

"Footprints" Episode #215

[Previously ...](#)

**Claire told Paula about Diane's plan to pursue custody of Samantha. Paula expressed certainty that Claire would win the case but Claire felt alienated by Paula's seeming lack of concern.*

**Courtney asked Jason to meet her at the park and, once there, the couple reconciled.*

**Don visited Alex and offered him support, encouraging the young man to unburden himself.*

**Jason went to the hospital and confronted Sarah about having Molly blocked from Brent's room -- and Brent awoke just in time to overhear the story.*

KING'S BAY MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

He heard.

Sarah can see it in Brent's eyes. The eyes she has waited for days to see again, to see life gleaming brightly in them, now present themselves as nothing more than two brown stones. And the flesh she has waited to feel responding to her touch -- it's colder than it was before he woke up.

He heard.

"Brent," she says weakly, thinking that perhaps this is a nightmare. This isn't how it was supposed to be when he woke up ...

"I'll go get a doctor," Jason says from behind Sarah. She nods, not even looking at her brother as he slips from the room. He obviously wanted to get away.

Sarah is suddenly wishing she could do the same thing.

Brent doesn't speak. He doesn't appear to have the energy to do it -- although Sarah is almost positive that's because he is using all of his energy in shooting her that icy glare.

"I can explain," she says hurriedly. "We were worried that you weren't going to wake up. The doctors, they said that once you were conscious you'd pretty much be out of the woods. Molly was in here crying and making a scene, and I just wanted to make sure--"

Brent interrupts her by turning his head away from her. The gesture expresses his point just as clearly as words would have: Her excuse isn't even worth the effort.

FISHER HOME

"Claire?"

Claire doesn't react. She sits still in the lawnchair, her eyes roving over the scene. Everything *looks* perfect: The lively garden, the charming house, the chat over fresh iced tea. It's like *Leave It to Beaver* frozen in time. Except she's pretty sure that June Cleaver never had to face a custody battle for Ward's illegitimate child, and she knows that no one's criminal first-love came back to haunt them full-time. That, or she missed some of the more interesting episodes.

"Claire?" Paula asks again, raising herself up out of her chair a bit as if ready to take action.

Finally Claire looks over at Paula. She is sure that the last several months have etched more weary creases into the older woman's face, that they have added strokes of silver that weren't part of Paula's sandy hair a year ago.

"You looked like you were a million miles away," Paula says.

"That's how I feel sometimes."

"You're still here. You always will be."

"I know, but--it's like I'm living in a different world now," Claire says. "The life that Tim and I had made with Travis and Samantha after Diane left town -- that all feels like it was some incredible dream or something. And now I've woken up and I'm back in the middle of all this crap."

"I told you, this situation with Diane will settle down."

Claire finds herself again irked by Paula's confidence in saying that. For a moment, she allows herself to be swept under by the currents that have been pushing at her from all sides. And when she withdraws from them, even after just that moment, she feels as though she is gasping for air.

"It's more than that," she says in a rush. "It's the fact that my life is completely and totally different from what I expected it would be at this point. All the planning we did was totally shot to hell. And now I have to deal with Diane and ..."

"And?"

Claire offers no response.

"Ryan Moriani?" Paula fills in. Claire looks at her with great surprise. "That's who that was at the apartment that day I came by, wasn't it?"

Claire's hesitation creates only the slightest blip in the conversation. "Yeah."

"Claire, what's going on? Are you still trying to help Andy Fitch get his mother away from Ryan's father?"

"It's more than that," Claire says, her voice thin. "It's like I'm tied to them or something. No matter how hard I try, I can't break away. I came to King's Bay, I built a life with Tim, my father was finally gone -- and then Ryan and Nick showed up and ruined everything."

Paula listens intently, attempting to piece together the story. She searches for one of the missing pieces: "Why did Ryan come to see you that day? Did you ask him to?"

"No," Claire answers vehemently, as if that's the most ridiculous idea she has ever heard. "No. He just wanted to ... I don't know. I think he wanted to talk."

"And isn't he aware that you hold him and his father responsible for Tim's death?"

"More than aware. But ... that's not enough for Ryan." She stops to exhale heavily, like she is forcing out her inhibitions so that she can fill in the picture for Paula. "The relationship Ryan and I had -- I told you it was volatile. It ended badly. Things happened ... things that affect both of us to this day."

She leans forward, propping up her elbows on her legs. "A lot of that still bothers Ryan, and I think he's looking to justify it or something by making things feel okay between him and me."

"But he's still involved in his father's business, right? He must know that you could never be happy about that."

"He does know it," Claire says. "But Nick has power over Ryan -- the type of power my father wanted over me but he couldn't have. And until Ryan is able to break away from that, he's never going to be what he wants to be."

Unsure of what to say, Paula nods.

Claire continues, her intensity mounting. "But that's no excuse. Ryan *is* still involved with Nick and he's lying to me about it, I know it. And that makes him just as much to blame for Tim's death."

Paula seems to be struggling with this idea. "Claire, neither Nick nor Ryan pulled the trigger on the gun that killed Tim."

"They may as well have. It's because they lied and deceived people and operated with absolutely no regard for anyone else that Tim is dead -- and they're going to pay for it."

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Courtney and Lauren wait as the waitress puts away her pen and pad and heads off.

"I'm so glad that's over," Lauren says, sighing with exhaustion.

"Ordering?" Courtney asks with a chuckle. "Is it that much of a strain?"

"Haven't you ever noticed how bad at it I am? I can never make up my mind, and then when they come to take the order I always have to read it off the menu. Otherwise I freeze." Lauren obviously finds the admission funny and Courtney joins her with a grin.

"I don't know why I take you out in public," Courtney says sarcastically, shaking her head.

"Because, my dear, it's better to be out in public with an idiot and make yourself look better by comparison than it is to be out alone, right?"

"Right." Courtney's lips wrap around the tip of her straw as she takes a sip of strawberry lemonade.

"So?" Lauren urges, suddenly impatient.

"What?"

"Jason! You said you were gonna tell me about what happened with you guys. You know you can't leave me hanging like this."

Amused, Courtney rolls her eyes.

"Come on!" Lauren pushes, looking ready to burst.

"Jeez, simmer down," Courtney says. She allows a second for the switch to a more serious demeanor. "I asked him to meet me at the park the other night. I was just tired

of not being able to talk to him and having it be all awkward at skating, so ... I sucked it up and told him I wanted to talk."

"So what'd you say?"

"I just apologized for being so difficult with him and for expecting everything to be cool the second I wanted it to be when I went over to see him that night."

"And that's it? Everything's fixed?"

Court cracks a smile at how simple Lauren makes it sound. "Yes, everything's fixed."

Lauren's smile widens. "Good! I'm so happy for you guys." And then just as quickly as it broke out, the smile wanes.

Courtney knows what's coming.

"At least someone's making a relationship work," Lauren almost mumbles. Courtney thinks she hears a touch of bitterness tinging the statement.

"Lauren, don't do this to yourself."

"It's hard not to ... I mean, I'm really happy things are going well with you and Jason, but it's just frustrating, you know? That's how it should be with Alex and me."

"But it's not," Courtney says with a definite stamp of firmness. She softens as she adds, "I think it's time to move past that. It wasn't a very serious relationship anyway."

Lauren sighs. "Yeah, I know. And I doubt that I'm ever gonna have one, either."

MARSHALL APARTMENT

The leather feels so familiar against Alex's hands, even now.

His fingers hold the journal cautiously, like it might explode at any instant. They pull it carefully from its place at the back of the "junk drawer" in his dresser and he walks over to the bed, unable to remove his eyes from it.

He sits down on the edge of the bed but quickly moves himself back to the headboard, leaning against it as he pulls his knees up closer to him.

Save for the times he has moved in the past few years -- and the ample opportunities those times provided for him to discard the journal -- this is the first time it has been out of that drawer in a long time. He marvels at the passage of time as his fingers reach to open the leather cover.

Five and a half years.

Five and a half years. That was once practically an eternity to him. The idea of five and a half years passing used to seem amazing, almost impossible.

It's still amazing to him now, albeit for different reasons entirely. It's been five and a half years since he put this journal -- once his best friend, the confidant that hid in his dresser until he needed to consult with it -- away for good. Five and a half years since his life changed so completely.

I should have thrown it away, he thinks suddenly. But for some reason that isn't immediately clear to him, the very thought of losing this book sends a terrified shudder through him. He always knew the day would come eventually when he would no longer be able to resist and he would have to dive back into the journal's pages and back into the past.

That day is here.

Without even realizing it at first, he begins to review what led him to this point. The visit from Don several days ago -- it's been burning at his brain almost nonstop. But it's more than Don's support that brought him back to the journal. It's everything that has happened in the past two years. Everything with Courtney and Lauren and--

Jason. I never should have let that happen. Not after what happened last time ...

His trembling fingers flip to the first page of entries.

KING'S BAY MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

Sarah watches through the window as the nurse gets Brent settled again. He offers the middle-aged woman a grateful smile and she heads out of the room. Sarah makes an immediate move for the door, but she herself being held back.

"Don't," Jason says.

Sarah turns sharply to her younger brother. "Why not?"

"You're just gonna make this ten times worse. Brent doesn't want to speak to you right now, I can tell that much. Do you notice how he's completely avoiding looking in this direction?"

"That means we need to talk about this."

"No." Jason feels her trying to pull away from his grasp and pulls back. "Not right now, Sarah. Let this whole thing cool down a little first. You're not gonna do anything but dig a deeper hole right now."

"Jason, he's finally awake. I need to see him."

Jason doesn't say anything -- he doesn't have to. He simply stares Sarah down.

He can see her give in, after what feels like practically an eternity. "Fine," she grumbles, jerking away from him. "I'll go, for now. But promise me something."

"What?"

"Don't let Molly come here tonight."

Jason's jaw drops. "No. I'm not gonna play our game--"

"This isn't a game, Jay. Like you said, everyone needs to cool down. If Molly gets to talk to Brent tonight, that's not going to happen."

The validity of the statement surprises Jason. He finds himself nodding. "All right. You get out of here. I'm going to go in and talk to Brent -- just so he knows what's going on, kind of, so he doesn't think we're all totally abandoning him. I'll make sure that Molly doesn't come by tonight."

"Good. Thanks." Sarah casts one final look in on Brent and turns, heading for the elevator.

As Jason makes his way into the room, he can't help but be amazed by how ugly -- and how complex -- this whole thing has become.

Down the hall, Sarah steps into the elevator, which is thankfully empty. Something inside of her is aching to get back out and rush to Brent's side, but she knows that what Jason said is true: That will only make things worse right now.

Tomorrow, she thinks hopefully. Tomorrow is the day that Brent and I get back on track.

FISHER HOME

"Claire, dear," Paula says gently, "there are times when I think of Tim being gone and it hurts so badly--there's nothing I want more than to see someone punished for it."

"The Morianis are those people," Claire cuts in. "And they will pay."

Paula shakes her head and goes on with greater firmness. "That's not going to accomplish what you're hoping it will. Revenge is not going to bring Tim back, and I'm willing to bet that it won't even feel as good as you believe it will."

"Oh, it'll feel good."

"The quest for it is what feels good," Paula says. "You lose yourself in the mission. It feels as though you're doing something to make Tim come back. But when you accomplish your goal -- *if* you accomplish your goal and there aren't any ugly complications, which isn't normally the case -- it will be a hollow victory. Sure, someone will be made to pay for Tim's death, but it won't bring him back."

Claire stares out into the garden again. It looks to Paula as if her daughter-in-law is trying to lose herself out there, to distance herself from the sharp, biting reality of what they are discussing.

That couldn't be further from the truth. On the outside, Claire is showing no signs of the struggle going on inside of her. She is pushing herself to vocalize something that has become abundantly clear to her over the last several months.

"This isn't just about the Morianis," she says finally.

The admission takes Paula by surprise. Her eyebrows crunch down as she focuses in more clearly.

"It's about ... It's about me. About my past," Claire continues. There is no consistent rhythm to her speech: One strand of words sounds as though each and every sound is being pulled painfully from within her, like they are being resisted almost too powerfully -- but then the next ones just come tumbling out rapidly.

"When I married Tim ... He saved me from that. He helped me get away from past. With Tim--that was the first time I was really able to break away from my father. Tim gave me the strength to do that. But then he was taken away ... The past took him away. It was the Morianis who caused it. If they hadn't been playing these games, if they hadn't

stormed back into my life and then tried to take advantage of Mrs. Fitch -- Tim would still be here."

Paula wants to try and reassure her, but the truth behind the sentiments suddenly seems so powerful that she cannot even conjure up a contradiction.

"It won't go away," Claire is saying. "I'm sure Diane will make my father and probably the Morianis an issue in the custody case. The past might make me lose Samantha, too. And I can't let that happen, Paula -- I can't keep letting that happen. My past has to be stopped, and I have to be the one to do it."

"Claire." Paula sounds desperate, as if she is trying to bring back someone who is dangerously close to being lost. "The only way you can be rid of the past is to move forward. Your father is gone. You have us now. You are a Fisher."

Claire appears ready to fight this, but then says, "I know. I ... Thank you. Thank you for making me a part of this family."

Paula smiles warmly. She is almost positive that Claire is going to add a "but" to the statement but it never arrives.

"It's hard to keep that in mind at times," Claire says. "Just thinking about everything that has happened -- and now with Tim gone ... there are times I just feel empty, you know?"

Paula responds with a nod, a mournful, drooping gesture. "I know. I feel that too, Claire, sometimes ... When you feel like your children are out of your grasp ..."

A bell rings in Claire's head and she realizes suddenly that it has been on the verge of doing so whenever she has been around Paula this past year.

"Paula?" she asks, almost feeling as though she is intruding on a private moment now.

Paula's reaction, a quick upwards jerk of her head as if Claire has startled her, solidifies the feeling of intruding for Claire. She pauses a moment before speaking.

"Are you thinking about ... about your other son?"

The nod in response comes quickly and it seems to Claire that Paula has been waiting months to admit even that much to someone.

The words that follow so soon afterward catch Claire by surprise -- not because they are being spoken, but because they come out with so little hesitation.

"I have been thinking about him. I always have -- but now more than ever. Since that instant we heard about Tim ... It's been impossible for me not to wonder what became of my other son."

"That's understandable."

"I suppose it is," Paula muses. Then, abruptly, she stands and takes her glass of iced tea from the small table. She heads inside with a finality that tells Claire the discussion is closed.

For now.

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"Don't do this," Courtney says. "Don't put yourself down like that." In truth, Lauren's constant self-deprecation is wearing on Courtney's nerves. She is trying not to let the agitation show but is finding it more difficult than she imagined it might be.

"It's hard not to," Lauren says. "I mean, how many chances did I have to make it work with Alex, and I still wasn't able to? If I couldn't make that work, I doubt I'll ever--"

"Stop. Just cut it out, okay? We've been over this already. You do not need to get all down on yourself because of Alex. There's something else going on there."

"Sure." Lauren rolls her eyes and then picks up her glass of Coke.

"I'm serious," Courtney says, attempting to soften the edge that has popped into her voice. "My dad went to talk to Alex the other day. I asked him to, just to see if maybe Alex would open up or something. Or at least so he could make sure that Alex is okay."

Lauren is leaning on the table with both elbows now. "Yeah?"

"Alex didn't tell him anything," Courtney adds quickly. "But my dad said that he thought he at least affected Alex, so maybe if he wants to talk, he'll go to my dad."

"Well, good. I hope everything is okay with him."

"So do I. But ... I am worried. He's been so withdrawn lately. I know the whole thing between you and him was probably hard for him, but still -- he knows that Jason and I are his friends no matter what. He hasn't called me back or anything in a while."

Lauren has been holding her glass with both hands. Now she sets it down on the table and begins twirling the straw in her fingers. "Maybe he thinks that because things didn't work out with us, he can't really be a part of the group anymore, you know?"

"Maybe. I hope he doesn't think that." Courtney pauses and it is obvious to Lauren that her friend is about to spring something important on her. "You're coming to Whitney's party, aren't you?"

"Yeah ..."

"Alex is gonna be there, too." Court watches for Lauren's response and is relieved to see that it isn't too extreme. "I just hope we can all kind of get ourselves together and have some fun."

"Yeah," Lauren agrees, still twirling the straw. "Should be a blast."

MARSHALL APARTMENT

That fall, the fall of 1995, felt different to Alex the instant that the first traces of gold and burgundy appeared on the trees. Somehow he knew it would be different. He knew, somehow, that that year would change his life more than anything else ever had.

Of course, that much should have been obvious: In September of that year, he entered his freshman year of college. He made the choice to leave home, at least while school was in session, and live in the dorms. The whole thing was overwhelmingly exciting -- anxious, definitely, but also just plain exciting. He would have the chance to be away from his mother and away from the hell of high school, to start over in a new environment and be in control of how others perceived him and how he lived.

He knew he wanted to live in the dorms from the moment he visited the school as a prospective student. That was where most of the action was for the freshmen, it seemed, and he certainly didn't want to miss out on any of that. He didn't want to feel lost in the shuffle as he had in high school -- no, he wanted to be right at the center of all the important happenings.

One thing about living in the dorms frightened him, though, and that was the prospect of living with a roommate. He didn't know anyone who was going to his school, and if he had he probably would not have wanted to live with him anyway. But the idea of sharing such limited space with a stranger troubled him, as much as he didn't want to admit that it did, and it ate away at the back of his mind for most of the summer before he entered college.

Now Alex stares down at the pages, examining the loops and lines of black ink that spell

out his fears. The journal had been a high school graduation present from one of his mother's friends and he had been determined to make good use of it and record all the changes that would soon be sweeping through his life. Little did he know back then how great a gift this journal would turn out to be.

He turns the pages through the summer and the entries carry him into the fall. His roommate, Seth, wrote him a letter a few weeks before school began, once they received each other's name and address, and Alex did the same. The letter hadn't really told him that much, but he felt a bit more at-ease being able to pin some basic characteristics on the guy with whom he would be spending the entire year.

Seth played soccer in high school and was hoping to make the college's team. His grades were decent enough, his parents were still married, he had one younger sister. The usual information. Alex had written back with a similar letter, outlining the major factors in his life.

Still, the idea of having to be in such close proximity to Seth had Alex worried. Would he be able to find quiet time to write? Would he be able to get his work done? Sleep schedules, TV shows, and very minor details ... They were all burning on Alex's brain.

The anxiety melted away the moment that he walked into the room. Seth was there with his parents, unpacking his things. He was friendly, warm, and Alex liked him instantly. They ate together in the dining hall that night and the next day signed up for classes together, registering in the same literature class. Alex enjoyed the quick friendship, which had never come so easily before. Still, during those first few weeks he never felt totally comfortable around Seth -- but then, he never was completely comfortable around others, especially people he didn't know very well.

The changes for which Alex had hoped were coming. He and Seth quickly got to know other students in their dorm. They became part of a large social circle, the type of group in which Alex had always dreamed he could be included during high school. The first semester dashed by, a virtual blur of changes, new friends, and crazy nights. Of course there were low points, but the overall success of the experience kept Alex's journal entries light and happy, for the most part.

He is surprised to find that the pages are still crisp between his fingers as he moves through that first semester all over again. It's a time that his mind has often revisited, but he never allows it to dwell for too long -- because he knows where it all changes.

Those pages are approaching now. The handwriting gets sloppier, the words more spread out. Fewer exclamation points and more question marks decorate the pages.

Alex pauses as he reaches finals week of that semester, the week before the students were to head home for their month-long winter break.

He can't do this now.

He flips the journal shut and tucks it under his pillow. Quickly he rises, moving to the kitchen for a drink or a snack or--something. Anything to pull him out of that time.

It was a mistake to go back there.

END OF EPISODE #215

What do you think of how Jason handled the situation? How about Alex's trip down memory lane? What is in store for Claire? Please visit the Message Forum to share your thoughts!

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