

Seeking Land

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Seeking Land

by [Riona](#)

Summary

It's just Brad and Julia now, trying to live through their losses together.

Fliss takes the two of them back to shore. Julia asks for her phone number, so they can stay in touch.

“No,” Fliss says. “This is over for me.”

Julia can’t bring herself to ask Brad for his details afterwards. She’s terrified that he’ll do the same thing. Cut off the possibility of contact, leave her alone, with no brother and no fiancé and nobody to talk to about what they’ve been through.

They watch together as the *Duke of Milan* vanishes over the horizon. Julia is praying in her head, to a God who obviously doesn’t give a shit about either of them, that Brad will ask for a way to contact her.

“So,” Brad says at last. “Where do we go?”

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“Sorry it’s just an apartment,” she says. “The idea was my parents just buy me this place for now, then I buy my own house later on and rent this one out.”

Brad gets kind of a funny look at *sorry it’s just an apartment*, and she remembers too late that he and Alex grew up in one themselves.

“Oh, hey, sorry,” she says. “I wasn’t trying to... y’know.”

He shakes his head. “It’s fine.”

She walks past the guest bedroom quickly, head down; she doesn’t want to look at it. Brad glances through the door, though.

“Did Conrad live here with you?”

She can’t stand hearing his name. “I mean, *technically* no. His apartment’s, like, a block away. But he was over here the whole time.” She grabs two beers from the fridge, and then a third in case Brad wants one as well. Sets them down on the countertop. “He wasn’t really great at living independently.”

It drove her nuts, the way he’d keep showing up on her doorstep without warning, expecting to be invited in and cooked for. She’d kill everyone in this building to make it happen again.

Brad puts a hand on her shoulder. There’s something uncomfortable and unnatural about it, and he takes it away too fast. He’s not great at comforting people. But he’s trying, at least, and she supposes that means something.

“It’s, uh, it’s probably not the right time to ask,” he says, after a moment.

She looks up at him. “Ask what?”

He hesitates. “How did it happen? With Alex?”

She’s been afraid of this. She hadn’t given details, when she’d come back onto the deck with the distributor cap. She’d been crying too much to say more than *Alex is dead*.

“It’s not good,” she says. “You sure you want to know?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “I think I might have to.”

She takes a deep breath.

“He stabbed himself,” she says. She’s trying to keep her voice steady, but she loses control on the third word. “In the gut. Right in front of me.”

Brad jerks back, like he’s seeing it happen right there. “Fuck,” he says, softly.

“I tried to get the knife off him.” Her voice is a wreck. “I don’t know what he thought he was doing.”

It still doesn’t feel like it can be real. Kidnappings, deadly hallucinations? This is the kind of fucked-up thing you hear about on the news; it’s not a *real* thing that happens to actual people, people you know, people you care about.

Brad presses both hands to his head, like there’s a headache threatening to split him open. “What am I supposed to tell Dad?”

Fuck. She’s going to have to talk to people about Conrad.

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She takes a shower before she lets herself think about anything else. It feels really good to be clean. The actual shower itself? Not so great.

She used to take baths, mostly. She doesn’t think she’ll ever be doing *that* again.

It feels like she keeps catching glimpses of rats in the corners of the bathroom. She tries very hard not to look at them.

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She just tells her parents that they were abducted by pirates. She wouldn’t know how to start explaining the rest of what happened that night.

Connie died a hero, she says.

Fliss said he jumped off a... a tower, a chimney. He couldn’t have expected to survive it.

He was trying to get to a speedboat. He wanted to find help for all of us.

He was terrified, Fliss said. Lashing out at something she couldn’t see. He was just trying to get away.

A part of Julia wants to believe that Fliss pushed him. She just needs someone to blame.

The pirate captain shot him, she says.

The lie comes so naturally to her it's like she saw it happen.

Her parents never totally approved of Alex. She doesn't tell them he's gone as well, not yet. She's scared she'll see their reaction and realise they're glad.

They beg her to stay with them for a while. But Brad's back at her apartment, and he's the only person she can really face being around right now. At least he knows what she's been through.

Brad isn't Alex, no matter how much she wants him to be. But he shares Alex's blood. And he knows how to be a brother, and she's lost one of those as well.

She's not sure which of them she needs him to replace.

She's been watching for traits he shares with Alex. They're both cautious; they both think things through. Alex was always the one who kept her from running wild. Telling her not to squeeze into that pipe on the sunken plane. Reminding her to decompress.

He understood death, she realises now. She doesn't think she did, really. Not before all this.

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Someone's tapping her shoulder. That's the first thing she's aware of. And then she realises that she's been screaming, and then she registers that she's awake.

She sits up in bed, massaging her throat with her free hand. "Ugh."

"Sorry," Brad says, quietly. "It sounded like you were having a nightmare."

Julia closes her eyes for a moment, and has to open them again quickly to remind herself she's still here. "I was drowning."

Brad pauses.

"Me too," he says. "Every night."

Julia looks at him, the uncomfortable way he's sitting on the edge of her bed, the way he's avoiding her eyes. She gets so caught up in her own trauma sometimes. It can be hard to remember that he's been fucked up by this as well.

She takes his hand in hers, strokes her fingers over his knuckles. It's something she used to do with Alex; she was always playing with his hands, it was a habit that calmed her down.

Brad draws his hand away. She guesses that's just the person he is; he's bad with any physical contact more intimate than a brief hug.

She can't really blame him for that. But she feels like she's starving for someone to touch her.

"I can't sleep alone," she says.

She sees him tense up.

"Never been great at it. I used to cuddle up with Conrad when we were kids." She says it to take some of the tension out. *See, it's a harmless suggestion. No subtext here.*

He's not Alex. She knows he's not Alex.

"I'm... not really used to sleeping – I mean, being asleep – with anyone," Brad says, after a moment. "I don't know how well I'd actually sleep."

"How well are you sleeping now?" she asks.

There's a pause.

"Not great," he admits. "You know. The nightmares, the what-ifs. The... the screaming coming from the next room."

It's not that funny, but it catches her off-guard enough to kind of make her laugh anyway. "Sorry."

"Hey, I'd be an asshole if I blamed you for it," he says. "Honestly, if I got more sleep, you'd probably be hearing it from me as well."

She swallows. He's not wearing his glasses; he must have heard her from the guest room and come in without putting them on. He looks more like Alex without them, and it hurts.

"I'm sorry I didn't get the knife away from him," she says. "Or maybe if I'd stopped him going down the hole in the radio room—"

"You know the thing I can't stop thinking?" Brad says. "If I hadn't tracked down that wreck, we'd all be fine."

Julia stares at him.

"That's insane," she says. "What, you think you were supposed to go 'better not research this, what if we all end up getting kidnapped and hallucinating ourselves to death on a hell ship'?"

"No, that's what I'm saying," Brad says. "We'd be fine if the kidnappers hadn't come after us. Or if that plane hadn't been shot down, or if Fliss had stopped us to call in the wreck, or if no one ever tried to develop that weapon in the first place. The things that happen, they're way bigger than what any one person does." He pauses. "I don't blame you."

He doesn't say *or if Conrad hadn't taunted the kidnappers*. She doesn't know if he knows about that. She stays quiet about it.

But it helps. Maybe, a little. Maybe he's better at comforting people than she'd thought.

“I could stay in this room,” Brad says. “I don’t know if I could...” He gestures at the bed, vaguely. “But I could stay here.”

“You sure?” she asks. “I mean, we could make something out of couch cushions. I just don’t know how comfortable it’d be.”

He shrugs. “Maybe having someone nearby would help me as well.”

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The shower breaks and floods the apartment in the night.

The kidnappers kick in the door and drag them both out, struggling and yelling.

She stabs Brad, and as she watches him bleed out all she can think is that she saw someone else dying like this once, but she can’t remember his name or his face.

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“Hey! Hey. Whoa. Hey, Julia. Julia?”

She wakes with her throat raw and the leader of the kidnappers stooping next to her bed.

He’s reaching out. He’s going to put his hands around her throat. He’s going to kill her.

She has to fight back.

She lashes out, screaming, and he jerks away.

“Whoa! Julia, it’s me!”

It’s Brad. Shit, of course it’s Brad, they got away, the kidnappers are dead—

“Fuck,” she says, sitting up. She presses her hands over her face. “Oh, God. Oh, fuck.”

“You okay?” Brad asks, keeping a careful distance from her.

She doesn’t know if she should tell him what just happened in her head. Maybe he’ll be freaked out. Maybe he won’t want to be around her any more.

Like Alex, who stabbed himself in the stomach so he wouldn’t have to marry her.

But she might be a danger to him, and that means he needs to know.

“Do you ever feel like... maybe the gas isn’t totally out of your system?” she asks.

Brad’s silent for a moment.

“You’re still seeing things too?” he asks.

Too. She's not alone. It means they're in more danger than she thought, and yet somehow it's a relief.

"Do you think we're going to end up killing each other?" she asks.

He pauses. "I could leave."

"I'm not scared of you," she says. "I mean, I'm not more scared of you than of being alone."

A very small smile creeps onto his face. "Yeah, that's... pretty much how I'm feeling, too."

If she does end up trying to kill Brad, at least he'll understand why. Might be tricky to explain to anyone else.

"Sorry for waking you up," she says.

He shakes his head. "Wasn't really sleeping."

She lies back down. Eyes still open. She's not ready to close them yet.

Brad hesitates for a long moment, and then he lies down on the other side of her bed. On top of the covers, and facing away from her; they're nowhere near touching. But he's there, and she thinks that might help.

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They're not going to hurt each other. They know what they're up against, now. They know what's real and what isn't. They'll be okay.

Or maybe they won't be okay, after everything that's happened, but they'll survive, at least.

She donates all her kitchen knives to charity, just in case.

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