

SCREW FLIRTING

BONUS EPILOGUE

LOLA WEST

EPILOGUE

BUG

One year later...

We were sitting in some bar in Martha's Vineyard. After circumnavigating the entirety of South America, we'd made the decision to sail up the east coast and meet up with Ryan. Unlike Jack and I, Ryan had a really terrible year, like horrendous. There was a freak accident during a soccer match and he tore two of the four ligaments in his knee. It was the kind of injury that doctors call a career killer.

There was video. My brother was one of those YouTube moments that makes viewers wince. It was raining and a player from the other team slid into him - moving at full force, which would have been okay, but a couple of guys on Ryan's left slipped too. When the smoke cleared, my brother was on the ground with his knee turned in a completely unnatural direction, but it was the expression on Ryan's face that killed me. He didn't flinch or call out in pain. He just succumbed. His gaze withdrew and the fire in his eyes dulled; it was like he knew, like even before a single doctor in a white coat told him that his knee was blown, Ryan

already understood he'd never get to live his dream of playing professional soccer.

He had to drop out of school to recover. And after surgery, and months of physical therapy he was walking again but he wasn't okay. It happened in September, Jack and I were only gone for three months. We considered turning back but my mom said he'd be fine. Still, neither one of us could bear the thought of not being by his bedside, so we docked *Screw Flirting* in Cartagena, Columbia and flew home. It felt weird to leave the boat behind because it had quickly become home, but neither one of us could bear to think of Ryan suffering without our company.

He was not receptive to our arrival. In fact, he was down-right pissed, somewhat sanely ranting about how there was no way he was gonna kill our dreams and his in one fail swoop, so after a few days of shenanigans, like sneaking cheeseburgers into the hospital after hours, we were back on the plane returning to our floating home south of the equator.

Months later, when I called my mother and she told me that Ry was spending the summer in Martha's vineyard working at some golf club restaurant, Jack and I replotted our course. Much to our parents' chagrin, we had decided that one year at sea wasn't enough for us. We were doing well. Jack was writing and publishing independently so we had some income and there was no reason to change the course of our lives just yet. School might happen someday. It also might not.

When I spoke to my mother she always sounded a smidge disappointed, but the tone when she mentioned Ryan was different. There was something fearful in her voice that told me Ryan wasn't fine like she'd expected, not

at all. So seeing Ryan became priority. Both Jack and I wanted to be with him, maybe for a week, maybe for a month. We weren't sure. We just both knew that we wanted to reconnect. So we headed north, arrived, anchored our girl, *Screwy* - the boat's affectionate nickname - and went ashore to finally sit across the table from my brother and shoot the shit over a few beers.

The bar Ryan picked was kind of a dump, lots of worn wood and split booth seats, and even though we'd been drinking legally in South America all year, back home in the US, Jack and I were still underage, so beggars can't be choosers. Ry said the place had a reputation for never checking IDs and that was good enough for us. The three of us found a spot in the back corner, Jack and I on one side of the booth and Ry on the other. Since we'd arrived, there had been hugs and lots of back slapping but I got the feeling that Ryan was avoiding any kind of real or deep interaction. I'd asked him how he was twice and he'd side stepped the question by asking questions about our trip. Jack didn't seem to notice or maybe he was just doing that bro-dude thing where you respect the unspoken boudry being drawn.

Jack rambled on about our trip, "So after the caribbean, we went through the panama canal to Peru, The Galapagos and Easter Island..."

I interrupted him, "You know this. I emailed you our itinerary."

Ryan shrugged and said, "Yeah but you didn't tell me about it - I didn't see your faces or expressions or whatever. Go on, Bug, tell me about your adventure, I want to hear." He popped his eyebrows at me like he was full of mirth, but I saw his grip tighten around his beer mug. My brother was playing silly for sure, but all I could see was his tension. Everything about him looked tight to me, his jaw, his shoul-

ders, even his nostrils were flared like a beast ready to pounce.

I couldn't bring myself to tell him about the magic of my months on the ocean with Jack. I couldn't let him see that while he was suffering Jack and I were living out the seaborn equivalent of the garden of eden, peaceful scantily-clad months of being together in love on the adventure of a lifetime. So, I decided to tell him our horror story instead.

I looked at Jack quickly hoping he could see forgiveness in my eyes and then I said, "We went to Antarctica."

We'd decided not to tell anyone about our polar excursion, and I'd just told my brother without consent, but I felt like he needed a secret, something, some kernel to remind him he was special to us, no matter what.

Before I spoke, Ryan had shifted his glance down to his mug for a second, but his eyes snapped up at my words. And then on a wry smile, he said, "You told mom you didn't."

I nodded. "True. We didn't stay very long. And..."

"You didn't want her to go crazy with worry." Ryan noted.

I nodded again.

"You could have told me though." He said, frowning.

"I am." I said, thinking maybe my strategy to get under his skin was failing.

But Ryan turned to Jack and even though the tension in his body hadn't eased much, his smile felt solid when he quipped, "So, giant turtles in The Galapagos, mythic statues in Easter Island and what - fucking freezing winds and ice in the south pole? That sounds like a shit place to visit, dude."

Jack smirked, "Penguins and incredible snow vistas. Duh."

Jack was being glib. Our Antarctica experience was a nightmare. The boat was solid and prepared for the journey and the season was right but we were all chattering teeth

and layers of down warmth. And then we missed a collision with a giant block of ice by inches. If we'd hit we would both be dead, frozen in the middle of the ocean. We should have never gone.

I added, "Yes, penguins and vistas but also a near miss with an iceberg. It was fucking terrible. I shook for days after - and not because I was cold - which I was - I shook because I didn't tell you or mom and dad and what if we died out there. Jesus. It was so stupid."

With his eyes narrowed, Ryan said something that made my stomach turn, "Sometimes being stupid reminds you that your still alive."

I was stunned silent. The conversation went on without me but nothing felt right.



AFTER A COUPLE of beers I started to relax and the rhythm of being together felt more normal. We chatted and laughed and then some of Ryan's buddies showed up. They were mostly guys, other people who worked at the country club I assumed. Ryan introduced us, but there were enough of them that their names all mashed together in my head. With his new friends Ryan seemed to shift again becoming an almost exaggerated version of someone both Jack and I knew, but didn't totally adore: Ryan, the life of the party. We moved from our quiet booth to some high tops near a pool table and a dart board and then there was talk of a party, and I found myself yawning. Jack noticed because he always noticed me.

"So, what do you think, ye mighty people of the sea, will you come and party with ye golf club slaves?" Ryan asked raucously.

I looked at Jack and his face scrunched up as he said, “I’m so sorry, man. We’ve got to go check on Katerina.”

“The dog? Your excuse is the dog?” Ryan whined. He was already more than a little tipsy, but not wasted.

“She pees on the bed if we leave her too long. She’s a real bitch.”

Ryan cackled at Jack’s girl dog is a bitch joke. His laugh was too big. It made my skin crawl, but then he looked at me and gently smiled. “Fine, take my sleepy sister home to your floating palace.” I hopped off the stool I was sitting on and moved to hug him. His hug was genuine, warm and solid. He kissed the top of my head and said, “I’m glad you’re here.”

But as quickly as he went sentimental, he was gone, turning to his new friends, throwing his hands in the air and calling out, “Let’s get this party started, assholes!”

And then he strutted away from us without so much as a bye, the door to the bar slapping closed behind him and Jack and I were left looking at the empty space he’d left behind. There was no chatter about tomorrow’s plans, nothing.

Without looking at me, Jack said, “Maybe we should stay a while.”

I added, “Like for the rest of the summer, I think.”

Still staring at the empty spot that used to be Ryan, Jack scowled and nodded.



ON THE WALK home Jack and I were both quiet. It was clear that Ryan was not okay, but there wasn’t much to say or talk about. I was pretty sure the tension and partying that Jack and I saw was just a glimpse. But, It almost felt rude to speak

ill of Ryan because the weird raging energy that seemed to be percolating just beneath the surface of his skin was well earned and perhaps necessary. Still, his behaviors felt worrisome.

As we strolled through the cool night air, Jack tightly held my hand. He wove and re-wove our fingers together like he was trying to bind us at the wrists. Standing by his side, feeling the bulk of him weaving in and out of my stratosphere, felt comforting. For the last year, everything we did, we did together and I'd grown accustomed to feeling the shadow of his strength. Like homing pigeons we went through the motions of boarding the dingy and motoring out to where we'd anchored the boat.

Once on board, I rubbed Katerina's little head as I said, "We're gonna need to rent a slip."

Jack nodded.

"Which means we'll need jobs. And I think jobs on Martha's Vineyard in the summer are hard to come by at this point." My nerves were chattering inside me, exploding like a pot of hot popping corn. I needed to stay with Ryan. I absolutely had to stay.

Without looking at me, because he was still tying up the dingy, Jack suggested something genius, "I was thinking we could run day charters. I know the boat is a little small for that but it's not impossible, right?"

The boat wasn't too small. We could make it work, and we would make a ton more money chartering than we ever could working in restaurants or cleaning hotel rooms. It was perfect. My mood lifted immediately.

Excitedly, I rambled off ideas, "We could make a website and print some flyers to pass out by the ferry. Oooo... we should also print brochures to drop off at the hotels, bars and restaurants...."

Jack laughed, interrupting my inspired rant, “So, you like the idea?”

I grinned at him, bobbing my head up and down like a fool. “I love it.”

“I love you,” He rumbled, low in the register of his voice, making my thighs quake. We were going to be okay. We were going to make sure Ryan was okay. I could feel it.

Relieved, I gave into the sensations taking over my body at the sound of his voice. “You know,” I paused for dramatic effect. “I was thinking I need a shower.”

“A shower, huh?” I didn’t think it was possible but his voice dropped even lower.

I took a step towards the cabin. “Yeah,” I bit my lip and flirted, “I’m very dirty.”

He laughed, but in a growly, kinda snide way that said, *I’m gonna show you dirty, baby.*

“You think you could help me with that?” I asked, posing and batting my eyelashes at him like a silly coquette.

His nostrils flared. Then, he growled and drilled towards me, his beast unleashed. My teasing had woken the wild man. It was the sexiest version of Jack. I turned spinning so when he closed in he pressed his front to my back. He crowded me pushing me towards the ladder that would bring us down into the cabin and closer to the shower I was seeking. Pushed by the momentum of his body weight I grabbed a hold of either side of the hatch. A sting of adrenalin raced under my skin because for a second, I thought I might fall, but he had me. I could feel him hard and thick pressed against my lower back.

Hot and whispery against the shell of my ear, he said, “If I help you, you’re only going to get dirtier.”

I smirked and breathed, “Oh good.”

He gripped my chin hard and turned my face so he

could invade my mouth with his tongue. And then we were scrambling down the ladder and towards the head, a tumble of flying clothes, grabby limbs and sloppy kisses. In the warm spray of the shower he buried himself deep inside me, and made me come. With my legs wrapped around his waist, he repeated one word in my ear again and again, "Mine."

And he was right. I was his - because belonging to another person - being loved by them so much that you don't want to know where you end and they begin - wasn't about losing yourself. Not when it was right. When it was right, belonging to another person could make you more empowered, it could make you stronger and help you grow. With Jack I was more. I was myself only braver and more willing to take calculated risks and I was that for him too, always.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lola West writes short, sweet, smart, silly, sexy romance. With a PhD in women's studies and a flair for the dramatic, Lola likes to keep it real. Her loves are cotton candy, astronomy, kitten heels and small-town hunks. Lola's heroes make you swoon and her heroines that talk back. Also, she believes that consent is always sexy, even in books.

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