You're actually attracted to me?"

He lavished another hot, open-mouthed kiss on her, then pulled back to look at her, his eyes heavy-lidded. She would've sworn on anything that he wanted her. "What do you think?"

She reached for him first. So this is happening, she thought dizzily, through the haze of lust. She pulled his hair and mumbled incoherently into his mouth, and almost smiled when he understood immediately, his hand coming up behind her to tug at her braid. She knew this was only physical, but she didn't care; she needed some kind of outlet. She needed to not think.

She broke away from him after a few minutes to murmur, "Sofa."

He groaned against her mouth but loosened his weight on her and they stumbled like disoriented
teenagers towards the only furniture in the room. Her head was spinning as she felt herself falling softly back to where she’d been only hours earlier. They squirmed around, reluctant to break apart, trying to fit themselves comfortably on the tiny space. She hooked a leg around his waist and took shallow, gasping breaths as he kissed his way down her throat.

He licked into her mouth and at the same time his hand slid up her thigh, under her dress, found her underwear and rubbed.

He shouldn’t have done it. Suddenly something in Mary's brain clicked and she realised what she was doing — about to have sex with Henry Crawford on national television, no less.

"Oh my god," she said, tearing her mouth away from his and pushing him back. "Stop. This isn't happening. We can't."

Cassandra had not thought there was a single more awkward experience on earth than watching a sex scene with your parents. She was wrong. Far, far more awkward was watching reality TV sex with two people who clearly fancied each other but hadn't mustered up the courage to communicate. And also one of them was her sister.

So it was a relief (for the three of them, not Henry) when Mary stopped proceedings.

"We can't," she was saying, over and over again, and God fucking dammit he heard her the first time. His hand retreated and he looked up at her, his eyes sleepy and hair mussed. "Mary…"

She pulled her skirt down and forced herself to sit up. "We can't have sex!" she hissed. "This — you — we can't."

"Why not?" he asked, his voice coming out even lower and raspier than usual. "Did you just want to make out and dry hump like teenagers?"

"I wasn't exactly thinking about it," said Mary. She glared at him. "Get off me."

Henry obliged.

"This never happened," she said shakily. She got off the sofa, went towards the door, unlocked it and swept out, tugging her dress into a semblance of neatness and order as she left. Henry refused to watch her go, instead fiddling with his hair and correcting what she'd done to it. Perhaps he would fall asleep here tonight. He had no desire to go back to the group, pretend like he hadn't just been about to have sex with Mary Bennet, get into bed with her and wake up by her side. You could get to the bathroom from here; he wasn't a savage and he would brush his teeth before going to sleep — and then crawl back onto the sofa. Yes, he decided. That was what he'd do.

Meanwhile, Mary strode out of the room and then dashed to the bathroom where she spent ten minutes removing any sign that she'd almost had sex with Crawford on a sofa without even a blanket to protect their modesty. She joined Lizzy, Will and Anne, chatted like nothing had happened and made up an excuse for Henry not coming down. In her mind, she wondered: why wasn't he here? Was he hurt that she'd backed out and not given an explanation? Maybe he was dealing with the situation in his pants, but surely it didn't take this long to — she grimaced. She would not start thinking down that route.

She shrugged. She didn't care. When everyone else got tired, she went up to bed as well, and asked a tech if Crawford was all right. The tech informed her that he was asleep in the living room. Satisfied
and a little disappointed by that answer, she crawled into the bed she had to herself for this evening, and in time fell asleep.

Tom yawned. "I feel the same way myself. I'm going up to bed now. See you in the morning, Cassandra, before you leave?"

Cassandra nodded and Tom left the room. So the coast was clear.

"Jane," she said, "I think we have to talk about you and Tom."

Her sister frowned. "Tom? What about? I thought you were sort of getting along."

Cassandra sighed from the depths of her soul. "How long has Down the Isle been going on?"

"I don't know, a few weeks, a few months? Depends how you measure it."

"Right," said Cassandra. "And how would you describe it?"

"As a reality dating show?"

"OK, but in particular, what's the nature of these romances?"

"... Cassie, if you want to say something, just say it."

"Fine," snapped Cassandra. "I was trying to say it delicately, but you weren't picking up on anything. You're being an idiot about Tom, and as much as I don't like him I know you really do, and for the love of God don't let that or anything else stop you from being happy."

It was in this moment that Jane experienced one of her infamous shocks of fate.

"You can't really be suggesting that I like Tom," she spluttered.

"Worse," said Cassandra darkly. "You love him."

"As a friend! He's my best friend!"

"You like his dumb hair and think he's cute," said Cassandra shortly. "Jane, you're smart and I love you, but sometimes you can be really daft about your own life. I am telling you that Tom is practically devoted to you and has probably known he's in love with you for some time now. For God's sake, sort it out. I don't want to see any more of this mutually oblivious pining-flirting the next time I visit."

And with that, she left the room. Jane sank back into the sofa and replayed Cassandra's words. You love him.

Furiously, she shut off the TV. Then she sat there, alone in a dark room, and wondered how oblivious a student of human nature could be.

Chapter End Notes

Henry Crawford kisses like it's the main act, pass it on. (Note: this is inspired by a line in
Lisa Kleypas's novel Blue-Eyed Devil, when Haven says: “You know how when someone kisses you, you can tell they’re only doing it as a step to something else? Like they’re just trying to get it over with? Well, Hardy kisses like it’s the only thing in the world he wants to do. Each kiss is like a complete sex act.”

I realise I've been talking about Lisa Kleypas in every author's note of late but truly she is fantastic and you're so welcome to hmu for recs xo.

What Henry says to Mary pre-first makeout, 'then be not coy, but use your time,' is from Robert Herrick's poem To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time.

Lots of love for your patience and lovely reviews (I know I haven't got round to some! But I will!) and I'll see you very soon.
The Horizon Tries But...

Chapter Summary

if you've been tracking notifications but not actually reading the fic (which I do too so this isn't a callout x) I just want to say that I'm going to let you, dear readers, vote on the winning couple when the next chapter comes out, and as there's 110k+ worth of fic you MAY want to start catching up so you can vote when chapter 28 hits the screens

Chapter Notes

This one is so fluffy you'll need to brush your teeth afterwards. Also, you have read chapter 26, right? I didn't get my usual reviews but it's cool, I just don't want you to have missed out a crucial chapter.
Title from Arctic Monkeys's Arabella.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Previously on Down the Isle…

A shock dumping yesterday removed new couple Louisa and James and left only four couples on the isle: Emma and George, Lizzy and Will, Henry and Mary, Anne and Fred. Yesterday Henry and Mary made out twice and still managed to avoid talking about their feelings; Anne and Fred had one pitiable conversation about the reconnected high school sweethearts trope and went to sleep facing the other way. Now, with two days left to go, the question we're all asking is: WHAT THE HELL ARE THEY WAITING FOR? Anne's meagre explanation was that she didn't want to make a move while they were both in the villa because it would — and I quote — "cheapen it". Will someone please tell Anne that no one on earth would dare imagine she was cheap and that there is nothing more we'd like to see than she and Fred admitting their love for each other? Emma, maybe?

Cassandra had left early that morning and Jane had driven her to the station. Tom hadn't come; he'd had an important meeting with a client and would be coming back late as well. Jane had had the flat all to herself and it was sort of helpful that on the day she realised she was in love with her best friend, the aforementioned best friend had hardly been around, thus giving her time and space to think about her feelings. She'd calmed down and rationalised that probably it wasn't as bad as she thought. It was just Tom. They had always been comfortable around each other.

Then he came home and scoffed down dinner in the tiny kitchen whilst narrating the free-to-disclose details of his day, and she realised how wrong she was.

He went into his room to change whilst Jane tried to gather her wits. She turned on the TV and watched the adverts dispassionately. It was going to be fine! The worst thing would be if he guessed how she felt, and she could hide that. She had to.

"I haven't missed it, have I?" he asked, skidding into the room and flopping down on the sofa. The
bubbly tones of the *Down the Isle* intro played over the shots of the contestants, and he sighed in relief. Then he saw that Jane had set a can of Guinness on the table (on a coaster, of course) and his face lit up.

"I love you," he announced, taking a swig. Jane froze at the words and it took her a second to realise he didn't mean them in the way she wanted.

"Sorry I've been out so much today," he added idly. "Work, you know."

Jane nodded awkwardly and the episode began.

As per the rules of *Down the Isle* (not that you'd know, because I just made them up) on their penultimate day in the villa each couple was to go on a date. This was not some BTEC fifteen minute picnic that you may have seen on the *Down the Isle* screen before; this was a nice, long, intimate date with food that could definitely pass for Waitrose in origin. The producers were hoping some feelings would be confessed in the romantic setting.

First to go were Lizzy and Will.

"You look beautiful," Will murmured, when Lizzy arrived at the bottom of the stairs, wearing a yellow dress she'd only packed on a whim. She smiled and it was all for him, and they left the villa to much applause.

"This dress is my sister Jane's," said Lizzy, as they walked towards the venue.

"Ah," said Will.

"I, er," said Lizzy, after they'd gone a little further, "dress like a 1950s schoolteacher. A lot of knitted jumpers."

Will tried not to smile. "I see."

"Well, you haven't yet," said Lizzy smartly. She looked at him from the corner of her eye and continued walking. "I just — well, we don't know each other in the context of normal life, so I don't want you to be disappointed when I'm not wearing a cute sundress every day…"

Will frowned as he realised this was a genuine worry Lizzy had. "I won't feel differently about you when you wear different clothes."

Lizzy forced her eyes away from the dusty ground to look at Will. "The clothes are synecdochial," she muttered. "They stand for this whole place." She waved a hand around the vicinity and saw the table that had been set up for their date. "I'm just saying that it'll be different."

Will placed his hand on hers and they stopped walking. He looked at her clearly. "I know. I'm looking forward to it."

Lizzy nodded, then smiled. "Oh, god," she said, as they approached the table stocked with bottles of wine and sat down. "I've never understood the point of this."

Will inspected the various bottles they had been given in turn. "No?"

"My idea of good wine is anything that costs in the double digits," said Lizzy. "I don't really…" She picked up a bottle. "Musk-a-det," she said, confident and atrociously English. "Lovely."
Will's face dipped into a pained expression, and Lizzy laughed so hard she almost fell off her chair.

Fred was putting the washed breakfast plates back into the cupboard when he turned around, and there stood Anne.

"Oh," he said, which was a terrible thing to say upon seeing the love of your life. "Sorry, I didn't hear you coming."

Anne stood there clasping her wrists ineffectively. "No, that's all right, I didn't — I was just coming to get a glass of water."

"Oh, of course," said Fred, and moved out of the way so she could reach the cupboard. He busied himself with rearranging the fruit basket so he didn't look like the pathetic guy who had nothing better to do than stand around when the —

She was saying something. "...doesn't have to be awkward, right? I did really mean it when I said we should be friends, and just because the situation is weird doesn't mean we have to be. It can be a friend date."

Fred's eyebrows shot up. Surely she wasn't… no, of course she didn't mean what he'd thought.

When they had first started going out in Year Ten, they labelled their time spent together 'friend dates' because they wanted to keep what they were a secret. Over time it had become a comfortable joke among their friends that shared study periods, after school hangouts and trips to the cinema were Anne and Fred's 'friend dates'. But of course that wasn't what she had meant to remind him of, because the words had just slipped naturally out and she'd continued talking about the other couples and the show's end.

"I asked a tech and our date is tonight. So, you know, don't eat too much dinner." She smiled. "You and Will are cooking tonight, right?"

Their date? What was she… oh. Somehow, Fred had forgotten that he and Anne, because technically they were coupled up, would be going on a date sometime today.

And here she was extending the bloody hand of friendship, and there were only two days left of this, and for God's sake what had he been waiting for? He knew what he wanted. It had never changed.

"Fred?"

He blinked. "Hmm?" he said, and that was shitty because it seemed like he hadn't been listening to her — which technically he hadn't, but that was because he was thinking about her.

Anyway, it didn't matter what he said now. All that mattered was what he said tonight.

"I want to say something," said Will, as they sat overlooking the glittering blue sea. Lizzy had laughed when he'd protested that you didn't drink wine at a wine tasting and proceeded to down it, so he'd given in and poured himself a full glass too. This was the first good wine he'd had all this time on the isle and he drank it slowly, savouring the taste and the moment.

She winked. "Careful now."

He didn't exactly smile, and that was how she knew how serious he was.
He took a deep breath. "I came on this show thinking I'd have a sober holiday and find some new mates. I wasn't very serious about the love part."

"I know," said Lizzy.

Will gave her a look. She acquiesced.

"The first few days were fine, and then I saw you walk in. I hadn't even met you, but immediately a part of me knew."

Lizzy was somewhat horrified to realise that tears were forming in her eyes. "Will…"

"I'm telling the truth," he said. "It was like being struck. Something settled in my stomach and I didn't know what it was."

"You didn't act like you'd been struck by my beauty," said Lizzy. "I'm pretty sure the first thing you said to me was an insult."

"I was only repaying the favour," he said.

They smiled at each other.

"Everyone knows that I didn't like you very much at first," Lizzy admitted. "I'm sorry. But in my defence, you didn't exactly — "

"I know," he said. "You don't have to explain."

She put her hand in his where it lay on the table. "I love you," she said, looking deep into his eyes. "I really do. The way you are with me — the way I feel when we're together — I've never felt like this before." She blinked away tears. "I know it's special. You make me so, so happy… You're the most considerate man I've ever known, Will Darcy."

He swallowed thickly. "I wasn't this considerate before I met you."

"I don't believe that. You were just less open about it."

He raised an eyebrow. "We can ask my sister and friends when we get back. They'll definitely say you've improved my personality."

"Oh, well, I couldn't argue with that. You're much nicer to be around now."

Will's mouth dipped into a smile, and Lizzy couldn't help herself from leaning forward and kissing it.

Now that we've sent the wholesomeness of Will and Lizzy out of the villa on a date, the tone is appropriate to deal with Mary and Henry.

Mary had effectively been hiding from Henry ever since she'd left the living room last night, horrified at how far she'd let things go and still kind of aroused. No one had said anything about Henry not being in the communal bedroom last night, though Lizzy had lingered in the dressing room for several moments to indicate to Mary she was willing to talk. Now, having suffered a fitful sleep, Mary was vacillating between pushing what had happened to the far recesses of her mind, and being unable to think about anything else.

Quite simply, she had no idea how to go from here.
She looked up and saw that it was George standing the doorway of the bedroom — surprisingly, without Emma.

"Hey, George," she said, trying to toe the line between polite and 'please go away I don't want to speak to anyone'.

"Are you in here alone?" he asked, looking down the length of the room.

Mary's eyes widened. No, he couldn't know — could he? She'd told Lizzy, but that was only about the first time. (Oh, God, there'd been more than one time…)

Out loud, she said, "Why wouldn't I be?"

George raised an eyebrow. "No reason."

Mary waited for him to walk down the room and out towards the rest of the villa, which was clearly where he'd been heading.

"Look," he said, sitting down on a nearby bed and facing her like a dad trying to talk to his teenage children. "I know we haven't spoken much, but of course I'm always here for you. It's all right to feel confused, angry or frustrated in here. And sometimes it's easier to talk to someone you don't know very well because you don't feel so much pressure to be someone they think you are."

Mary rolled her eyes, though deep down she appreciated the sentiment much more than she wanted to show. "Did Emma put you up to this?"

George smiled. "No. It's something I figured out by myself. You're one of the most outgoing people in here; today you've been a recluse."

"Oh." Mary bit her lip. She'd come on the isle after Emma and George had got together, so she hadn't really known them as separate individuals. It had been easy to assume that Emma led George around by the nose. Now she realised that George was much more clued up than most people gave him credit for.

And why not tell him? Maybe his insights would surprise her.

"I made out with Crawford," Mary admitted. George blinked, and Mary decided to add details. "Ferociously. And it happened twice. Then I ran away and now later today I'm going to have to go on a date with him, and I don't want to do it."

"That is… a lot."

"What were you expecting?"

George's smile held in spite of her attitude. "I wasn't entirely sure. But do you regret it?"

"Yes!"

"OK, why?"

"Because — because I can't be making out with someone I hate!"

"Do you really hate him?"
Mary stared at George's face, judging him objectively quite attractive, actually, in a cutest guy at the office kind of way.

She didn't like her answer to his question.

He lifted his eyebrows. "I'm going to leave before I feel like I've interfered too much. When Emma hears about this she's going to bring it up for the next twenty years and I want to have some kind of defence." He patted Mary's shoulder in a way that was surprisingly not awkward and left.

The next twenty years. Because, of course, everyone here had found true love. Emma and George, Lizzy and Will, Anne and Fred (who were too scared to admit it, but Mary wasn't an idiot). Left over were she and Henry, the weird hate-pairing whose angry makeouts were a gross parody of what this place was actually about. Speaking to George had been helpful, after all. However ineffably attracted she was to Henry, it was probably amplified by the fact that everyone else here was in love, and being around them just made Mary lonely. It wasn't real, thank God, and when they left, it would fade. It was stupid to imagine they were in any way like the others.

In another part of the villa, Anne was eating to try and distract herself.

Having escaped from that disastrous interaction with Fred in the kitchen, she had scoped out an empty stretch of corridor on the first floor and was curled up in an alcove with a jar of sweets. Lizzy and Will were the two most likely people she would've gone to with this, but they were out on their final date, and also Anne knew Lizzy's patience was somewhat thin on the issue of Fred. Emma would dismiss the possibility that Fred didn't feel the same way, and Mary had her own romantic problems to deal with. Anne did not want to seek advice from George (who might tell Fred) or Henry (who would probably laugh for a long time before saying something profoundly unhelpful), and thus she was left with no one.

She sighed and ate another jelly bean. Earlier, she had cast away her self-made excuses and tried to talk to Fred again. She had tactfully suggested that they approach tonight as a 'friend date' — a mammoth hint referencing their old relationship, with implications of her hopes for their future. He hadn't caught on. She tried not to feel disconsolate; after all, not remembering one decade-old joke hardly equated to not being interested in her. But still. It was a bad sign.

Or, he had understood her hint and merely pretended to be oblivious to let her down lightly, indicating that he just wanted to be friends. And was he right? Should they just be friends? She hadn't come on the isle to rekindle something with her one and only romantic experience. Did this mean she wasn't moving forward? Did she really like Fred now, or did she just like the memories she associated with him?

These thoughts were interrupted by footsteps coming down the stairs.

"Anne!" said Emma, clearly not realising that this was her hiding spot. "Have you seen George?"

Anne blinked. "George? Er, no."

Emma shrugged. "Oh, never mind. I'll hang out with you instead." There was enough space for two and Emma climbed inside the alcove. "How are you?"

Anne liked Emma. She was smart and outspoken and a completely loyal, genuinely caring friend. But she was also persistent, determined and confrontational, and one look at Anne's sugar-heavy snacking would immediately reveal that something was up.

Emma's eyes drifted to the dwindling quantity of jelly beans in the jar that nestled in the crook of
Anne sighed. Whilst she knew what Emma would say, and furthermore she doubted Emma's ability to keep secrets from anyone, let alone George (the entire plot of chapter 20 being evidence for this), there was no use pretending everything was fine now.

"It's Fred," said Anne resignedly. She moved her hands helplessly. "I don't know what to do. And we'll have to go on a horribly romantic date tonight, and I just… I need a plan."

"I understand perfectly," said Emma, in a tone of such confidence that Anne almost felt everything would be all right. "Well, firstly, you need to know how you feel about — hi, babe!"

The figure of George Knightley emerged. "Hello," he said cautiously, coming down the corridor Anne had previously thought was a good hiding place. "What's going on here?"

"Emma was just helping me through my…" Anne considered the consequences of letting George in on her secret as well. On the one hand, telling Emma was basically equivalent to telling George. On the other, why was she telling more people who couldn't help her about her problem, instead of the one person who might?

In any case, it didn't matter. "We're back!" Lizzy called from downstairs, and Anne followed Emma and George into the villa atrium to greet her friends. She pushed aside thoughts of Fred and went to hug Lizzy, then Will.

"It was lovely," Lizzy said, her eyes sparkling and a happy glow over her face. "And I discovered what I always knew in my heart: Will is a massive wine snob."

"You're a juice snob," muttered Will.

"Wine is worse!" sang Lizzy. He quirked a brow and she grinned at everyone. "So, what did we miss?"

The sounds of Lizzy and Will returning from their magical date drifted through to the bedroom and shook Mary out of her pity party. This was ridiculous. What was she scared of? She had faced far worse than this. All she needed to do was spend half an hour alone with Henry, which would be fine. Awkward, absolutely, but she doubted that he’d want to talk about last night either. They would have an untelevisably inane conversation, and a day later she’d never have to see him again.

When the date came, she eschewed the girls’ offers of help for getting ready, pulled on a dress nicked from Lizzy's wardrobe and marched down the stairs.

"Let's get this over with," Mary muttered, seeing Henry standing at the villa door.

"My thoughts exactly," said Henry.

They said nothing on their way to the date, mostly because it was surprisingly windy out and it was difficult to hear anything in the truck they were being escorted in.

They sat down in front of a selection of sliced fruit and small desserts placed on a tiered cake stand.

Mary set the tone. "Well, this is fucking awkward."

Henry sighed. "Can you be nice?" he asked.

Predictably, she bristled. "Why should I be nice to you?"
"Answering a question with a question," he said approvingly. "I mean it, though. Like, can you be nice? Or is it not in your nature?"

"I'm very nice," said Mary, a little peevishly. "Just not to you."

For some reason, that made him laugh.

She didn't like that he was laughing. It made her feel unsteady and the last thing she wanted was to amuse him.

"Why are you here?" she asked, focusing on a cupcake. "On the show?" There. That was a nice thing to ask. Maybe that would stop him laughing too.

He shrugged and ate some kiwi. "Some mates dared me and I thought it would be a laugh."

Eerily similar to her own story. "And has it?"

He looked right at her. "Not in the way I expected."

Oh god. "I've been surprised, too," she said, steering the conversation away from dangerous waters. "Like I never thought I'd be friends with an uptight posho like Will."

"But a relaxed posho like me…?" She didn't say anything and he added, "Though I suppose we've moved past friendship."

Mary swallowed and her cupcake lay untouched on her plate. "Can we, um, not talk about that?"

"About what?"

"You and me," she ground out. "All that stuff yesterday. We'll pretend it never happened. Have you never had an embarrassing, meaningless hookup before?"

Henry paused, and for a moment Mary could've sworn he looked… hurt.

"We have to talk about it," he said.

Mary's mouth sat in a stubborn line. "No, we don't."

"Yes, we do."

"No, we — "

"Stop it," he snapped. She raised her eyebrows; Henry never snapped. He just swanned through life saying things in a tone that suggested he didn't really care.

"What is there to talk about?" she mumbled. "We almost had sex before I realised at the eleventh hour it would be a giant, colossal mistake. We only have to be around each other for two more days before we leave and never see each other again."

He peeled a cupcake. "Is that what you want?" he asked in a neutral tone.

And then Mary knew she really was royally fucked, because it wasn't what she wanted at all.

"What are you scared of?" he asked softly. "Why did you run away last night?"

"Because I didn't want to be around you," she said.
"Why not?"

"Because — because I didn't know what to do." His eyebrows shot up and she could already hear the innuendo in his mouth. "Don't," she said warningly.

His eyebrows sank back down.

"I wanted you to stay," he said, and touched his tongue to the corner of his mouth where a strategically placed bit of frosting had been.

She scoffed and speared some fruit onto her plate. "Because you wanted to get laid."

"No," he said. "I mean, yes. But I wanted you to stay," he repeated, and it held all the weight of a much stronger admission.

Mary looked down at the beautiful white tablecloth.

"Oh, fuck it," she said. "What do you want me to say? I like you? Because I really don't! I kind of wish that we'd gone home instead of Louisa and James, because we so obviously don't belong here among all the happy couples." She sucked in a breath. "Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Henry said, "You really don't like me?"

Mary felt her temper reach boiling point. "That's what you got from that? I was telling you all about my fucking insecurities being here, and — actually, I don't know why I'm surprised. Of course you'd focus on the part about you."

He gritted his teeth. "It's not as if I can do anything about the other stuff. Look, if you really feel so out of place, then leave."

Mary gulped. "Fine. Maybe I will."

Neither of them said anything. She chased a melon slice around her plate.

"You won't actually go," he said.

Mary dropped her spoon and it clattered noisily. "Obviously not. There's no point. There's only two days left."

"Or," said Henry, because he couldn't think of any other way to get her to react, "you won't leave because secretly, you want to be around me. And once this ends you won't have an excuse to see me again, so you're just sticking around, waiting for something to happen, because you're too much of a coward to take the risk yourself."

Mary sat back, awestruck.

"Struck dumb by my accuracy?" he asked.

"No," she said, her voice coming out choked. How did he… She shook herself. She was proud, but not proud enough to sit here and be teased about her unrequited feelings. She fumbled around her mind for familiar words that had worked before. "You're so… unbelievably arrogant! You know what? I don't have to be here." She looked around for the show assistant who was loitering by the trees. "I don't have to be here, and I don't want to be. Can I go?"
Tom sucked in a breath. "Well, that went terribly."

Jane didn't respond.

"Jane?"

"Hmm? Yes, me too."

Tom frowned. "Did you hear what I said?"

"... No."

"Are you all right? You've been acting weird."

"Weird? Me? No."

"... OK, if you say so."

Only a few of the contestants had seen Henry and Mary re-enter the villa, but news spread fairly quickly that it had not been a good date and they had retreated to opposite corners of the villa to brood, alone. Lizzy and Anne had braved their way inside and tapped on a door behind which they guessed was Mary. After thirty seconds of silence, Mary had muttered, "I'm fine," and Lizzy and Anne had deemed it best to let her be.

"I don't get it," Lizzy said later, as she sat with Will and Anne in the kitchen. "So they don't like each other?"

Anne shrugged. "Apparently not."

Will's response was to pour Lizzy more orapple juice.

Lizzy smiled at him and drank it before making a dramatic proclamation. "Because last night, Mary told me that she and Henry made out."

"Lizzy! "Shitting fuck." "Was that something you were allowed to tell us?"

Lizzy seemed unbothered by their exclamations. "But that's wild, right?"

Anne and Will looked at each other.

"Pretty wild," admitted Anne, as Will said, "Absolutely un-fucking-precedented."

"Well, I wouldn't say unprecedented. All that sexual tension had to go somewhere."

"Except now instead of bickering, they won't even talk to each other," said Anne. She frowned. "I always thought they liked each other, in spite of the bickering."

"Or because of the bickering," said Lizzy. She was in her element here, cheerfully analysing other people's actions. "Like Will and I. We did not get along at first."

Sitting nearby on the swing set with George and Fred was Emma, who chose to interrupt this moment by yelling, "You're not the blueprint for romance, Lizzy!"

"Getting competitive at last, Em?"
"That money's mine!"

"And mine!" added George.

Lizzy grinned and turned back to Anne and Will. "The best part is I can't even tell if she's joking."

Anne frowned. "I think she is." She lowered her voice. "Isn't Emma quite well off?"

"Yep!" came Emma's cheerful shout.

Will frowned. "How did she hear that?"

Emma and George were next to go, and their date was a hot air balloon ride. But who cares about that? Let's get to the juicy stuff.

"Do you think we're going to win?" asked Emma, who wasn't particularly struck by the magic of being a few thousand feet above the ground because she'd done this many times before.

George choked on his champagne. "Not after you've said that."

Emma scoffed. "I'm pretty sure the people who don't like me already don't like me. Anyway, I don't think we'll win."

George grinned. "No?"

Emma leaned back from the barrier to look at George. "Don't get me wrong, I'd love it if we did — "

"Of course."

" — But I'm perfectly happy if we don't." She frowned. "I don't want to come last though. But even if we do, I found you, and you're worth much more than winning some cash and being able to write 'Down the Isle winner 2019 ' in my Instagram bio."

George smiled at her, and Emma felt the thud in her chest that always accompanied one of George's smiles.

"So who do you think has captured the public's heart?" George asked. "If not us."

Emma hummed. "Lizzy and Will."

"Really?"

"Or Anne and Fred," she added quickly.

"But not Mary and Henry."

Emma pulled a face. "Those two? They're not so much a slow burn as a childish tangle of pride, unresolved tension and blatant ignorance of what's right in front of them."

George coughed. "Maybe… things have moved on a bit."

Emma immediately narrowed her eyes. "Hang on. Did you do something?"

He prefaced his confession with, "This is not the same as you interfering in people's relationships."

"Well, tell me what you did, so I can decide if you're right or not."
George sighed. He'd kept it a secret for four hours; that wasn't a duration to be ashamed of. "I talked to Mary this morning, and I may have suggested that she was only telling herself she hated Henry, because I left her in a state of silent shock and then, obviously, her date with Henry didn't go well."

Emma's eyes widened and George swore he could see the dots connect rashly in her brain. "OR, it did go well and they pretended that it had gone badly to put us off their case, and they're actually having sex in a room of the villa!"

He sighed and offered a conceding, "Maybe?"

"But more to the point," said Emma, grinning exuberantly at him, "You are so sly! Getting Mary to realise her feelings? I didn't know you had it in you!"

"I thought you might rail at me for being a hypocrite," he admitted. "After all the sideline lecturing I've given you for getting involved in other people's relationships."

She smiled. "Not at all. I'm delighted you've seen my way of things."

"No, that's not — that's not what's happened here."

"Isn't it? You thought that Mary and Henry needed some help…"

"I found Mary by coincidence and thought she needed someone to talk to."

"You meddled because you thought it would help! You, George Knightley, are a — "

Sadly we will never get to hear what George was, because in an age old tradition of romance culture, he'd stopped her mid-sentence by kissing her.

By the time Emma and George came back from their date, it was time for dinner. Will and Fred had whipped up something with a lot of cheese and even more pasta, which was eaten in the usual spirit of things. Lizzy, Emma, Will and George supplied decent conversation, but Mary and Henry weren't talking because they were angry at each other, and Anne and Fred weren't talking because… well. They had sort of telepathically agreed to save all they had to say to each other for their date.

And then the time came. Anne's heart had been hammering in her chest all throughout dinner, and now it was fit to burst. She'd kept to herself for most of the day, thinking over and preparing and then tearing apart what she wanted to say. Her mind was still in a confusion. But there wasn't time to sit and think any more.

They were driven to the date location in a truck that greatly resembled the one in *Twilight* and deposited at the foot of a staircase in a stone castle, with the sunset casting everything around them in pink and orange light.

She looked at him. "So we just…"

"Climb up to the top."

Fred held out his hand and Anne took it, and the atmosphere swept around her until she felt that she was in another world. Slowly they climbed up the stairs, and Anne gasped when they reached the top and she saw the setting. Every available inch of the place was covered in flickering candles, and a table had been set up by the corner overlooking the grounds below.

Anne swallowed. "Shall we?"
"A bloody ad break," sighed Tom. He emptied the bag of Doritos into his mouth. "Look, if this doesn't end up being what I think it is…"

"Just out of curiosity," said Jane, in a tone that made the question seem instinctive rather than something she'd been planning for the last hour, "what do you think Anne should do?"

Tom frowned. "About Fred?"

"Yes," said Jane. "I mean, she's probably just realised she's in love with him, and she's said she's hesitant to — to ruin their friendship."

Tom arched a brow. "Their friendship?"

"Yes," persisted Jane. "They do sort of have one."

Tom was quiet for a few moments, and Jane sat impatiently in her spot on the sofa, hoping desperately that he hadn't seen through her and realised what she was really asking.

"Clearly he feels the same way, so of course she should tell him."

"Right," said Jane, a bit desperately. "But she doesn't know that, so if you were to approach it from her perspective…"

"I think she does," said Tom. "She knows him so well, she must know."

"But she's so unsure!"

"She shouldn't be."

Jane drew in a breath. The ambiguous pronouns flew around and she wasn't sure who they were talking about any more…

The ad break ended and they turned their attention back to the TV.

Anne and Fred were standing at the stairtop entrance to the roof of a renovated Spanish castle. There were candles everywhere and on the ground below, a guitarist was playing Albeniz.

If there was ever a more perfect moment…

"Shall we sit down?" said Fred. Anne nodded wordlessly and he drew her towards the table. A meal was laid out with two low candlesticks in the middle of the table. She sat down as if in a dream. A strange anticipation was thrumming in her veins and she felt she was moving through the prelude to something big.

"Cheers," he said, lifting his glass.

Anne lifted hers as well. "What shall we toast to?"

A wry smile settled on his face. "Making it to the final?"

"Sure, we can cheers to that." They clinked glasses and she sipped at her champagne. She noticed he didn't drink much of his either.
"What do you plan to do when we leave here?" he asked, lowering his eyes to his plate.

He was giving her an easy question to answer. She had lots of plans: going back to work, obviously; arranging trips to see the friends she'd made in here; an inevitable family dinner she was too weakly optimistic to blow off. But abruptly she realised she didn't want to say any of those things. She looked at Fred, sitting there beside her as the sun set behind him and threw its coloured inks all across the sky. The light peeked through the trees that lined the horizon and words that would liberate her formed in her throat. She couldn't contain them another moment.

"I want to try again," she said. She looked at him because she couldn't look anywhere else. "You and I. I haven't — I haven't given much indication of how I feel, I know, and I'm sorry, but now that I know you again I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't tell you, and if we can forgive each other about the past then surely..."

It was not a perfectly romantic moment. Fred had started on his steak, and his fork had been halfway towards his mouth when Anne began her speech.

"And it'll be different this time," she said. "We're not the same, we're older, and I really think I'm — ready. I don't know how you feel but for me I don't — I've never wanted anyone else, and I just have to say it, I think I'll go mad if I don't, so..." She sucked in a breath. "That's what I hope for when we leave." She swallowed and her eyes met his again over the soft candlelight. "How about — how about you?"

He was looking at her in a way that pierced right through to her heart, and she stared back, her surety showing in her eyes.

"Do you really mean it?" he asked fiercely. "Anne, do you really mean it?"

"Of course I really mean it!" she broke out. "When have I ever said I was sure of something I wasn't?"

His eyes blazed as they fixed on her and she felt herself unable to breathe. The whole of the world hung in the balance in this moment. Then he leaned across the corner of the table and she could barely register what was happening, except she must've known because she moved forwards too.

"The candlesticks!" she gasped, thinking what an apt metaphor but terrible thing it would be if they both caught fire, but then Fred's hand was cupping her chin and his mouth fit perfectly over hers, and she found she didn't care if the whole of this medieval Spanish castle burnt down, so long as this moment never ended. How could it be that the entire world had contracted to one feeling? To the camera it must've looked desperate, almost clumsy, but to Anne it was as vital as air. Each kiss was an assurance for what they were promising, the meeting of their lips the answer to her question. Yes. Yes, I want to try again.

Breathlessly, they broke apart. She tried to distill and show on her face the joy that was racing through her heart, but a smile didn't do it justice. Any doubt she might've had was gone now, replaced with the bone-deep knowledge that it was Fred, it had always been Fred. In this moment, looking at him, she could hardly believe she'd ever thought anything different.

He hadn't stopped looking at her since they sat down, but now he spoke and his voice was low and passionate. "I swear, Anne, if you're serious about this, I'm never letting you go."

"Good," Anne breathed. Finally, everything felt right. "I don't intend to go."
The episode drew itself to a close, panning out on a gorgeous shot of two young people in one mind sitting and talking on a warm summer night. How many more conversations like this were happening across the world?

In ---ton, two other young people were sitting and talking in a rented flat.

"So that just leaves…"

"Henry and Mary," said Jane. She frowned. "I never really got them. Maybe they won't get together. Not everyone deserves a happy ending, you know."

"No?"

"No," confirmed Jane. "People make mistakes and choose a different ending for themselves. And real life is never fair."

Tom said, "Do you think you deserve a happy ending?"

Her heart beat quickly under her skin and she found herself short of breath. If asked, Jane would say she was satisfied with her life. She loved her work and she loved her family, and she was healthy and fulfilled with nothing to complain about. But when Tom looked at her like that, focused and insistent and utterly absorbed in the moment they were sharing, she found it an unwelcome reminder that there were things in the world she wanted and didn't have, and she almost hurt from how much she wanted them.

"Well, happy endings only exist in fiction," she said intellectually. "Real life keeps going on."

Tom looked away and she felt herself breathe again. "Right."

She nodded. "It's late. I think I'll go to bed."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Chapter End Notes

Oh my god, Anne and Fred, my two sweet darlings, finally! I hope it was up to all your expectations — I know everyone LOVES Anne and if this fic has a main character it would lean towards her, and she deserves a passionate and beautiful romantic resolution. I spent ages trying to work out how to say it without using the horribly mathematical word 'perpendicular', but I don't think I ended up describing it clearly. If this detail nagged at your brain, be at peace now when I say that on their date, Anne and Fred aren't sitting across from each other. They're sitting on adjacent sides of the square. Thus, kissing isn't an awkward leaning-over-table thing.

Also just to clarify, this 'episode' hasn't ended at the end of the day. Chapter 28 picks up back in the villa for the rest of the evening. And Fred hasn't done his speech yet… We're nearing the end! I'll definitely finish this by mid-September, but frankly I can't quite believe I've been consistently writing one fic for four months. Your comments and Tumblr asks have been so invaluable and I treasure them all <333
...It's Just Not as Kind on the Eyes

Chapter Summary

This is the voting chapter! Voting will close in a week, i.e. 10/9/19, so if you want to vote there's a ticking clock on reading this chapter.

Chapter Notes

And so the denouement begins. This one is quite slow-paced, but the gang comes together to reminisce and hopefully it puts you in good mind of how you're going to vote.

Title from other half of chapter 27's lyric, still Arctic Monkeys's Arabella.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Previously on Down the Isle…

With the final only a day away, our couples were treated to a series of spectacular dates that probably blew our budget. Lizzy and Will enjoyed a sophisticated and romantic wine tasting: the only time on the isle Will has been able to showcase his unique set of skills. Henry and Mary had a rather different experience when they sat down to eat dessert. Henry tried to goad Mary into admitting she liked him, and though she'd all but admitted her feelings for Henry to George that morning, she wasn't ready to announce them. They stormed off in separate directions. Moving on, we declare that Emma and George's hot air balloon date, which followed, was the cutest thing ever aired on television. Finally we sent Anne and Fred off to a candlelit dinner atop a medieval castle, where in the bask of an Iberian sunset Anne declared she wanted to "try again," and Fred's kissing did the replying for him.

With one day to go, Henry and Mary are the only couple who aren't together. Will they succumb to the pressures of the environment? Time is running out, but perhaps this evening is the moment they've been waiting for…

"Can you pass me the cashews?"

Tom tossed the bag to Jane and she caught it deftly.

"Thanks."

"No problem."

She opened the bag and started eating.

Tom frowned. Ages ago, he'd had this stupid idea that he'd wait until Down the Isle was finished to say how he felt. Watching the show together every night for weeks had become an important part of
their friendship, and it felt right to pay mind to its end. But what was the point in waiting? He wanted to tell her. He had to, or he'd probably go insane. She was licking something off the corner of her mouth and Tom felt like the most pathetic specimen of humanity for not being able to look away. At least if she rejected him he could bury his feelings and start anew —

"Tom? Are you paying attention?"

He was, but probably not in the way she wanted.

"Yes," he lied. He cleared his throat. "Er, I think that's a great idea."

Jane grinned and he felt a wave of relief at not being caught. "You do? I mean, I don't know what publication's going to go for that kind of story. They have to be trashy enough to care, but not too trashy I will never escape the shame…"

"Definitely," said Tom.

"And I'll have to interview all the contestants, which would be a pain as there's at least twenty of them…"

Ah. Jane's idea was an article on all of this year's Down the Isle contestants one year later. "I'm sure you'll find a way," said Tom. "Plus, one year later, most of them might not even have that much to say. And if they don't, you can just stalk their Instagrams."

Jane rolled her eyes affectionately. "Sure, that's what I do when I research a piece."

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So last episode we left off with Anne and Fred proving to us that love is real with their rooftop confessions, but there was reality TV gold happening inside at the same time. Mary and Henry had holed themselves up in opposite corners of the villa following their explosive-in-a-bad-way date, but they had finally come out of their respective hibernations for the evening. Henry was plotting silently up on the terrace, and there we will leave him for a few minutes. Mary was with Lizzy in the kitchen, doing what she would've described as talking, but what most other people would call ranting.

Lizzy took the chance when Mary finally paused long enough to allow her to speak. "Sorry, I don't understand the problem? He's asking you to date him. Clearly you're attracted to him. You should say yes."

Mary scoffed. "I knew you would say that. You've lost your mind."

"If you don't like him, why is this even a problem you need to talk about?"

"Because... because he's still pursuing me, like Antigonus and the fucking bear, and he obviously doesn't mean it. It's just embarrassing for both of us that he keeps doing it even though I've clearly said no."

Lizzy raised an eyebrow. "But you haven't. Last night you kissed him."

Mary scowled. "That didn't mean anything."

"To you, obviously."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Lizzy mimicked Mary's suspicious tone. "What do you think it means?"
Mary glared at her, and Lizzy asked sweetly, "Sorry, have I stepped out of line?"

"You're wrong," said Mary baldly. "This isn't some fucking enemies to lovers slow burn. Crawford is a pain in the arse I'll be rid of in two days, and I swear I'm counting down the hours until we can be free of each other."

Lizzy just laughed, which made Mary all the more uneasy.

Variety is the spice of life, and at the end of our last episode we left Anne and Fred on the terrace. They're still there, but they've abandoned the formal table setting for an old stone bench where they can sit together, drink champagne and cuddle under a tartan blanket.

Fred said, "I have a confession to make."

Anne tilted her head from where it leant against Fred's shoulder and smiled. "Yes?"

"I lied. The producers didn't track me down and get me to come on here. Sophy watches the show and kept the fact that you were on it from me for days. She eventually told me and I realised I had to come on."

She hummed meditatively. "That was brave of you."

"Because…"

"Because we hadn't seen each other or spoken in years, and you were going to be stuck in a villa with me. What if we met again and you didn't… or I didn't… not that I don't, but you didn't know that…"

Somehow Fred managed to decipher this unfinished rambling and put together that Anne was asking how he knew.

He lifted his head from where it was resting on hers and she sat back so their eyes could meet. "I did know," he said. "I mean I knew about my feelings — yours have been a mystery to me for this whole time, until two hours ago."

She laughed.

"Seriously," he said. "Sophy didn't tell me at first because she knew how much you meant to me; how much you've always meant to me. I started watching the show filled with forced scepticism; I told myself that I'd changed and you'd changed, and there was no way I could still feel what I used to feel for you." He shrugged. "I could."

"But I know I've changed," said Anne.

"Not in any of the ways that made me love you."

She didn't say anything; just looked at him.

He continued. "The truth is… I'd spent all those years kidding myself. I've never been able to forget you. No one in all the time we were apart ever came close to you, so after a while I just gave up. I thought that I was fine being alone. But really, I just didn't want anyone who wasn't you."

Anne felt a lump rise in her throat. "That's exactly how I felt," she said softly. "Then you were so far away that it was stupid to pin all my — all my romantic possibilities onto you. I told myself that I was idealising what we had. I ended up here because I was sick of my own excuses." She smiled up
It was one of those quiet nights when everything felt still: the air, the mood, time itself. Its calmness was completely at odds with the explosive happiness that had taken hold of Anne. She couldn't quite believe it. Fred was here and would be for a long, long time — the rest of her life, she hoped. A month ago, she'd never have allowed herself to even imagine this happening.

"I told myself it was selfish and stupid to come on the show. I didn't know if you'd forgotten me or didn't want anything to do with me. I was already watching every episode multiple times like some desperate creep — but Sophy told me that was fine; it was basically like I was stalking your Instagram."

Anne said, "I don't have Instagram."

He smiled ruefully. "I know."

"Because you tried to stalk me on there?"

"Correct."

They both laughed and she would've sworn she'd never felt lighter, never felt happier.

"Anyway," he said, "back to the story of me watching reality TV every night because you were on it. I was going to wait for the show to end before reaching out to you, and if you found someone along the way, then I told myself I'd be content if we were just friends. But in the second week you mentioned me…"

Anne frowned. "I did?"

"Well, not by name," said Fred, with a flash of a grin. "But you mentioned a 'dumb teenage relationship that I haven't — anyway', and looked flustered. Firstly — "

"I don't think it was dumb," she said immediately. "Of course it wasn't; it was the most important relationship of my life. I probably just said what I said to preserve my cool factor."

They laughed again. It was nice to laugh together. She missed simple things like that.

Then he looked at her innocently, but she saw the mirth dancing in his eyes. "So, your not-dumb teenage relationship that you haven't… what?"

She found herself fighting down a smile. "Do you need me to tell you? It sounds like you'd decided the end of that sentence for yourself."

"I'd decided what I wanted it to be," he said. "I called a million phone numbers trying to get in touch with the producers. Finally they got round to me and I had many intense interviews until they were convinced I was who I said I was, and fit to go on the show. They said I was welcome to go about things however I wanted, but they wouldn't save me from being dumped. And eventually I had to tell you how I felt."

Anne lifted her head and raised her eyebrows. "Oh, you did? Because you cut it pretty fine."

"I really was going to do it tonight," he said. "You were just a step ahead of me."

She looked mildly disappointed. "It took me until the penultimate day to do it. I'll admit, it was stupid of me to not realise what a gesture you coming here was."
"Yep," he said, and she laughed happily. He wrinkled his nose. "And it seems stupid that I ever pretended I wasn't in here for you."

"I believed it," protested Anne.

Fred raised an eyebrow at the same time he wrapped her hands in his. "We've both been stupid. I should've done something, anything, years earlier. As risky as it would've been… that wouldn't have mattered if you'd said yes. Instead I waited until I saw you on a stupid TV show getting close to a prick called Ellis."

Anne knew that Fred knew perfectly well that Ellis wasn't his name. "Elliot," Anne corrected. "And you owe a lot to this stupid show."

"I do," agreed Fred easily. He drew his arm around her and she laid her head on his shoulder again. "It's been very good to me. It's given me a feeling I'm not really used to."

"What feeling?" asked Anne.

"Feeling happier than I think I deserve."

Has that filled up your romantic cravings? I hope not, because here's more.

Henry Crawford was not the sort of man given to grand gestures, but if the mad blood were ever to stir it would be tonight. Emma, George, Lizzy, Will and Mary were milling around downstairs outside, and whilst it was a shame that Anne and Fred weren't back yet, Henry decided he would have to make do with an audience of four.

Mary suspected nothing. After her conversation with Lizzy, which had ended up in a place Mary had been avoiding for weeks, her irritation with the world was at a high and she was stalking around the villa, her frustration growing by the minute when she couldn't find Henry anywhere. Apparently no one had seen him, which meant he must be hiding from her.

"Whatever," she said, stomping into the kitchen and pouring herself some cranberry juice. Lizzy and Will were there and Mary didn't even feel bad when she interrupted their canoodling to be grumpy in their midst. She slumped down on a kitchen seat. "Fucking coward. Well, fuck him. If he wants to avoid me, he can fucking avoid me. See if I care. I was going to be the bigger person and find him so we could have a proper conversation like mature fucking adults, but if he wants to hide out in the terrace like an illegal flatmate during the landlord's inspection then he can do what he wants. I don't care."

Neither Lizzy nor Will had said anything during Mary's tirade, which Mary would later look back on as an early, missed indication that something was about to happen.

"Right," said Will, when Mary talked herself out of breath. "Crawford's taking his merry time."

Mary ignored this. "Anyway, I wonder how Anne and Fred's date is going?"

"Quite good, I hope," said Lizzy. "I think Anne's finally — "

"Bennet!"

Mary heard her surname being bellowed from the terrace because it was yelled at a volume of three hundred decibels. However, she pretended not to, and continued: "I hope they win. They deserve it."
"Bennet!"

"— And anyway, isn't this show really about each contestant's personal development? Anne's so different from who she was at — "

"You can't ignore me forever!" came the voice of the devil. He sounded wild and gleeful, which were entirely the wrong emotions to have. He should be meek and grovelling, especially after he had ignored her for the whole evening. What right did he have to want to talk to her now? "Either you can come up here, or we can do this in front of — "

"Do we have security guards to remove protesters?" Mary asked idly.

"— moot point because we're on national fucking television, but if you want the illusion of privacy — "

Lizzy and Will exchanged a look. "Are you really going to ignore him?" Lizzy asked, almost desperately.

Emma and George came over from the swing set to get a better view of the excitement. "Mary, I think someone's trying to talk to you," said George.

If George thought that their chat yesterday had given him the right… "I don't want to talk to him," said Mary.

Then something hit her head. Mary blinked and picked it up off the table. It was a piece of scrunched up paper, on which was scrawled: Don't play coy. Guys don't like that.

Oh, now this she couldn't let slide.

"What the fuck, Crawford?" she demanded, turning around and glaring at him from where he stood, all the way up on the terrace. She couldn't quite make out his facial expression but it surely was a smirk.

"I knew that would get you to talk to me," he said, triumphantly. Mary's irritation grew. He shouldn't feel triumphant.

"Lucky you!" she yelled back. "Now you get to hear my feminist rant about how the world shouldn't revolve around the axis of dick!"

"I'd love to hear all your rants!" he said cheerfully — no, that wasn't right, cheerful teasing belonged to an entirely different type of relationship to the one they had — "but maybe after we've discussed the question of us, hmm, darling?"

"Don't darling me!" she screamed. This had to be one of the stupidest things she'd ever been a part of: a cross-storey shouting match with a guy she never wanted to see again, and who was unfortunately also a bloody great kisser. "What the fuck is the point of this? Are you getting off on me screaming at you?!"

"Honestly, a little bit! It's one of the many things I like about you!"

Mary's face froze, her retort frozen on her tongue. He'd never said that before.

All the other stuff: arguing, yelling, getting on her tits — she was used to. Comfortable with. But in all their mutual belligerence, never once had Crawford said he liked her. Until this. Until now. Was this what she wanted? The push to break the stalemate? Her thoughts whizzed round in her head and
everything began to fall into place…

Of course, he had to ruin the moment by mocking her. "Cat got your tongue, Bennet?" He grinned, and it looked a little forced. "I would've said that when I realised it, if I'd known you wouldn't laugh at me."

And then suddenly, she knew what she had to do. Pushing past Emma and George, who were rooted to the ground in the space between the villa and the kitchen, she saw Anne and Fred standing by the entrance holding hands — oh god, so everyone's been listening — and she marched inside, away from everyone else. Why are there so many fucking stairs in this place? She took them with a vengeance, down the corridor, up some more stairs, and then finally she stood at the entrance to the terrace.

She opened the door and blinked when she couldn't see him there. Confused and a little disappointed, she stepped back, and into the circle of his arms.

She jumped, he released her, and she turned around to face him. "Fuck you," she said, resorting to a default Crawford phrase. It came out mild and almost affectionate.

He folded his arms and looked down at her, tall and handsome and very irritating. "You're here," he said, his tone amused and slightly reverent.

"Yes," she stated tautologically. Suddenly she felt very shy. "Were you just saying that, or do you really…"

To give Henry credit, he didn't fuck around in important situations. "Yes," he said, his mouth turned up in that smile she was beginning to… "I like you, and it drives me insane. In a good way."

She narrowed her eyes. "Why should I believe you?"

"Because it's true," he said. "I've been stuck in here with a two-drink limit and the same people for two weeks, but I've never been bored." He grinned. "Because of you."

Mary told herself she would not just fall into the arms of the fit guy saying pretty words — at least without some more grilling. "You liked Anne at first," she said accusingly. "Then Fanny. You really liked Fanny. How am I supposed to believe I'm not your third choice?"

His grin tilted up. "Because you like me back."

Oh, he was just so good at saying the wrong thing. "So you want me because I'm available?" She realised what she'd inadvertently given away and pointed her finger. "And don't you dare say that I —"

He caught hold of her hand. "We have a connection, Bennet. Don't tell me you have this much fun arguing with anyone else."

She took a deep breath and admitted to herself that was true.

"I mean it, Mary," he said, and his voice was in that low and seductive register she especially hated. And she noticed he'd called her Mary. "You drive me crazy and make me laugh. I find it refreshing. And there's no way you make me so mad without feeling the same way."

"You're insane," she said, because she could think of nothing else.

"So are you," he shot back.
Mary thought about why she was on this show (insanity, alcohol, friends with bad judgement) and whether snapping out witty retorts to hold him at arm's length was what she really wanted them to be.

"OK," she said.

He raised an eyebrow. "OK?"

"Yes," she said. "You. Me. Whatever this is."

"How romantic," he drawled, and Mary should've known by the way her heart swelled at his sarcasm that this was going to be the best risk she'd ever take.

"If you're expecting me to be romantic, you're an idiot." She paused. "What are you expecting?"

Predictably, Crawford replied with: "Good sex."

Mary's mouth dropped open in practised outrage. "Are you seriously — "

His mouth covered hers and she stopped talking.

An awkward silence settled over the tiny living room co-rented by Jane and Tom.

After a few unbearable seconds, Jane blinked. "Huh. I didn't think that they'd actually..."

"Do that?"

"No, not like that! I mean... I never saw them together." She frowned. "I didn't really see them with anyone."

Tom shrugged. "More things in heaven and earth, Horatio."

While Mary and Henry were upstairs getting more closely acquainted, Anne and Fred had returned from their date and after half an hour of hiding out in the outside alcove alone, they piled onto the giant swing with the rest of the contestants. When it became clear that the aforementioned final couple would not be joining them any time soon, Emma lost her patience. She waited for a lull in their separate conversations before looking pointedly at Anne and Fred.

"How was your date?" she asked.

Predictably, Anne blushed. "Good," she said shortly.

"I would agree," said Fred. He and Anne looked at each other and shared a glance.

Emma wasn't having this secrecy. "Ugh, come on, guys. Just tell us! George and I told you when we got together."

Several people frowned. "Actually, I don't think you did," said Anne. "The news trickled down from the source, but I don't think we heard the details."

Emma raised her eyebrows at George, who shrugged. "Then it's a fair trade," she agreed.

"Now I feel left out," said Lizzy, as Will sat expressionlessly next to her, not particularly enjoying
the avenue that this conversation was going down. "Ooh, shall we all share the stories of how we got together?"

"Yes!" said Emma. "This is pre-final bonding." She looked at George pleadingly.

George sighed. "We'll go first. Do you want to tell it?"

"No, you can," said Emma generously.

George was quite sure that Emma would interrupt him before the first minute was up, but he started anyway. "I'm not completely sure this is how it went down — "

Emma covered her face in her hands. "Oh my god, how it went down."

George grinned at the rest of the group, who laughed. He cleared his throat. "Ahem. It was a bright cold morning in July, and — "

"A classic," said Fred appreciatively.

"Are you trying to get us to lose?" demanded Emma.

"All right, all right," said George, leaning back and drawing his arm around her shoulders tighter. "So, we'd had that recoupling the night before — "

"You're going to start there?" interrupted Will. "And miss all the weeks of you pining like a lovesick puppy?"

"Harsh words; I could say the same for you," George shot back.

With an imperious tone he had likely learnt from Lizzy, Will replied, "It's you we're talking about here."

Emma nudged George. "You pined after me?" she asked delightedly.

"Will, you Judas," said George. To Emma, he said, "I'm sure I told you this."

"Hmm, I don't think so?"

"It's the first I've heard of it," offered Fred.

"You're a newbie," Lizzy pointed out. "No offence."

"None taken," said Fred amusedly. Then he raised an eyebrow. "But you're no OG either."

"Very true," agreed Lizzy. She looked at Will and grinned. "I mean, who could forget my entrance? My first move was picking a fight with Will."

"OK, there's time for all that later," said Emma. "This is about me and George. Let's get back to this pining thing."

George began. "There isn't that much to say — "

"Au contraire," interrupted Will. "So there was the first day, when we all met, and Emma blew him off for — "

"Elton," Emma groaned. She hid her face in George's shoulder. "I shouldn't have ignored you.
Especially for him."

"I know," said George, in a rare display of open confidence. His confidence was usually of the quiet sort; he was a grown-up with his shit together who knew who he was and was comfortable with it. But a remembered kick of jealousy towards Elton, the guy Emma had chosen in the first recoupling, brought out his cockier side.

Will continued the story, his friend's former heartache an easy recall in his mind. "And then George got involved with Harriet: firstly out of kindness, then out of a weird mix of hopelessness about Emma and a pitiful wanting to be wanted." George mimicked receiving a knife to the gut. "That carried on for weirdly longer than we all thought it would."

There was a silence, and then George cleared his throat. "Thank you, Will, for that flattering assessment of my character." He narrowed his eyes. "I'll return the favour when I tell the story of you and Lizzy."

Lizzy groaned.

"Oh, but that's unfair," said Emma, jumping in and defending her man. "I did a lot of not-great stuff too before we got together."

Anne and Lizzy grinned at each other. "Like when you told everyone about me and Fred knowing each other after I said to keep it secret?" said Anne.

"Or when you railed at Edmund and Fanny in front of the entire isle?"

"Or when you wilfully ignored how much George liked you for lesser specimens like Elton and Frank?"

Emma pulled a face. "I don't like this game."

Lizzy planted a smacking kiss on her friend's cheek. "We love you anyway."

"So, the story," said George, pulling the conversation back to where it was supposed to be. "After all that, it was the recoupling and I picked Emma — he pecked her cheek and it bloomed pink — and then in the morning we had the conversation we should've had so much earlier."

There was a silence. Fred raised his eyebrows, Anne frowned and even Will looked disappointed. "Is that all?" asked Lizzy.

Emma looked at George slowly, in the way of two people who know they have lots and lots of time together. "I didn't realise how I felt about you until that recoupling," she said softly. "Thank you for that. If you hadn't chosen me, I don't know how much longer it would've taken us."

"That's true," Lizzy chimed in. "So much that's happened here has been because of you. But unfortunately, you can't Emma yourself."

George grinned. "You could say that I Emma'd Emma."

"Yes!" said Lizzy delightedly. "That you did."

Emma wasn't very pleased with this assessment. "Hey, no, George picked me in the recoupling, but that wasn't the end of it. In the morning, we still had to talk and — " She pulled a face. "Oh, all right."
Everyone looked at each other curiously. "What?"

"So technically George made the first move," grumbled Emma. "He came into the bathroom when I was brushing my teeth and told me he loved me. Then I kissed him and we made out on the granite countertop until we decided we wanted breakfast."

Lizzy wiped a fake tear away from her eye. "That's a lovely story."

"Thank you," retorted Emma. "Who's next?"

"Us," said Lizzy merrily. "Let's go right from the beginning."

"The beginning was so long ago," protested Will. "It hardly counts."

She kissed his cheek but ignored what he said. "So, things got off to an excellent start when I came into the villa and told Will I didn't like him because he'd fucked over Charlotte."

Will's face already wore a look of lengthy suffering. "We're going to have to edit this story when we tell it in the future."

"It's all on video, honey," said Lizzy.

Will sighed. "And so I am cursed."

George seemed to be enjoying this. He took over: "Then Will said Lizzy wasn't attractive — " Will groaned loudly as Lizzy patted his shoulder and cheerfully informed the group he no longer thought that.

"I never thought that," said Will. "I was just being a dick."

"Oh, and then Lizzy yelled at you in front of everyone when you picked her for the recoupling," said Emma. She curled her lip. "That was a terrible move, you know. And your apology was a car crash. You were focusing on the wrong thing completely."

"I didn't think to hire your firm to write it for me," said Will.

"If you had, you might've got her much quicker."

Lizzy frowned. "Doubtful. At that stage, hating Will was like, 80% of my image, and I would never have given that up."

Fred looked between them. "So how did it all change? I mean, I know from watching the show, but I wasn't here to see it."

"Very fucking slowly," said Will, as I'm sure you would've agreed from the time those chapters were being posted.

"I just didn't interact with him for a week and then that was like a fresh start," said Lizzy. She fidgeted uncomfortably. "And I was interested in a few other guys..."

George grinned. "Whilst you were off exploring your options, Will was sitting on the terrace trying to drown his sorrows in blueberry juice."

"It's true," confirmed Anne. "I was there."

Lizzy frowned. "You were?"
Emma rolled her eyes. "George, Will and sometimes Anne used to hang out on the terrace and be sad about their love lives. I was an honorary member after George and I got together but Will was still sad."

"The sad terrace pining group, Lydia called us," said Will. "We have a group chat."

"Oh my god, Lydia!" said Emma.

"She was amazing," said Lizzy. "I miss her. I wonder how she's doing?"

"Marketing herself into a fast fashion collaboration, no doubt," said Will. He smiled a little. "She tore into me for not making a move on you. I thought she was just delusional, but now I can see that she was pretty smart."

"Terrifyingly," Lizzy agreed. The group sighed in fond remembrance.

"Anyway, the story of us. I think we just mutually pined for a few days before we finally… got together."

"I was losing my mind that day," said Will. "So I finally stormed into the room and told you how I felt."

"Wow, Darcy," said George. "A man of passion."

"Thank you," said Will, unsure of whether to accept that as a compliment or treat it like an insult.

"So…" said Emma, looking over at Anne and Fred. "I mean, you don't have to say, but we've all shared our stories and it's the final tomorrow, so…"

Anne and Fred looked at each other. "All right," said Anne.

Lizzy looked at her friend. "Anne, you don't have to…"

Anne grinned. "We're not as dramatic as you guys. There was so much plot in those two stories. We just pined and fell into place together."

"I came in here for Anne," said Fred. There were a few minor sounds of feigned surprise. "Obviously," he added belatedly. He looked over at her, affection clear in his eyes. "See? Everyone knew."

Anne scowled at him and at everyone else. "Why did none of you tell me?"

Emma groaned loudly. "Believe me, it was a lesson in restraint. We knew we couldn't because the whole thing was — " she sighed — "a journey you needed to figure out for yourself."

"Also, even if we did, you would've managed to convince yourself out of it," Will added bluntly.

Anne narrowed her eyes at her friend. "Thank you, Will."

"Anyway," said Fred, who felt oddly at ease confessing his feelings for his soulmate in front of six other people he'd only known for a few weeks, "I already knew from seeing her on the show, but from the first moment we spoke again it was engraved in my mind that all I wanted was to be with Anne. I was just waiting for was for her to say the word."

Emma had to ask. "What about Louisa?"
Fred stuttered out, "Louisa wasn't — to be completely honest, I wasn't really aware that anything was happening there on her end. I was too focused on Anne."

Emma gave a little sigh at the romance of it all, as the object of this declaration blushed furiously.

"Actually, I forgot that we did have some nudging," she said, glaring good-naturedly at Lizzy. "There was that time when you pretended to be dying of some cough and asked me to cook in your place, and I ended up cooking with Fred."

Emma and Lizzy exchanged a look. "Ah," said Emma, clearing her throat delicately. "That one was down to me."

"Is there a pie you don't have your finger in?" asked Fred, but his tone was teasing rather than angry — which was just as well, because practically everyone who had gone to war with Emma on the show had ended up losing.

"Don't tell me that didn't bring you closer," said Emma.

"My girlfriend embraces many of the policies of Machiavelli," said George affectionately. "The ends justify the means, etc.."

"George, what a lovely description of the woman you love," she said, sniffing. "I love being compared to fifteenth century Italian spymasters."

"You would make an excellent spymaster," George continued, apparently deciding that this road was one he'd like to be run over on. "You've got the mindset."

"And the looks," said Lizzy.

Emma sighed dramatically, but underneath she was secretly pleased. She was saved from having to balance a reply between these two extremes when, from the direction of the villa, appeared Henry and Mary.

"Hello," said Lizzy, not even bothering to conceal her amusement as they approached. "Talked everything out? You two were up there for quite a long time."

Mary cleared her throat. "Yes, well..." She waited for Henry to jump in with a smooth comment that would stop Lizzy and everyone else looking so smug, but he just stood next to her smiling.

She sighed. "Crawford and I are... together now."

Henry leaned in to whisper in her ear, "You could sound more enthusiastic about it, darling."

"Do you want me to sing a fucking song?" Mary snapped.

"Well, it looks like nothing's changed from the outside," said Emma. She patted a space next to her that they could sit on, if one of them sat on the other's lap. "We're recounting stories of how we got together."

Lizzy leaned forward, curiosity sparkling in her dark eyes. "So Henry's yelling from the terrace thing actually worked? I had no idea you were one for such grand gestures, Mary."

"Throwing a sexist note at my head is hardly a grand gesture," Mary scoffed, though her tone was at odds with her seating, which was being positioned on Henry's lap. "We've got nothing to offer on this topic. Let's talk about something else."
Then she yawned.

"Tired?" asked the voice that was always at her ear.

"It's been a long day," Anne agreed. "Let's go to bed. It's the last day tomorrow, and we'll need our energy."

Gradually, everyone trooped up from the giant swing into the villa and up the stairs into the bathrooms. The atmosphere was more settled than it had ever been on the isle. Just in time for the last day, everyone's romances were tied up ready for a future, and it was a very harmonious villa on which the lights went out.

As expected, though, Henry and Mary snuck out of the communal bedroom to a more private setting when they thought everyone else was asleep.

"That was a lovely episode," said Tom. "I feel like I've been taken down memory lane. And I'm pretty sure I saw that Lydia's launching a jewellery collection, so Will will be pleased to hear that."

"It feels odd that we're almost at the end," said Jane. "We've barely been watching a month but it feels so much longer."

"Has it only been a month?" asked Tom. "Wow."

"What?"

He crumpled his face up awkwardly. "I broke up with Pauline when we first started watching this."

"Oh," said Jane distantly. Surely it wasn't a good sign that he was thinking about his ex. "Yes, I remember."

"Not that I'm thinking about her," Tom added quickly. "I just thought of it randomly. Out of the blue."

"No, I didn't think…"

"Anyway, it doesn't matter."

"No?"

He shrugged. "Nah."

She could escape to bed. Equally, she could stay here, and drag this out, and either lean forwards or not lean at all and wake up the next morning and have breakfast with him, and then that evening would be the last opportunity like this…

Tom yawned dramatically. "Christ, I'm tired." He slapped his thighs and got up. "All right. Night, and I'll see you in the morning."

"Yes," said Jane, chiding herself for the disappointment she felt at not being able to choose to lean forwards at all. "Goodnight."

Chapter End Notes
Omg we're almost at the end! Chapter 29 is the final and it's going to be a real short one, and then we're ending on Chapter 30, a crazy epilogue which will feature everyone. EVERYONE.

As promised, here's the link for voting your winner: www.surveymonkey.com/r/L87BPWW. It's a ranking vote so put your favourite as 1 and then work down to 4; if you only care for some of the ships then please use N/A for the ones you don't have time for. Any problems feel free to contact me in a comment or on Tumblr. Voting will close in about a week's time.
And I Want You to Know My Feelings

Chapter Summary

f.y.i the final chapter is going to be posted tomorrow (i.e. Saturday evening, British time)
so schedule your final dose of this mad AU if you wish

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who voted and especially all of you who left such lovely messages — I promise you they are very treasured! To the person who asked for my Tumblr: it's the same as this account, @loversinfiniteness. I mostly post art and extracts from literature or literary theory, but you're welcome to join the fun.

This is the last chapter using the TV show format, so we're saying goodbye to a lot of beloved Down the Isle staples here.

Title from Queen, You're My Best Friend.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Previously on Down the Isle…

At the end of a day of final dates, Anne and Fred finally said what they needed to say before returning to the villa for the rest of the evening. They joined Emma, George, Lizzy and Will on the lawn and spent the evening recounting how they'd all got together — but where were Henry and Mary? Doing unairable stuff in the alcove next to the terrace, of course. Their date earlier that day hadn't gone well by any standard of the word, but that evening Henry shouted at Mary from the terrace that he liked her, and those were the words that changed everything.

It was just in time, as well. We end this series with four happy couples, and now that your votes all have been calculated, tonight is the night that we'll find out: who the winner is of this year's Down the Isle?

Jane yawned comfortably and stretched out on the sofa. "The final's always the worst episode," she said. "If there's one imperfect thing about Down the Isle — "

"Only one, of course," said Tom.

She raised her eyebrows. "Would you care to offer some more?"

"Never," he said, scandalised. "It's unreal, imaginative, the best show on TV…"

She continued talking. "The final just doesn't have that much weight. I mean, it's nice to know that your faves have won some money, but the real prize is — " she made an ironical face as she said it — "the love they find on the show."
He grinned at her. "You're rolling your eyes, but you actually think that, don't you? You can fool the world but you can't fool me. Jane Austen, professional cynic, has a soft side."

"Well," she said loftily, "even cynics have to believe in something."

He smiled at this: it was exactly the sort of thing he'd expect her to say, and the fact of his knowing her so well forced that familiar tug at his heart. Usually when he looked at Jane he smiled and thought, *I love you*, but it was the last episode of *Down the Isle* and Tom was feeling confessional —

The intro started playing and he saw Jane's concentration turn to the screen, and he felt like an idiot for even thinking he should say it. He could at least wait another hour.

What is there to say about the final of *Down the Isle* that hasn't been said already? Now that the final eight are all happily coupled up, the winning spot is fair game for anyone.

The day began with Henry and Mary doing the walk of shame through the bedroom, en route the kitchen outside.

"We see you!" Emma said triumphantly, disturbing the early morning calm of the still-dark bedroom with the air of a tigress snaring her prey. "We know what you got up to last night!"

There were groans from various people in the room, as it was only owing to Emma's freakishly good night vision and awareness that Henry and Mary had been caught. The two vertical figures froze.

"How..." Mary began.

George yawned. "She's wonderful, isn't she?"

The tech crew decided that this was too good a scene to miss, and the lights were turned on. Lizzy groaned and buried her face in her pillow. "Em, can't you interrogate them later?"

"When they could've denied it?" Emma demanded. "No." Henry and Mary were still standing in the middle of the room — Henry bare-chested, Mary wearing unexpectedly lacy sleepwear — and had on very different expressions. Mary was looking extra annoyed to compensate for her embarrassment, whilst Henry, who was immune to such emotions, simply looked very satisfied.

Lizzy decided to give up on sleep in favour of making fun of her friend. "Nice top, Mary," she called from the other side of the room. She paused suggestively, and said, "I mean, what there is of it."

"I agree," said Henry.

Mary's expression turned from irritated to horrified. Henry just grinned wider. "We're leaving," she announced, wrapping her hand around his arm and dragging him from the room. Henry winked at the room at large before letting himself follow her.

Emma's face was fixed in an expression of pure smugness. "Did you see that?"

"We couldn't miss it," came Will's drawl. "You made such a big deal they turned the lights on."

"Will, can you just — Lizzy, tell him to be nice, please?"

Anne intervened. "Sorry, why is this a big deal? We already knew they were together."

"But now we know more!" said Emma. She sat up. "The real question is: why are they up so early?
If I just spent the entire night having — "

"Emma, please," said George, whose face had taken on a very red expression owing to his genteel sensibilities.

Emma took pity on her boyfriend. "All I'm saying," she said, "is that the communal kitchen is a weird place to go the morning after."

"Will said he saw you and George in the kitchen the morning you got together," said Fred.

"It was fucking traumatic," Will added. "There was a bee that was following me the last 2k of my run, and then I got to the villa where I thought I'd be safe." He shuddered.

"Little did he know what he'd be greeted with," said Lizzy.

Emma threw a pillow at her.

"This isn't even good content," said Tom, who was still feeling irritated about earlier and taking it out on an flawless, innocent TV show. "They're just lying in bed bantering."

"It's the last episode!" Jane protested. "The denouement, if you will. Don't hold it to such a high standard."

Tom grumbled his dissatisfaction.

The light-hearted ribbing that our cast equated to friendship continued in the communal bedroom for a while, and to respect Tom's complaints we will skip the next few hours. We pick things up again with the contestants fully dressed and gathered on the lawn.

"We should probably try and be entertaining," said Anne, when their idle chatter drifted to a stop.

"Ugh, but how?" said Emma. "The relationship dramas are over. We're all happy."

"And that's not entertaining?" asked Fred amusedly.

"No," said Emma. "People aren't watching for scenes of romantic bliss. Remember when we had all those terrible men? Elliot, Edmund, Wickham… that was exciting. Bad, but exciting."

Several expressions on several faces indicated some disagreement with one of the men whom Emma had deemed terrible.

"Ooh, I know!" said Lizzy. "Let's play a game."

"Great," muttered Mary, just as Henry asked, "Are we teenage girls at a sleepover?"

"You wish you could ever had that much fun," said Emma.

"All right, I suggest Kill Fuck Marry." He rolled his eyes and added, "Or its PG cousin, Snog Marry Avoid."

"Somehow it feels wrong to hear you offer a PG suggestion," said Fred, grinning. Henry smirked.

"Mm, maybe not," said Lizzy. "Someone's going to suggest three of us for a round and it's going to
end in tears."

Will cleared his throat. "How about truth or dare?" he said, with as much dignity as the words could take.

The group laughed and at least five jokes were made at Will's expense, by the end of which everyone forgot to consider his suggestion.

"Paranoia," said Emma.

"What's that?" This from Anne, Fred and Will.

"How do you not — actually, it makes total sense that Will has no idea. So you start with a person and they have to come up with a 'who's most likely', then they pick someone else and tell that person a new 'most likely', but don't tell the person what they were picked for."

George raised an eyebrow. "Sounds complicated."

"OK, let's make it simpler," said Emma. "We'll just do who's most likely. Someone start. Who's most likely to…"

"Get married first," said Anne.

"Oh, Emma and George for sure," said Lizzy, winking at her friends.

"Plus George is running out of time," agreed Will sagely.

"Practically on the shelf," said Fred.

"Senile," added Henry.

"How about," said George loudly, "we just recount our favourite memories from the isle?"

Lizzy's eyes lit up, as if she'd been waiting for this opening a long time. "My personal favourite moment," she said, grinning, "was when Anne got drunk at brunch and yelled at Fred in front of everyone."

"Ooh, yes, that was amazing," said Emma, whilst Henry's lips curled in sardonic agreement. "You didn't say much, but what you did say was devastating."

Anne covered her face in her hands and moaned, "Lizzy, why would you remind me of that?"

"It was good that you did it," said Fred affectionately. "I'd been here for a week and I'd got nothing, and then you were finally talking to me about it, so it meant you must've cared. I lived off that logic."

"I don't think the most iconic yelling moment goes to me," Anne protested. "Emma's had some pretty good ones…"

"Oh my god, when you gave Edmund a piece of your mind. At the time, I was like 'Em, honey, maybe you should cool it', but now it's just amazingly hilarious." Lizzy paused and said thoughtfully, "I hope they're happy."

"Who?" For Will, this conversation was really testing his knowledge of everyone else's love affairs.

"Fanny and Edmund, of course," said Lizzy. "Remember, Fanny left the isle for him? After he got
"kicked out because of our votes?"

"All your favourite moments are about each other," complained Henry. "Me, my favourite moment was — " Mary clapped a hand over his mouth, which basically told everyone what he was about to say.

"We just have to accept that the girls have been more memorable," said George dolefully.

"Well, all you and Will did before you got girlfriends was sit on the terrace and make fun of each other, whilst both having sad af lives," Mary pointed out. "At least that's what the viewers saw at home. Did they cut stuff out, or…?"

"Nope," said Emma, popping the 'p'. "That was it." Then she frowned. "Oh wait, I remember Will agreed with me about the Fanny/Edmund argument; I was arguing against Wickham though, so it wasn't neutral ground."

"Lydia is too good for him," Will affirmed. "She should remember that when he fucks things up."

"Oh, no, I actually think he really liked her," said Anne, smiling at Will's doom-mongering expression. "Don't be so pessimistic."

Turn back to the final scene of chapter 21 if you can't remember which of these two predictions was right!

Before they were due to leave the villa to face the live audience and find out who'd won *Down the Isle*, the girls gathered in the dressing room one last time.

Emma looked around at her friends. "I just want to say something before we leave. I love you all so much and I know this place is technically about romance and I've done that because I've found George, but I can't imagine what it would've been like without you girls. I know we're going to be friends for life and I feel so lucky — " her voice caught, and it was all tears from there — "to have gone through this incredible experience with you. And individually you're all amazing, and — "

She paused to steady herself. "OK. Lizzy, you're funny and incredible and have kept me in check without being a bitch about it, which is no mean feat."

Lizzy laughed a little tearily. Emma swallowed the lump in her throat and continued. "Anne, you're the kindest and smartest person I've ever met. I'm so lucky to call you a friend, and I can't think of anyone more deserving of happiness than you."

Anne beamed and hugged her friend. Emma wiped away her tears and resumed. "Mary — "

"Don't," said Mary, holding up a hand. "Seriously. You're going to make me cry."

Lizzy looped an arm around her shoulder. "That's the point, honey."

Mary scowled at this, which made everyone, including herself, laugh.

"Mary, we've had our differences, but I love you anyway. You're always so amazingly confident and your dry, snarky comments have saved mine and everyone else's sanity. You've made this place so much better, and I'm just — I'm really going to miss you being around."

They hugged warmly.

"Why am I crying so much?" Emma demanded rhetorically. "I've given a million speeches, and
never… ugh. This has been the greatest experience of my life, and so much of that is because I've shared it with you."

"Oh, Emma," said Anne.

"It's true," said Emma. "Like when I was being weird about the Harriet thing, or when Frank turned out to be not completely single, you girls (and old Mary, of course) were my support system. You've all been so reliable and caring — and I hope I've been half as good a friend as I've had in you — "

"Oh my god, of course," Lizzy broke in. "Em, if we were in prison together, you'd be my number one choice ally."

Emma put a hand over her heart. "That actually means so much to me."

"I have a feeling Emma would get too involved in the social life," said Mary critically. "In prison it's best to stay on the fringes."

"Have you been to prison, Mary?"

"I've watched a number of documentaries, and — "

They broke into laughter.

"We have to get together like this soon," said Anne. "Us and all the girls who left early. Mary, Fanny, Louisa, Harriet, Lydia, Charlotte, Caroline…"

"Anne," said Emma majestically, "your memory never ceases to amaze me."

Anne shrugged modestly. "Medicine was basically a degree in memorisation, so…"

Lizzy grinned. "Oh, I love you. That's such a you thing to say."

"I love you too," said Anne warmly. "If I may make my weepy speech…? When I first arrived here I was terrified not just romantically, but also about if I'd have any friends. I don't want to get all weirdly personal, but in real life I wasn't exactly sociable, and I hoped I could be someone better and braver than 'normal me' when I came on here. But I knew it was all going to be fine when I met you guys — oh my god, and Will and George, I'd hate to forget them — " she laughed, remembering the aptly named sad terrace pining group. "And even when all my romantic attempts were ending in failure, I felt like I had, in my own way, done what I'd come here to do."

"And then Fred came in," said Lizzy warmly.

"And then Fred came in," Anne agreed, unable to hold down the smile that appeared whenever she said his name. "I can't ask for anything more."

"You deserve it," said Lizzy, almost fiercely. "Seriously. You're patient and funny and brilliant — "

"Lizzy, stop," said Anne, her cheeks red.

Lizzy obliged. "Just know that I would definitely have gone insane in here without you," she said cheerfully. "I mean, most of it was Will-related so it would've eventually sorted itself out, but I'm sure I did a lot of overreacting about other stuff too. You're just an incredible friend, so I — " she stopped, seeing that Anne's face was going red once more. "And Mary!" she said, turning to the other girl. "You've just been the most honest, straight-talking, unaccepting-of-my-bullshit friend I could ever want and need."
Mary smiled wryly.

Lizzy finished with, "From the bottom of my heart I love you all, and I know we're going to be friends — all of us — for life."

"I guess I should make a speech too," said Mary. They laughed. "Lizzy, I'm not really sorry for taking Will on that fake date to make you jealous. Emma, your schemes might be unnecessary but I know you do it because you care, and also tell your boyfriend thanks for talking sense into me about Crawford. Anne, I honestly think you're too good for this place, but thanks for sticking here among us and being a paragon of humanity." She looked around at the other girls. "I'm really glad we're friends."

Mary's short, unprepared speech had done a number on them all. "I'm going to miss this so much!" Emma exclaimed tearfully, and threw her arms around the other girls. "You're all my favourite people in the world. This experience wouldn't have been half as incredible without all of you."

One cannot expect the same sort of openhearted declarations from Henry Crawford, who had only known these people two weeks, or Will Darcy, who had problems showing affection.

The boys wandered around the bedroom as the girls held their last hurrah in the dressing room. Will sat down next to George.

"George, without you, I probably would've killed someone in here."

George grinned. "And with me, that person probably would've been… me."

"After Wickham, yes. You'd be dangerously close to the top of the list."

George clapped his friend's back. "Thanks for keeping me company when I was in a mess about Emma."

"I suppose I'll have to retain those duties in the future," said Will dryly. "When you inevitably fuck up."

"Pot, kettle?" said George.

Far enough away that they couldn't hear the this conversation, Fred and Henry were talking.

"Listen, so thanks for caring about Bennet and I," said Henry. "I know I didn't let you say anything helpful, but it was good of you to try."

Fred replied, "Er, no problem. And thanks for your support with me and Anne."

"Oh," said Henry, and it was almost awkward. "That was mostly Emma."

Fred frowned. "Sorry?"

Henry rubbed the back of his neck. "I assume you're talking about when you and Anne ended up cooking dinner together? It was supposed to be me with Bennet but Emma had this whole scheme to change it to you and Anne, and no one wanted to argue with her."

"Huh," said Fred, who was not exactly surprised to hear of this intense meddling from his fellow contestants. "Well, thanks for your part in it."

Henry shrugged. "No worries."
Towards the end of that day, as the sun dipped into evening, the couples were ushered to a set-up on the villa lawn where Yvonne stood in front of a mostly female audience who'd flown out from Blighty to watch the live final of Down the Isle. Yvonne screamed out the welcomes for the TV audience and the contestants stood in their pairs, nervous and smiling. Then came the couples interviews.

"So, Henry and Mary," said Yvonne, with a brilliant smile on her face. "You two are a very new couple, and for a moment, we thought you weren't even going to work things out! What made you finally decide to…" Yvonne gave a suggestive pause. "Come together?"

After the titter at her simplistic innuendo, Henry squeezed Mary's hand and took on the question. "Well, Yvonne, a man can't wait forever. I knew I had to do something about my feelings for Mary before we left, or I'd never forgive myself for letting her go."

The audience aww'd appreciatively, and Mary wanted to kick Henry in the shin for giving it such a fucking romantic spin. Henry must've read her mind, because he murmured "play nice, darling," and Mary rolled her eyes.

Yvonne quirked a brow. "Mary?"

"He's quite dramatic, isn't he," was all Mary said.

Yvonne smiled coyly. "But clearly you love it."

Mary's answering glare to Henry's grin was far more muted than it had been in previous days, and you could swear it held the imprint of a smile.

"So," said Yvonne. "What's next for you two after all this ends?"

"Might get married," said Henry carelessly.

The audience whooped and Mary dug her elbow into the space between his ribs. Yvonne giggled. "Henry, do be serious now."

Henry held the camera's gaze for just too long. "All right, the first thing we're doing is taking a trip to the beach, because Bennet thinks it's terrible and I think she's wrong."

Mary continued, "Let me guess… I'm going to get in the car, and instead of driving to the beach he's going to drive to the airport, and instead of Bournemouth or Torquay it'll be Bora Bora."

Henry said, "Well, not now, since you've seen right through me…"

Yvonne gave a deep sigh of jealousy. "You guys. Send me a postcard when you're there."

"Emma and George!" said Yvonne. "You two have been the longest-running couple this year. What do you think made you act so quickly?"

"Oh god, it wasn't quick," said Emma, laughing. She slid a glance towards George. "Looking back, we could've saved so much time if I were just aware of my feelings."

"But I love that!" enthused Yvonne. "It's so organic how you found your way to each other. What's been your highlight of your time here?"

"I don't know about George, but mine has definitely been the simple stuff. We've cooked a lot
"Our first proper conversation was when I helped you make dinner the second day."

Emma's eyes widened. "Oh yeah!" She entwined her fingers around George's and looked adoringly at him, before remembering that Yvonne was there as well as a live audience. "It's strange to think about where we started," she said. "It's true that I wasn't immediately drawn to George, and then for a long time I thought we were only friends." She smiled wryly. "But looking back, no way would I have been so weirdly involved with Harriet's love life if I didn't secretly wish I was in her position."

"But George, you knew from the start, didn't you?" prompted Yvonne.


The audience sighed at the romance of it all. Yvonne asked, "And what's next for the two of you?"

Emma and George exchanged a glance. "So we talked more about this," said George. "We'll get back into normal life, but we've decided to spend our weekends together by commuting alternately."

"The only flaw in the plan is that George is too old for a RailCard," added Emma. "Now that is tragic."

"Anne and Fred. Everyone knows your story: you were together when you were teenagers and then out of touch for eight years after an abrupt breakup. Would you credit Down the Isle for helping you get back together?"

Anne blushed and looked at Fred. "Well, I don't think we'd be together now without it."

"I would've spent this summer reading and resisting the urge to find Anne on Facebook," said Fred. Yvonne smiled happily. "You know, I've always said this show does a public service. But Fred, when you came on the show, it still took almost two weeks for you two to decide to get back together. Why was that?"

"Er, well, you could say I didn't make my intentions very clear," said Fred. "I was afraid of scaring Anne off."

Yvonne nodded sagely. "But now you two are together. So what's next?"

Anne smiled at Fred. "We were saying that Sophie (Fred's sister) would probably want to know the story of this — " she gestured between them — "in great detail, so… a family dinner?"

"I've probably got a hundred missed calls even though she knows I haven't had access to my phone," said Fred.

Yvonne beamed. "I love that! Sisters are always so nosy. And Anne, what about your family? They must've liked Fred if you dated him for four years when you were at school."

Anne stumbled through her answer: "Oh, my family is — they definitely — well, you know families……… though actually, my sister Mary is probably ecstatic about us!"

Yvonne blinked. "OK… I just wish we had you on earlier, Fred! We want to see more of you two!"

Fred smiled. "I think things worked out pretty well the way they did." His eyes kept drifting back to
Anne as he spoke. "And it sounds weird, but I'm glad Anne's experience wasn't all about me." He grinned straight at the camera. "Because obviously, once I was on the isle, it was all about me."

"Not all," Anne teased. "But enough that I knew you were very important."

"Will and Lizzy!" Yvonne was still keeping up her dazzling smile. "How has the Down the Isle experience been for you?"

"Excellent," said Lizzy, her hand on Will's thigh. "I've made so many amazing friends, I've had so much fun, and learnt so much about myself. Oh, and I've got myself a hot boyfriend, so I can't complain."

Yvonne laughed. "And Will?"

Will looked considerably less comfortable than Lizzy in front of the camera, but with her encouraging presence he managed to say, "It's been very rewarding. I've been very lucky to find what I've found."

"Oi, don't forget me," was called out by an out-of-shot George.

Will actually laughed. "And George is all right too."

Yvonne asked, "So what's next for the two of you?"

"Oh, well, probably a lot of texting," said Lizzy. "Hilariously, Will never expected to stay on the show for so long."

"My sister and I agreed I'd be booted off before the third week," said Will.

"So he's going to start work immediately when he gets back and hope for a merciful boss," Lizzy finished. "But it does help for our relationship that we're both in London."

Yvonne nodded. "And will Lizzy get to meet this sister you mention?"

"I'm sure they'll be best friends within three minutes of meeting and they'll start making plans without me, in front of me." Will looked towards the camera. "Georgie, I can practically hear you laughing about it."

Yvonne smiled. "That's so nice. Will, if you could do the Down the Isle experience all over again, is there anything you'd do differently?"

"Well, there are some things I shouldn't have said," he said, and next to him Lizzy smiled at the memory that was now funny to look back on. "But no. I'm happy where I am, and I wouldn't risk changing that."

"I would've eaten more on the nights that Emma cooked," said Lizzy. "And got Henry to cook earlier! Did you know he's secretly a foodie? I think he has an Instagram, or something…"

Yvonne looked at Henry. He cleared his throat and said, "No comment."

Lizzy smiled up at Will. "But, Yvonne, because of this, I wouldn't change anything."

The irony of watching people on a TV show declare their love for one another whilst sat next to the
man she secretly loved was not lost on Jane. But what could she do? To tell him would be to risk a friendship that was immeasurably important, and what if that friendship was so irrevocably damaged they never saw each other again? Her reflexive pessimism had already denied that he might feel the same way. So she just kept watching the show.

All attention was focused on Yvonne as she began her announcement speech. "It's been a summer full of drama, fallings-out, friendships and love. After 29 chapters we've finally reached the end, and it's time to find out which of our final couples have won your hearts."

She paused to stare deep into the eye of the camera.

"I can now reveal that the winners of Down the Isle 2019 are…"

Everyone held their breaths.

Yvonne smiled. "Anne and Fred!"

"Oh, I knew it!" said Jane, clapping like a drama teacher whose vision had finally come together. "They were the most romantic couple, after all. And Anne's grown so much throughout that her winning this feels right."

The other contestants whooped and cheered as a blushing Anne and an elated Fred made their way to the front of the stage to stand next to Yvonne.

"Congratulations, Anne and Fred!" she shouted over a hundred or so screaming voices. "You've just won fifty thousand pounds! How are you feeling?"

The camera zoomed in on Anne's shocked but very happy face. She tried to speak but couldn't through how much she was smiling, so Fred squeezed her waist and said, "I think we're in a bit of shock."

"Darlings! Did you not think you could win?"

Fred continued, "I don't think we ever actually thought about it." He looked back to where the other contestants stood and Lizzy gave him a congratulatory double thumbs-up. "All the other couples are incredible and any of them could've won."

"Uh-huh," said Yvonne. "Now, I know what I'd do if I suddenly won twenty-five grand, but the question is: how will you spend it?"

With the question of financial responsibility on the table, Anne finally found her voice. The microphone was thrust in front of her face and she stammered out, "Gosh, um, pay off my student loans? I'm sorry, I know that's so boring. Fred?"

The microphone moved back to him. "I, er, don't know," said Fred. He rubbed the back of his neck and smiled earnestly at the crowd. "Honest to God, I really didn't think we'd win."

"You're too modest," said Yvonne, touching his shoulder. She turned to the other finalists, who — far from being disappointed or annoyed on losing out on fifty thousand pounds, actually looked delighted with Anne and Fred's victory. "How do our runners-up feel about this result?"
"Fanne forever!" shouted Lizzy. Anne blushed painfully crimson and hid her beaming face in Fred's shoulder.

"I think I speak for all of us — " Emma looked round at her fellow finalists — "when I say that we're just so happy for them. Anne's been the kindest, most sincere person on the isle since the start, and we all see that she and Fred just belong together."

Yvonne turned back to Anne and Fred for a final time. "Any parting words from our Down the Isle winners?"

Fred was looking at Anne with the expression of a man who couldn't quite believe his luck.

"Take a chance," he said softly. "If something's lost, it can still be found."

"This has been the most incredible few weeks of my life," said Anne. "I'm so grateful to have had this experience, and — " she smiled up at Fred — "I'm unspeakably happy with where it's taken me."

Yvonne was satisfied with that. With her trademark pizzazz she faced the camera, whilst in the background the other contestants enveloped Anne and Fred in a group hug. "So that's a wrap on another fantastic series of Down the Isle! Anne and Fred were very worthy winners, though I'm sure you'll agree that everyone was brilliant." She looked back at the celebrations happening behind her. With a wistful tone, she continued, "I think if we've learnt anything from watching this series, it's to go for what you want. Be George, opening that bathroom door to tell Emma how he felt. Be Frank, voluntarily leaving the isle in the hopes of something with Mary C. Be Will, storming into that room and saying how he felt even though he thought Lizzy didn't care for him at all; be Anne, finally bridging the distance of eight years apart; be Henry, shouting down at Mary from the terrace and be Mary, marching up the stairs and confronting what she wanted. Be brave, dear viewer. Who knows? You might even find yourself walking down the aisle…"

And then the show was over. Tom looked over at Jane and the familiar I love you rang through his mind, only this time, buoyed on by Yvonne's inspiring call to arms, he said it out loud.

She froze. "What?"

"I love you," he said again. He heard his own words and registered his own surprise. To have the words inside him for so long and only now hear them was strange. Nice, though. Liberating. "I love you."

She stared at him for what felt like an age, and then: "You — what do you mean? Tom, you don't — we… I… oh my god, did Cassandra say something to you? Not that I told her — in fact, she — no, that's not what we're talking about…"

Her rambling, so rare for Jane to do, was what settled the weight in Tom's chest. She was nervous and adorable, and he realised with a deeply-felt rightness that of course she felt the same way. It made sense. His heart knew hers so well it would never fall in love all on its own.

He slid closer to her on the sofa. "I love you, Jane," he said again. He quirked an eyebrow. "You're the writer. Tell me what that means."

There was a long silence. For all his certainty about her feelings, she was reacting very slowly, and not at all like someone who was receiving a welcome declaration of love. She just kept staring at him.
He shifted uncomfortably. "But if you don't — if that's not something you want to hear, then we can — "

"No!" she almost shouted. She clapped a hand over her mouth. "Tom, I don't understand — you mean you actually — "

"It's not bloody complex," he said lightly, hoping that a change in tone would make this easier to digest. "I love you. In a big way, like the climactic scene in all those books you read." He took a breath and paused before he said the next thing. "Do you love me?"

"Do I — " Jane was mortified to find that she was crying. "You haven't guessed? Of course I love you! But Tom, what if — "

"Oh, thank bloody heavens," said Tom. He scooted even closer so he could see all the freckles on her face. "Look, of course things will change, but that's not a bad thing. It's good. We already work as friends. And for God's sake, if Henry and Mary can work it out, we can too." Her face was changing, growing softer and brighter, and he kept talking because he wanted to see where that could end up. "So we can't be cool twenty-first century platonic roommates any more, but we can be people in love who live together. It would be a much sappier TV show, but there are benefits, too. We can — "

Jane had apparently decided to demonstrate one of those benefits, because Tom was cut off in the middle of his rather lovely speech by the feel of Jane's lips touching his.

After a few seconds he pulled back, because he had to be sure. "So you really —"

"Yes!"

"Even though it might —"

"I don't care."

"I just thought you had to know, even if you didn't —"

"I do. I was terrified of saying something because I thought you didn't —"

"I do."

"It's getting quite hard to tell which one of us is speaking, isn't it?"

"Because we both feel the same way."

They smiled at each other.

"If only we'd realised earlier!" Jane suddenly said. "Five years, and only now…"

Tom said shyly, "I was a bit spurred on by Yvonne's speech. 'Be George' and all that. In a way, watching the show has sort of… changed me. Yvonne's rallying cry just put the thoughts together." She hadn't said anything to this confession so he doubled back on himself. "Is that weird? It's kind of weird. Oh well," he said, and grinned boyishly. "You already know that about me."

"No," said Jane gravely. "It's not, at all. I… I think it's quite lovely that these stories have had that effect, especially for us." She tried to make sense of that feeling but couldn't quite put her finger on what it was. Tom shifted so that her head was nestled on his chest, and she settled for, "Somehow, it feels right."
Chapter End Notes

Oh noooo I didn't plan on this taking as long as it did; I thought I would bang out a quick 2k final episode, then move onto the long and languid epilogue. Instead, this became yet another 6k chapter.

Anne and Fred were your winners by a country mile, no matter which scoring system I used. Lizzy and Will were second, Henry and Mary were third, and Emma and George were fourth.

We're almost there! I'm going to post the epilogue tomorrow evening, and then I guess this will be over. It's been a real pleasure, folks. And my Tumblr's always open.
Epilogue: The Chances of Finding Someone

Chapter Summary

The end, the end! Thank you for sharing this madcap journey, and I hope you'll find that this final chapter moves everything to a better place.

Chapter Notes

This is the last chapter of Down the Isle, and what a cherry on top of the sometimes meta cake it is.

My final author's note apology for what's about to happen ahead: I know I've ascended the heights of egotism by writing something and slapping Jane Austen's name on it, but obviously I am not trying to imitate her style or remotely pass it off as hers. It's just a contrived twist on a relationship between Austen and her characters.

Title, as a nod to where we began, is from Can I Have this Dance, High School Musical.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One year later

"Jane, stop lurking."

"I'm not lurking," she protested. She peeked over the edge of the sofa and was dismayed to see that Tom was only on page two. "Why are you such a slow reader?"

"Why are you such an impatient fiancée?"

"I am not," said Jane, but she sat down on the sofa and pulled out her phone. "OK, I'm going to do a Sudoku, and if I finish that before you finish my article…"

Minutes later, Tom flipped over the last page. Jane sparked to attention.

"What do you think?" she asked.

He grinned. "Perfection. Rolling Stone won't know what's hit them."

"It's not for Rolling Stone," said Jane, though she beamed at his words. "Do you really think so? It's not heavy journalism but I think it redeems itself through being funny. You don't see anything big that needs changing? The contestants aren't wildly different from who they were on the show?"

"Nothing," assured Tom. "And anyway who remembers the show? You've made the characters your own."

She rolled her eyes and took the copy back. "Oh, did you talk to your sister about — "
"Yep," said Tom. "She says they can do the 24th."

"Really?" Jane's face lit up. "Oh, that's great! I mean, it also means we don't have much time…"

"Look at it this way," said Tom, pulling her towards him. "The sooner we're married the sooner you'll no longer have meltdowns over seating arrangements and tulips not being in season."

"The sooner you'll have to stop hearing me rant about it, you mean."

"Not so," said Tom. "I pay attention, and I know you're one botched bouquet away from going insane."

"Let's elope," she said. She shook the article. "Like Henry and Mary. Can you believe it? I'm still in shock."

Tom grinned. "Well, you can't know everything…"

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Some surprises I found down the aisle — a coda to last year's summer TV hit

by Jane Austen

Almost a year ago, ten attractive people were flown out to a Spanish island and deposited in a villa for our viewing pleasure. Contestants came in and out, and several weeks later eight finalists exited the villa, all in happy couples, and returned to life under considerably greyer skies. Most of them have been living under the radar this past year, but a reunion party took place last week (and through a connection so weird you wouldn't believe me if I told) this Author was given exclusive access. With the knowledge garnered from that night, I bestow upon you this article which will finally answer your idle wonderings: what happened to those two from *Down the Isle*?

The party was hosted by Emma and George in their house in Kent. This fact will be of interest to eagle-eyed viewers who recall that, in chapter 23, Emma and George had a fight. Emma assumed they would live in London; George was hurt she hadn't considered if he wanted that too. Clearly, they've learnt to compromise — which is a good thing, because three months ago they announced that they were engaged.

I get there before the party's started and hover in the living room as they finishing setting up. "Is there anything I can do?" I ask.

Emma comes into the living room armed with an overflowing box of decorations. "No, you're fine!" she says. She dumps the box on the coffee table, and starts taking decorations out, examining each one with a critical eye. "Sorry George isn't here at the moment," she says. She grins at me with a level of self-awareness I think the show sometimes missed. "He's buying a cake. He would've got one yesterday but I told him not to because I was going to bake it, but then I tried this morning and it was a complete disaster. I don't really bake but I thought it would be easy. It is not. Did you know that baking soda and bicarbonate of soda are different things?" She pauses her arranging of fairy lights to look at me and pull a face. "Anyway, George was sceptical of its success even before the question of sodas, but bless him, he didn't get a back up cake because he wanted to be supportive."

She lifts an eyebrow. "You can see how well that turned out."

I laugh. I've always been an Emma fan, though she is one of the few controversial *Down the Isle* contestants. I ask her how she feels about her divisiveness, and she shrugs. "I have people whose opinions I care about. Strangers on the internet aren't included."

She places some candles around the living room and it is honestly quite miraculous how their
placement changes the chemistry of the room.

"So," I say. "Why did you choose to host this party at your house?"

In a deadpan tone, she says, "Control the ground, control the battle."

At this moment, there's a knock on the door. Emma goes to answer it. I don't see the newcomer from where I'm standing but I know it's George because Emma says, "Oh, thank god it's you. I was worried it would be Elton or someone and I'd have to make small talk with him in front of a journalist — who's actually rather lovely, by the way."

Thank you, Emma. I appreciate that.

They come into the living room and George takes the cake out of the bag. "We can take it out the box and mess up the icing a bit so it looks like you made it," he tells her. When he sees me, he smiles warmly. "Hello. It's Jane, isn't it? I'm George."

Emma and George are just as delightful now as they were on our TV screens almost a year ago. I watch as they move around the room, preparing it for the party, and it's striking how much fun they have when they work together. For all that they seemed like a couple made of opposites: Emma is rash and outspoken where George is calm and steady, it's clear that they like this difference and never tire of each other. George tickles Emma's nose with a feather when she's focused on tying a ribbon and she shrieks, which only seems to encourage him.

"It might make things quicker later on if I talk to the two of you now," I say. They agree after George manages to persuade Emma that their photo frames look fine in their current position.

"I'll start by asking you how much has changed between you from the day you left the isle."

Emma perks up. "Oh, that's easy. When we got out, we were so excited and full of belief in our future, but we hadn't actually done any of it yet. We hadn't actually been through anything together. I mean, yes, we were official on an inescapable island and that had its own challenges, but we were holiday! Emma and holiday! George, not actual Emma and George."

"And we're engaged now," George offers.

Emma's eyes widen with the horror of a recently engaged woman who's forgotten to announce her news in every conversation. "Yes!" she says. "Oh my god, I was doing such a good job of answering that question on a deep emotional level that I forgot about — "

"Our future wedding?" George asks innocently.

Emma narrows her eyes at him. "Trust me, buddy, once we get into the wedding planning, you're going to wish I could forget about it."

He smiles at her with his whole face: his eyes crinkle and he's focused on her and nothing else. If I had a camera, I could make a very convincing 'Emma and George were robbed of fifty grand!' argument with this.

"What's the proposal story?" I ask. We all know from Emma's Instagram post (which, by the way, has amassed almost one hundred thousand likes) that they got engaged in Edinburgh, but details were not forthcoming in the caption.

"Oh god," says Emma, closing her eyes. "OK. So technically I proposed, though George laid the groundwork…"
"Don't be embarrassed," George says affectionately. "It's very forward-thinking."

"Exactly, you weren't thinking forwards enough," Emma says, going from flustered to snarky in under ten seconds. "Look, all I'll say is: there was alcohol." She frowns. "No, wait, that sounds very dodgy. I take that back."

"Emma said the words, but I'd planned the trip, booked the restaurants, researched the castles and chose which one would be ideal for a proposal…"

"And I ruined all his hard work by drinking a lot of this very nice red wine the night we got there, and just blurting out that we should get married."

"It was in our hotel room!" teases George. "You could've had a castle, Em."

I quietly mourn that we didn't see any of drunk Emma during Down the Isle, and wonder what might have happened had the contestants been allowed to get roaring drunk.

"You two, like most of the contestants, have gone back to normal life after being on the show. Has the experience of being on an immensely popular reality TV show changed you?"

"Obviously, it was the most incredible experience," says George. "It was emotionally intense and the friends I have from Down the Isle are kind of like friendships forged in fire — and I know that sounds so cheesy. But for example Will and I have stuck by each other at our most irritating, when we're irrational and angry and sulking, so I know he's going to be there for me no matter what."

"I'd say the same thing about everyone I'm still close with too," Emma agrees, "but on leaving the isle, it was the weirdest shock that people I'd never met knew who I was. It's nice that we're basically forgotten now, only popping up when something big happens and hits the headlines." She looks at George and smiles. "But navigating the waters of (what to us felt like) overnight fame made us stronger. We learnt that we had very similar principles and that we could rely on each other."

"What advice would you give to this year's contestants?"

"Make your move," says George very seriously. "The waiting and pining and accidentally dating someone else worked for me, but my story's got a weird author. Holding in how you feel won't make anyone happy, least of all yourself."

"Find good friends and love them first," says Emma. She smiles at her fiancé. "The romance will come later."

I let go of Emma and George at a few minutes past eight, so they can attend to the wave of guests who've just arrived. You remember Harriet and Martin, right? And how George was first coupled up with Harriet, and when he broke up with her she cried for ages? Happily any awkward tension from that saga that might've stuck around is gone. Emma and Harriet, whilst not best of friends, have clearly kept in contact, and Martin's friendly demeanour makes him affable in all situations.

Frankly, seeing Harriet and Martin still together was a little surprising. But from the weak foundations of "we have so much in common, we both like Friends and Arctic Monkeys ", a truly strong couple has grown.

Their arrival was quickly followed by that of Elliot, Louisa, Frank and Mary C. The latter two, you will be interested to know, arrived holding hands.

Soon everyone was seated in the living room with a glass of wine in their hand. With eight people present and still fourteen more to come, it became clear that I would need to conduct individual or
"It makes the most sense for me to go first," Elliot offered unsolicitedly. "So sorry, Emma, but I've got a late night poetry reading that's nigh impossible to shift, and I should hate to let people down."

One wonders how many people would be crestfallen if he did cancel.

To summarise Elliot's interview in far fewer words than he used: he's fine. He's working on his newest poetry collection, tentatively titled: *isle show you my scars if you open up your heart* though he professes he's unsatisfied with the assonance. I jokingly observe it's quite a mouthful. He looks faintly irritated, as if I've completely misunderstood his art.

The atmosphere of this evening is pretty informal: in fact, almost like another episode of *Down the Isle*. There's plenty of food and chilled indie music playing, which I suspect is due to George. Emma and Mary C are curled up on the sofa and catching up; Emma says: "You have to tell me everything about Austria."

"It was amazing," said Mary happily. "The audiences were so wonderful, Emma, and I'd never been to Salzburg before…"

Elliot talks to Frank after he removes himself from my presence, but after a few minutes of that Frank drifts over to Emma and Mary, his ex and his… girlfriend? if the tabloids can be believed.

When he sits down he drapes an arm over Mary's shoulders and Mary turns to look at him; her eyebrows are slightly raised and her lips are slightly curved upwards, and he mimics her expression back. Emma rolls her eyes and that confirms it: these two are together.

"How are you, Frank?" Emma asks. It's not nearly as cold as you might expect a question asked of the guy who humiliated Emma in front of the nation by having an undisclosed kind-of girlfriend.

"Good, thanks, Emma," he says. He grins and looks at Mary again. She doesn't return the look this time, though she's certainly aware of it. Her chin tilts up and for a moment her eyes dart to the bottom corner of her vision closest to Frank. Then she looks back at Emma with a smile.

I am pleased to report that Mary is doing well. She's back in her position as lead harpist of the Philharmonia Orchestra, and they have just completed their Austria and Germany tour.

"What impact do you think *Down the Isle* has had for you?" I ask, sat in the cosy interview corner Emma has arranged for me.

Mary smiles before she speaks. This is a habit of hers, though her smiles range from pleasant to genuinely terrifying. Some of the guests at this party have been on the end of the latter.

"I found incredible friends," she says. "Emma, Lizzy, Anne, Mary… and the boys too, of course."

"And what about the negative impacts?" I ask. "It can't have been fun to have paparazzi invading your privacy those first few months out of the villa."

Mary shrugs, though at the time I can't imagine she was nearly this unruffled. "It happened. But it was only a few months, and then everyone lost interest. I'm not famous and I don't want to be. There are people who do, and the paparazzi know to go after them."

I pluck up the courage to ask the Edmund question. (For readers with a poor memory: Mary and Edmund were the first couple of the show and promising, but ended in flames when Edmund couldn't contain his interest in a new arrival, Fanny.)
For the most part Mary just looks unbothered, and why should she be? "It was a year ago, and happened in a place that was constructed to be so unlike normal life, that I can't really blame anyone for behaving the way they did."

This is a perfect segway into the topic of Frank. "Do you think with your relationship with Frank — being able to develop that off the isle, in the course of normal life — that it would be different if you'd stayed on the isle together?"

She smiles and it isn't terrifying, though I feel it quickly could become so. "I knew you were going to ask this."

I smile apologetically.

She sighs. "I mean, I don't know. But it's a redundant question, isn't it? I don't know what if, and it doesn't matter, because it didn't happen that way. What did happen was I made a very odd sacrifice — maybe I thought I'd be venerated as a martyr; I don't know, I wasn't really thinking — and Frank decided he wanted to make it too. Then we got out, got back into our normal lives and gradually fell into place together." She pauses. "Obviously I'm capable of having a relationship under Down the Isle conditions," she says, and the shade is real. "But mine and Frank's wasn't, and I'm too happy with it to imagine it any different."

It occurs to me that my first two interviews have already covered the full spectrum of feelings towards Down the Isle. One contestant is writing underselling poetry collections punning on the show's name. The other is glad that her current relationship developed without it.

Louisa is doing well too. She and James broke up a few weeks after leaving the isle, but all seems amicable. Louisa has followed in the footsteps of ex-contestants before her by making a living through her Instagram, though she may have reached a low with a sponsored post for a beech furniture company last week.

Elliot leaves, apologising as he does it. Mary B and Henry arrive.

"Oh, it's so good to see you!" exclaims Emma, and apparently she means you in the plural because she hugs them both. Henry has already spotted the journalist in the room and he gives me a charming smile over the top of Emma's head. He and George man-hug, then George hugs Mary.

"We brought you some wine," says Mary, holding up a bottle of red. Emma's eyes light up. I am standing by the wall; close enough to hear what is going on, but not so close I am a part of their conversation. This is how I know Henry does it deliberately. He looks at me as if giving a tip, and says offhandedly, "We bought it on our honeymoon."

Jaws drop to the ground. Mary sighs a little — even if she hadn't expected this, she knows her husband (!) and knows this is the kind of thing he would do. Henry wraps his arm around her waist and it's a curious move; he seems to be mocking the expectations of physical affection between couples, but also the way he smiles at her is undoubtedly real. She responds by rolling her eyes.

The silence is enough for everyone to realise this isn't a joke. Emma's eyes dart to their respective ring fingers. It is the final confirmation.

"When?" demands Emma. They're still standing at the door. In the face of this revelation, she has forgotten about the rest of her guests who now must entertain themselves.

Henry shrugs. "Two months, eighteen days."

"Two months?!" Emma squeaks. Her face is a comedy of emotions. She looks up at George, seeking
a stabilising point, but he is shocked as well. It appears that Henry and Mary told no one about their wedding.

"Mary!" exclaims Mary C, who has come from the living room to join the party. "Get in here! We were wondering what's taking you and Henry so long."

Emma pivots towards her friend. "Mary and Henry are married."

Mary C raises an eyebrow. "Congratulations," she says.

"Thank you," says Mary B. Henry is talking to George about cricket, thus absolving him from this conversation. "Shall we go inside?"

"Of course!" says Emma. She shepherds them inside, pours them wine, motions them towards the various platters of food situated around the room. Henry eats two prawn spring roll wraps. Emma lets Mary and Henry spread the word about their own wedding, but judging from her frequent stares in their direction, it'll take her a while to be over the shock.

Henry and Mary do their interview together. Note to the reader: they are sitting on the loveseat.

"I suppose I should start by asking about your wedding," I say. "When did you decide to get married?"

"The day of," says Mary shortly.

Henry nudges her. "Give her some more details, darling."

On the isle, Mary and Henry danced around each other in circles of sexual tension for two weeks before finally admitting their feelings and getting together on the evening before the show's end. They came in a surprising third place, and pessimistic speculation was that this highly-strung couple was unlikely to ask. Well, tell that to their wedding rings.

"We love each other," says Mary simply. She shrugs and tries to look nonchalant, but there is a blush creeping over her face that might also have something to do with Henry's thumb tracing circles over the curve of her waist. She continues, "He brought it up, and I couldn't think of a reason to say no."

"What Bennet isn't telling you," says Henry, "is that I've been bringing it up since February."

From another person this sentence would be sort of romantic, or falling into the tired trope of the chivalric knight and icy lady of his affections. But Henry says it sardonically and Mary rolls her eyes even as she leans into him. Their relationship now is very different from its volatile beginnings.

"What advice would you give to this year's contestants on Down the Isle?"

"Shit, don't ask us that," says Henry. "We only came third."

"That's further than most."

He shrugs. "No idea. Pick someone to argue bitterly with for two weeks before one of you gathers up the courage to make a move."

I look at Mary to see if she agrees with this assessment of their early relationship. Henry looks at her too, as if daring her to contradict. Her smile is ironically wistful. "Now we only argue for fun."

Henry adds, "It's all worked out rather excellently."
I sense that Mary is not as easy in front of the press as Henry, so I let them go and enjoy the party. A few minutes later I spy them talking to George and Martin, and there's undeniable ease in the way they are around each other; affection, too, even if Mary doesn't like to talk about that. When he's telling a story, she smiles at his jokes and provides snarky comments for him to play off. Unquestionably, they've worked it out in the year since they left the show.

A few minutes after Emma announces that Anne and Fred are almost here, Louisa begs a prior engagement and leaves. Oh dear. Then Anne and Fred arrive, bearing the smiles of a married couple experiencing, for the first time, the highs and lows of pregnancy.

"I'm so sorry we're late," says Anne, as Fred hovers beside her like a worried mother hen. She touches her slightly rounded stomach. "One fun thing I've learnt about being pregnant is — " she stops herself. "Nope, not appropriate party talk."

"Anne, love, you can talk about anything you want," says Fred.

"But I don't want to talk about vomit," she says, almost pouting.


Anne makes a face.

Mary and Henry duck their heads into the conversation and Emma leaves to continue ensuring the comfort of all of her guests. Anne and Fred are momentarily struck dumb by Henry and Mary's announcement that they're married, but recover quickly.

"Oh, congratulations!" Anne exclaims. "I'm so happy for you two. Being married is wonderful."

"You're welcome to ask for advice any time," Fred tells Henry.

"You too," he replies.

More guests trickle in: Lizzy and Will, Charlotte, Elton, James. Lizzy and Anne hug like they haven't seen each other in years and Lizzy hints at the position of godmother with her familiar conflation of seriousness and teasing. Anne grins and says they'd hate to put Will in a position he was uncomfortable with. After a struggle, Will concedes that his fatherly instincts may not be all that developed.

There's some tension when Caroline shows up with her non-DTI (and presumably uninvited) boyfriend, Gordon, but it blows over when Gordon compliments the 'gemütlich' atmosphere.

"So I had no phone battery and, after raking through my pockets, a grand total of £1.26 in cash," Lizzy is saying to an audience of Will, Charlotte, Caroline and Martin. "And I'm somewhere in Coventry, and it's getting kind of dark."

"How ghastly!" exclaims Caroline.

"So what did you do?" asks Will pointedly. "You could've gone to the police or found a payphone, but instead — "

Lizzy interrupts him. "OK, I know you've heard this story, but no one else has, so can you let me have my dramatic tension?"

"Did you hitchhike?" asks Charlotte. "That seems like something you would do."
"Yes," says Will flatly, before Lizzy can stop him.


"Or," says Will darkly, "it was putting herself into unnecessary danger."

"It was barely a hitchhike," Lizzy protests. "It was only for an hour and Ricardo was like ninety; what was he going to do? And you know, he had a lot of good stories. He told me his dad fought in the Spanish Civil War, and he swears he met Martha Gellhorn. Martha Gellhorn! Come on, that's exciting."

"No," says Will, "it was the most terrifying eighty minutes of my life."

"Will made me call him every quarter hour," says Lizzy. "Poor Ricardo had hardly any phone credit left."

"If he [Will] hadn't," says Charlotte, "maybe you'd be dead in a ditch on the side of the M1."

Caroline intervenes before the conversation goes further down that road and this fic turns from light-hearted rom-com to horrifyingly dark tale of a roadside body dump. "People! This is not appropriate party talk." She doesn't get the chance to direct the conversation to more civilised topics because someone new arrives at the door.

A screaming "oh my god!" is heard. It's Lydia, probably the contestant who's made the most out of their stint on *Down the Isle*. A short-lived legend when she was on the show, Lydia's greatest hits include going after Will, backing off and setting him up with Lizzy when she realised how smitten Will was, asking Lizzy if she was cool with Lydia moving onto Wickham, and calling Will and George out on their cowardice. Since leaving the isle she has done deservedly well for herself, snagging a presenting contract with a short-lived talk show that she all but carried, then basically becoming a media darling.

"It's so good to see you!" exclaims Emma. George hugs her too, then Emma leans in to whisper in Lydia's ear, "And don't worry, Wickham isn't here yet."

"Oh, I don't care," says Lydia. Then Lizzy, Mary C and Will come forward to greet her and they're talking, catching up, making plans to have dinner together next month.

I steal Lydia away after she's made her rounds of the room. Bearing in mind her progression into a public figure who has a name outside of the *Down the Isle* bubble, I begin by asking her how she looks back on her time on the show, one year later.

"When I was on the isle... which, to be honest, was pretty short — I was gone too soon — I got involved with a fuckboy." She rolls her eyes. "I wish I could say that was the last time, but let's be honest, I'm probably going to do it again. It's just better to accept that you'll make more mistakes instead of holding yourself up to some super high standard."

Her honesty is, as ever, unflinching.

She grins. "Lizzy wouldn't like me saying that. That's the good part of my experience on the show: I made really brilliant friends." She shrugs. "And it gave me a head start in my career."

I bring it back to *Down the Isle*. "Do you think if you'd done things differently, you would've had a chance at making it to the final, or even winning?"

She snorts. "Lol no." Then she tilts her head and smiles impishly. "Actually, maybe with Mary —
Mary C, I mean, if we were in some bisexual alternate universe… but obviously she has Frank and that's cool. Honestly, I'm not really dating right now because I'm focusing on my career. Being on the isle, being around people who were ready to meet their person, made me realise how far away I was from that."

"People such as?"

Lydia rolls her eyes. "Do you really need to ask?" She motions towards several points in the room and the exhibits are as follows: Lizzy and Will smiling at each other for no discernable reason, Fred bringing Anne a platter of food gathered from around the room, George fiddling with a lock of Emma's hair as they talk to Mary and Frank. "I was gone before Henry and Mary arrived," Lydia adds, "but we met afterwards, and honestly if I'd been on the show at the same time as those two?" She arches a brow and sips her wine. "It would not have taken them so long."

I laugh because privately, I think she might be right.

Wickham arrives. For those of you who have been spared the details of his life this last year, let me fill you in. One would think that Wickham's reputation was irrevocably marred by the almost immediate reports of him cheating on Lydia, but in fact he has been welcomed into the arms of a prominent men's fashion brand. Alas, his time on the isle has only springboarded his career to more lucrative modelling contracts. There is however small comfort in the fact that at this party of only old contestants (and Gordon), he is not very popular. He spends most of the party talking to Frank or on his phone, and that's especially satisfying because I know no one's given him the wifi password.

The last to arrive are Fanny and Edmund, which is strange for two reasons. Firstly, I didn't think they'd come. They've kept an incredibly low profile: both are inactive on social media and completely absent from the tabloids. Secondly, they arrive together, and this Author must confess she'd idly assumed they'd split.

However, they are at this party now, which means they are prepared for at least some media attention. And any animosity between them and Emma seems to have faded in the past year, because she greets them graciously, and they're reservedly gracious in return.

"I'm afraid we can't stay for long," is the first thing Fanny says to Emma after the greetings are done. "Edmund's sister's flight gets in tomorrow morning and we need to be up early to pick her up."

The other guests, including Mary, are visible from the house's entrance. But Fanny says it so apologetically, so earnestly, that I think maybe they genuinely are driving to the airport the morning after a party also attended by Edmund's ex.

When I deem it appropriate to cut in and ask for a quick interview, they look at each other with a synchronicity without words. "Oh," says Edmund. He smiles apologetically at me. "I'm so sorry, but I don't think we'll be able…"

"We really hadn't planned on staying long," says Fanny sweetly. "It's such a shame we've run out of time! We should've spoken to you earlier, absolutely."

Edmund places a hand on her arm. "But we really do have to go."

I let them leave: their presence was itself beyond the expected. They bid appropriate goodbyes to everyone else at the party and tell Emma what a lovely twenty minutes they had. I suppose if I were them I'd be fleeing early too.

I think it'll be more revealing if I ask Fred some questions on his own, so I take my opportunity when
Anne's talking to Lizzy and Will to approach him.

"Oh, hi," he says. "You're the writer."

"I am," I agree. "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"Of course."

I ask him the basics: what he's been doing since leaving the isle (training to be a teacher), how he thinks being on the show changed his life (immeasurably), what is it like being married (just the greatest thing. It's the feeling of always being attached to home). Then I ask something riskier: "Do you think you and Anne would be together without Down the Isle?"

"That's difficult to answer," he says. He talks slowly, trying to wrap his feelings into words. "I don't want to downplay how important it was that Anne actually came back into my life, even if she didn't know it at the time. We missed all that time in the middle because neither of us reached out. But since being married, I've come to think that perhaps…" he pauses, searching for the right words. He settles for, "I don't want to come out with any grandiose ideas about true love and the ages. But I know that I really don't want to imagine a universe where we're not together."

He smiles at a point behind me and I turn my head to see that Anne is coming down the hall. "All good?"

"All good," she replies, kissing his cheek before turning to smile at me. "Have we met before? I'm Anne."

We exchanged pleasantries. I tell her she's rocking the wraparound soft denim dress she has on, because she is.

"Really?" she asks me, charmingly earnest and eminently likeable. "I saw it on Pinterest and I was, as they say, inspired."

"Pinspired," suggests Fred.

"Honey, no," says Anne, but she's smiling. "You know, it's a real minefield, pregnancy dressing. People talk enthusiastically about dungarees but they make me feel like a kangaroo, and also a child, which doesn't make sense, I know. Also, I now only wear trainers or these — " she motions down to her navy blue Toms — "because my feet are a half size bigger than they used to be. At this point I just want the swelling to continue until I can share shoes with Fred."

"You hate my shoes," says Fred.

"Only the brown ones," says Anne. She looks at me gravely. "Which is, unfortunately, most of them."

After Fred makes the case for brown shoes, Anne says she would hate for me to portray them as a couple whose lives revolve around an ongoing shoe argument, like in a bad sitcom, so I start asking my questions. I begin by observing that their life has moved on fast since the show's end.

Fred smiles at his wife. "That's an understatement."

"I can't even imagine where I'd be without it," says Anne. She looks down at her belly. "Well, I wouldn't be pregnant. But it's so odd to think where I was a year ago from today, and then compare that to now."
"Earlier," I say, "Fred and I were talking about how necessary *Down the Isle* was in bringing you two back together."

Anne takes a deep breath. "OK," she says. "This is going to sound cheesy and terrible and a year ago, I would never imagine saying or believing something so august. But I really think — " she pauses, and they smile absorbingly at each other again — "Fred and I are supposed to be together. There isn't any other way I can imagine my life being right."

I write slower than I need to, to allow them as much privacy as I can whilst sitting opposite them. "Thank you," I say when enough time has passed. "That's perfect."

Finally, I track down Lizzy and Will, and make them take time out of enjoying the party for their obligatory interview with the journalist.

"So, how does this work?" asks Lizzy, beaming at me even as she questions why I'm here. "You ask us about our lives, we feed you generic lines, you publish it on the internet?"

I smile. "If that's how you'd like to play it."

Lizzy frowns. "I feel like I know you," she says. Her eyes drift down to my pen and notepad. "This doesn't seem right somehow. Shouldn't you have like, a recorder? No, not that…"

"Ahem," I say. "So I'll start by asking: how does it feel to see everyone again?"

"It's great," says Lizzy. Will nods in agreement. "We've seen a fair amount of each other over the last year, but it's always lovely to get together. Although," she says pointedly, "there have been some unexpected revelations tonight."

"Henry and Mary?" I ask.

"Yes!" says Lizzy, just as Will says, "Absolutely no one saw it coming."

"But did you really have no idea?"

"None!" exclaims Lizzy. "I mean, we knew things were going well, even though apparently the public didn't have much faith in them…" she pauses, as if to stare into a camera that isn't there. "But wow. Marriage. Even Will and I aren't there yet."

That strikes me as an odd thing to say in front of a journalist doing a piece on your romantic life; risky, even, with your partner sitting right next to you. But though Will's face was notoriously difficult to read during *Down the Isle*, I genuinely think his neutral expression is a sign of neutrality, and not some deeply repressed dissatisfaction within his relationship.

I observe that this makes them the only couple of the final four who isn't already married or planning on it.

"Yup," says Lizzy cheerfully. "We're just going to keep living in sin."

Will informs me that since Lizzy is still studying for her PhD and that will take at least another year, they're going to wait some time before getting married, because Lizzy doesn't want the extra inconvenience of changing her name twice. Lizzy must be concerned that I'll think Will a horrible patriarch for assuming his wife will take his name, because she says, "Er, due to the emotional strain of certain disputes with members of Will's family, it's been agreed that I'll be taking the Darcy name."

Will says, "Lizzy, perhaps your future self will think it unwise to mention — "
"Oh, your aunt's not going to read this," says Lizzy airily. She blinks at me. "No offence to you, I mean. I'm sure your writing's very good. But Will's aunt only reads news that comes on paper."

"None taken," I say pleasantly. "So looking back, how would you describe the experience of being on Down the Isle? Will?"

He clears his throat. "Though I realise it was a very short period, within that time I changed very much and became significantly happier." He clears his throat and when his eyes meet Lizzy's he smiles. Obviously he's talking about her. "It was impossible to realise at the time how much Down the Isle was changing me. But for example; when I came home, Georgie [Georgie is Will's sister] remarked that I was so much easier to be around." A smile flickers on the corners of his mouth. "Of course, that could just be Lizzy's influence."

"And George, and Anne," Lizzy adds graciously.

I ask Lizzy the same question. She says she's grateful for the friends she made, and for Will. "When we left the isle, we were pretty sure we'd found something special, but this last year I realised how truly good we are together." She grins. "This realisation wasn't very televisable stuff; mostly it was a lot of talking about careers and logistics and things that could get in the way of us being together. That's the thing about being on the isle — there is nothing to interrupt you being together. Then you're thrown back into real life and you hope that the connection you built won't just stay, but get stronger." Her smile deepens. "It did."

"And finally, what's the most important thing you learnt from the experience?"

"Don't bottle up or overwrite your feelings," says Will. He smiles wryly. "They will come out, and you will look like a prat when they do."

Lizzy settles on, "Be brave. Maybe your reasons are just excuses. Also, sometimes first, second, third impressions are wrong." This time she tilts her head when she smiles at him. "It takes a while to know someone."

I thank them for their answers and release them to the party once more. With the last interview done, I think it's time for me to leave. I say my goodbyes and feel curiously sad about finishing this story. As I drive home, I cast my mind back through these conversations. Some people's answers were hopelessly abstract, but for the most part I think about how romantically successful Down the Isle actually was. Seven couples! One almost wonders if these people had a helping hand.

Last year's was a memorable season: dramatic, romantically varied, built on strong friendships, and the plot felt almost planned ahead because the tension stretched until the end. It also very neatly tied itself up. Judging from most of the contestants's reluctance to stay in the public eye, this article may well be the last we'll hear from them, and it's an all-round happy send-off. Notable exceptions, such as Lydia, are excepted.

It's easy to write off Down the Isle as just a reality TV show. But nothing is 'just' anything, because nothing exists in isolation; everything has an effect. And my personal experience of watching Down the Isle has been very rewarding indeed.

I would argue that we watch and love Down the Isle not because it offers an airbrushed fantasy of a luxurious all-expenses paid summer holiday, but because we believe in the love stories it creates. We all know there are barriers to everything, not least a stable and nurturing romantic relationship. But in Down the Isle those barriers are a little weaker, and hope is a little stronger. Of course we know that real life awaits these contestants, and all its likelihoods for disaster. But if they're in love, as they are when they leave the isle, why shouldn't they make it work? And never mind 'what will probably
happen' — isn't the former what stories are all about? What, despite everything, should happen?

Jane especially liked that last line. Stories were man-made, and they were about what should happen, never mind the randomness of life. Even if what happened wasn't what should happen, that was a view on what should happen all the same.

She could admit it was different when it was personal, though. In this story, her story, she had a good job, a loving family, and was engaged to her favourite person and best friend. She didn't worry about should happens. She just knew that she was very, very lucky.

There was Tom's voice coming from the bathroom: "Jane, darling? Can you bring up that nice blanket from the sofa when you're done? I forgot."

"One of these days you'll remember," she grumbled good-naturedly.

She cast an eye over the coffee table and silently congratulated Tom on his foresight to use a coaster for his beer, before tidying up some little messes and finally heading for bed.

She met him just as he was coming out of the bathroom. "I love you," he proclaimed, as she handed him the blanket. He pressed a wet kiss to her cheek and made his way to their bedroom.

"It's just going to be washed it off!" Jane called, going into the bathroom.

"Not a problem!" he called back from inside their room. "I'm never going to run out."

She waited a bit before replying. "That's good to know," she said steadily.

He appeared in the doorway again. "See?" he said, and demonstrated swiftly that he was telling the truth. He walked out backwards and they made faces at each other until he reached the wall.

Jane sat on the edge of the bathtub and waited a while longer to brush her teeth, because she couldn't stop herself from smiling. Nowadays, it felt like she was in her own happy ending.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my god, OK. I can't believe I've written 134k of one story. But I have and it's the end, so… I want to say thank you all, again, for your wonderful, excited, funny, delightful comments and messages. I know this fic is weird (which is also something a few of you have told me, so… thanks?) but if weird AU's aren't your thing, thank you for taking a chance on this. And if they are, just know you're the backbone of this economy.

I know I've only been writing this for five months and that pales in comparison to other WIPs which have been going on for years. However, this is bloody long, and though the timespan of writing was short, the percentage of my life which went into Down the Isle during these 5+ months was very high. I'm really going to miss this crazy, joyful, witty (?) AU and the stability of always having this to do.

In many of your lovely reviews you've said you look forward to future P&P fics from me. To be entirely honest I think I may be done with Austen fic because this was both very intense and very ambitious, and I don't think I'll ever top this in those respects. In
some ways I feel I've creatively whittled taken all I can from her. Furthermore the time in my life which had space for a 134k fic is closing up, so I'll be taking a break from all fic for a while. My next venture, when I return, will either be for Anne of Green Gables, The Mentalist, or Rokesbys. Only time will tell.

So goodbye, parting is such sweet sorrow and thank you, one last time, for reading.

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