

## "Footprints" Episode #257

### [Previously ...](#)

- After being confronted by Diane about having dinner together, Molly and Brent again questioned whether they can continue to spend time with each other as they have been.
- Courtney and Alex renewed their friendship. She promised an exciting night to get him out and socializing.
- Ryan's suggestion that they try to face the past together frightened Claire, prompting her to run away from their table and out of the restaurant.

## WINDMILLS

Rain.

The sounds of heavy drops slapping down on the street, the smell of wet pavement, the extra edge to the chilly air -- it all comes at Ryan in one intense rush as he pushes through the restaurant's front door. He stops, head darting around. She has to be out here. She blew right by the ladies' room, she wasn't in the lobby, and she sure as hell wouldn't have taken off on foot--

There she is. His eyes lock on her, the slender figure in the pale blue dress, leaned against the wall underneath a canopy several doors down. Her head is bowed and her hands are held to her face, shielding it from the rainy evening.

He wants to call out her name but doesn't want to risk scaring her off. Plunging his hands into his pockets, he pounds a determined path down the sidewalk.

"Claire," he says softly, not wanting to frighten her or attract too much attention.

He sees her flinch, so clearly she is aware of his presence. But she doesn't turn to face him and she doesn't acknowledge him.

"I'm sorry," he says. He stares out into the street and watches the rain mingle with traffic. "I pushed too hard. I know you said--"

"That I didn't want anything more than friendship." She risks the briefest of glances at him, over her shoulder.

"Yeah." The agreement croaks out of his throat, betraying the difficulty he is having in accepting that fact. "So I apologize for pressuring you, especially when I promised that I wouldn't. It isn't fair."

"No, it's not." Her words are cloaked in a pain so thick that Ryan can do nothing but let it sink him into silence.

He leans against the wall beside her, uncertain what else he can say. He has the definite sense that this could be the end of the road. It's a feeling that he's thought he was experiencing countless times since his return to King's Bay, but it's never been as intense as this. The dejection has always seemed fixable, somehow; there was always some other angle he could take, some misunderstanding to clear up or lie to tell, that could renew hope. There's no chance of that now. He can feel it in the energy emanating from Claire, somehow. The obstacle this time is *them*, her and him.

So maybe Nick was right.

The thought is suffocating, and for a moment, it fuels a new surge of determination to make this work. His mind dredges up the too-familiar longing to be with Claire again, to feel connected to her in that way that's been so absent from his life for so long.

But no. Not with the way this is affecting her. If his persistence is making her this miserable and tearing her apart the way that it is, then it's not worth it. It has to be stopped. Somehow.

"It isn't fair," she repeats quietly, her voice almost dreamlike.

His eyes wash over her form. The skin on her back, left open to the night air by the design of her dress, looks pale, fragile. He can see the goosebumps decorating her skin and the barely perceptible shivers that are rolling over her body. His first instinct is to take off his jacket and wrap it around her shoulders, but it seems wildly inappropriate now.

"No. And Claire, maybe I'm being selfish. I was trying to do something different. I've regretted putting Stan before myself all these years. I thought that maybe if I--"

"It's not you. It's my fault."

The flood of emotion surging through him goes slamming into a brick wall, stopped dead in its tracks. He waits, hanging on every thread of the silence, for her to add some meaning or context to what she has just said.

"It's like I have this horrible block," she says, each word lifting from her lips with a slowness that makes Ryan feel incredibly exhausted, except that every syllable increases the frantic pumping of his heart, as well. "I can't be happy. I can't let myself do anything that might help. It's like I *want* to be drowning in all of this ... this misery. No matter how hard I try to fight it off, it comes back, and it just--it overtakes me."

Ryan inhales sharply and a burst of the cool night air invades his lungs. He tries to use the moment to gather his thoughts but the words that tumble out do so clumsily. "Claire, you--you've been through a lot ..."

"So you'd think I would take advantage of an opportunity to clear up at least some of the pain that's been eating away at me for God-knows-how-long, right?" She pauses only long enough to turn her back to the wall, then continues as she gazes out into the street. "But I can't."

"You've had so much to deal with," he says gently. "Like you said, it's overwhelming. Maybe--I don't know--maybe the possibility of dealing with some of it seems rough because there's so much stuff you can't do anything to change ..." He trails off and lets the thought die in the air. It makes sense in his head, but he's not sure if it's coming out that way, and he's just grasping at straws anyway.

"Maybe." For the first time since he came outside, she looks directly at him. Faint streaks of makeup lie in the wake of tear-stain trails. Her eyes are puffy, heavy and cloudy with the weight of everything that her life has become.

For an instant the greatest sadness he can imagine fills Ryan's being. He wills it away as best he can, but he cannot remove his eyes from Claire, knowing that same sadness must dominate her every moment now.

"Let me take you home. You need to rest," he says, trying to assure her somehow -- with his tone, his eyes, something -- that it is a gesture of genuine caring and concern, and not some ploy to be rid of her.

She just nods, diverting her gaze back to the sidewalk.

"I'll go inside and pay. Do you want to come and wait inside -- to get out of the rain?"

"No, I'll be fine," she says, even though she has folded her arms together and is rubbing them with her equally bare hands.

As much as he wants to insist that she come inside and get out of the cold, he knows that it isn't worth the effort. She doesn't need to be told what to do.

He heads back to the restaurant, wondering -- despite every instinct that is screaming at his mind to shut up -- if both of them are beyond resolution now.

## THE LOOKOUT

"I just can't get you out of my head

Boy, your lovin' is all I think about  
I just can't get you out of my head  
Boy, it's more than I dare to think about ..."

The playful pounding of Kylie Minogue's hit song fills the club, its infectious bubble-gum flavor and vampish vocals reaching from wall to wall to make sure that every person is pulled out onto the dance floor.

In the entrance area, Courtney pauses. She feels the song, certainly, but it is less an invitation to join the party than a reminder of what she is doing tonight: She is here on a mission.

She can feel Alex beside her, tentative as always, and that sense is enough to snap her out of her reflective state.

"Do you wanna grab a drink before we go out and dance?" she asks, still surveying the landscape.

"Um, yeah, sure," comes the response. He is only half-involved in it; she knows that he must be evaluating the place with the same curious caution that she is. She takes him by the hand and leads him over to the bar, a rainbow of hyperactive lights bathing them along the way.

She orders first -- a rum-and-Coke -- and then looks out at the rest of the club while Alex orders his drink. The bar is in the back, elevated to make observing much easier than it otherwise would be. The far wall is the one that gives the club its name: It is composed entirely of glass panels and offers a view of King's Bay itself that only becomes more stunning at night.

And in the middle, between the bar and that glass wall, is the dance floor. Tonight it is filled with a crowd with which Courtney isn't sure she is entirely comfortable. When she had the idea to take Alex out and try to get him socializing some more, she almost instantly recalled the flyer that had been posted at 322 with The Lookout's new schedule last week. It just so happens that tonight is one of the "special" nights they've begun holding -- a gay and lesbian night.

For whatever reason, there seem to be far more men here than women. She had thought that the numbers would be the same as usual, but people would just be coupling up differently. But the men are greatly outnumbering the women, and that's probably making the difference more glaring to her. It's just not something to which she is accustomed and she knows it'll take a little getting used to. Part of her had expected to walk in and find a wild drag show or something that "obvious," and even though the scene is much more like it usually is than she had thought it would be, it is still different. She can only imagine how it all looks to Alex.

She turns and finds him doing much what she was doing, staring out into the crowd, taking in the scene. His soft features betray his discomfort, but there is also a broad hint of intrigue shining through. She can only imagine how it must feel to be in a setting like this after so many years of denying such an intense need.

The bartender slides her drink across the counter and she takes it, immediately bringing it to her lips for a long sip. Alex's appears a moment later and he does the same. Their eyes link together, in passing, and before Court even realizes it, they are sharing a brief, awkward giggle.

She hopes that the alcohol loosens him up a little. Truth be told, she's hoping it will loosen her up a little, too. If Alex is going to get out there and at least take some steps toward pursuing what he's always wanted, she is going to have to do some serious work.

## **GRAYSON BEACH**

Soft, miniature hills of sand break beneath Molly's toes, sliding in all directions with an ease that does not even suggest the thick, packed quality of the sand just a few feet away. Here, in the small shelter she and Brent have found under a rocky overhang, there is still some dry sand, untouched by the evening's rainfall.

"You were right," she says, breaking the peaceful quiet that has floated up between them.

"Which time?" The tone of his voice makes her immediately able to predict the expression on his face, and sure enough, when she looks at him, he is wearing a cheesy, self-entertained grin.

She decides not to get into bantering, wanting to say what she originally intended, but even so she cannot help cracking a smile in response to his sudden goofiness. "About the beach," she says. "About it being so nice in the rain."

"See? I told you to have a little faith."

"Hey, I came with you, didn't I? Crazy as it sounded to be trooping out to the beach in a rainstorm all dressed up."

"I wanted you to see what it was like," he says. His eyes roll downward, focusing on his feet, which are bare like hers and pushing the sand around. "When I was growing up in San Diego, we were always at the beach -- but my favorite time to go there was during a storm. There'd be no one there, and it was a good opportunity to think, I guess."

"So it was your special place to get away?"

"Sort of, yeah. Especially after my mom died." His gaze comes up momentarily, long enough to lock with hers. Something tells her that there's a deeper significance to this; he is sharing something very special and very private with her. Her lips curl upward with awkwardness and appreciation.

"It is beautiful out here," she agrees quietly, letting her eyes wash over the scene in front of them. The stormy sky and the coming night have drawn a dark blue screen over the world for as far as she can see. The rain is still flying, loose wisps blowing here and there, caught in the frenetic pattern of the wind. She can feel the wind's bite, but Brent's jacket is over her shoulders for protection, and only a few scattered droplets of rain are coming in at them. It's hard for her to believe that they are only a few feet away from all that action, concealed in the cliff's side.

"It's so weird," Brent says, his tone drifting and thoughtful and yet focused and deliberate all at the same time.

"What is?"

"Right now." He pauses, taking in and releasing a heavy puff of the damp evening air. "Us. You know that I never brought Sarah here? I never brought my *wife* here, and I'm sharing it with you."

She toys with her fingers, absorbing that admission. Sarah and Brent were married for almost four years and they never had the bond that Molly has with him. But because of that certificate and that ceremony, it may never be possible for him and Molly to experience that bond in all its intensity. "Things have a funny way of working out, I've noticed."

"Tell me about it. God ..." They turn their heads at the same time, eyes meeting as the words hesitate on Brent's lips. "If you didn't know about any of that stuff with Sarah, you'd really think we had everything, huh?"

Her nod comes almost instantaneously. "Yeah. You would." She looks away again, focusing on the navy world out in front of them, sighing. "But we don't. And we never can."

## **RYAN MORIANI'S CAR**

Minutes ago the rain seemed to be showing signs of slowing down, but now it has returned to full strength, battering the BMW as it glides smoothly through the falling darkness.

The entire ride has been silent; actually, they have been entirely silent since Ryan went

back inside the restaurant to pay, except for a few words he tossed out as they waited for the valet, only to realize that the last thing Claire was going to do was engage in conversation.

His knuckles grip the steering wheel tighter as he replays in his mind the scene outside of Windmills. He is still dealing with realization of how far out-of-touch Claire truly is. For so long he's felt that if he could just reach a little farther, push a little harder, he could have her. But she's untouchable.

Glancing over at her -- for a second only, not willing to risk any more than that -- he sees a woman practically enclosed in a shell. Her arms are held close to her body, folded against her stomach, with her long, thin fingers reaching around her biceps as if to hold them in protectively. The pale blue dress, which at the beginning of the evening he saw as stunning, now looks to him like an icy cover, blocking her from the rest of the world. Even the beauty of her face is focused so sharply forward, as though to keep her from being distracted by anything at all unnecessary, that it looks cold, desolate.

*She's cracking up*, his mind whispers. It's not something that he wants to hear but neither can he ignore its validity; this woman is not the same woman he encountered when he came to King's Bay in search of her a few short years ago. The events of the past two years have warped her dramatically. Is that same woman even in there anymore?

More than anything, he wants to reach out and shake her, hold her, do something to draw back out the woman he has loved since she was sixteen. But everything about the figure in the passenger seat is telling him that there is not a damn thing he can do about it.

---

The car keeps picking up speed, as though Ryan senses her discomfort and wants to get her home as badly as she wants to get there, but still the intersections and street signs don't come quickly enough for Claire. Her focus is set dead-ahead, locked on the street. She doesn't dare look over at him or even acknowledge that they are in the same vehicle; she is beyond grateful that he seems to recognize her need for total quiet right now.

She can almost feel herself folding inward, pulling further and further away from everything outside. There is a dreadful chill coursing through her body that she cannot control.

*What is happening to me?* she wonders desperately, feeling a momentary break through the haze. But as soon as it comes, it is gone, replaced by an acute longing.

For Tim.

She needs him now, more than ever. Something is slipping inside of her. Everything that has come at her in the last few years -- James, the Morianis, losing Tim, Diane going after Samantha, Stan -- it's all coming back, suffocating her as though it were all happening for the first time.

*Tim could stop it. He could help me get through this--*

But that's dangerous territory to veer into, she realizes that even now. Yet having to accept that he's gone, that he won't be able to help her no matter how hard she wishes for it, is even worse. She can feel herself keep shrinking, freezing up.

Something has got to give.

## **THE LOOKOUT**

Alex allows himself to be pulled into the crowd of dancers, led by Courtney's delicate hold on his hand. She pulls him through the swarm of bodies -- most of which are male, Alex observes -- until finding what she must deem an appropriate spot, because she turns around and pulls Alex closer to her to dance.

Being in such close proximity to a girl is strangely comforting right now, he realizes as they find a rhythm with each other. He's danced with many, many girls over the years, and it's a familiarity that he appreciates in this new atmosphere. All he's been thinking about since they walked in the door is that there are actually guys dancing with other guys here, a concept that for some reason he has never given much thought, and the foreignness of it has had him floored.

He was more than excited about this outing once Courtney told him what they were going to be doing tonight, but there was also an enormous amount of nervousness building within him all day. When they arrived at the club, that nervousness suddenly swelled up and consumed him, and he was unable to do anything but sit there and nod and take in the scene.

Hopefully, now that they've been here for a little while, he can loosen up a bit and enjoy the experience. He wants to, badly, even though a huge part of him would love to leave right now and not worry about it ever again -- as if that'd be possible. Dancing with Courtney is helping him feel more comfortable, though. And that alcohol probably didn't hurt, either.

They pass several songs together, keeping up with the fairly monotonous beat of the club songs that come one after another. Alex notices that Courtney is keeping a "safe" distance from him, as if to show that although they are dancing together, they are not *together*. He's not sure how much he likes that; in a way, it leaves him feeling open to



some sort of attack. Looking around as he has been the entire time that they've been dancing, he notices the intensity and voracity with which some of the men around him are going after their dance partners. He's not sure that he's ready for that.

But that hasn't stopped him from checking out all the possibilities. It's not anything new, but it is a strange thought that he conceivably could pair up with any of these guys. They're not all automatically off-limits, and that's something he has a feeling will be difficult for him to accept.

He catches Courtney's eye in passing and can see that she is trying to tell him something, but he doesn't realize what until he feels a hand on his back. Awkwardly he turns, not wanting to leave Court alone and also not really wanting to face this. But it would be even harder to ignore it, so he follows the lead of the hand and turns around.

He finds himself face-to-face with a young man, probably somewhere around his age, with bleached tips on his dark hair and a deep tan that makes the whiteness of his teeth stand out even more in the club's lighting. He is wearing dark jeans and a sky blue button-up shirt, the top buttons undone to reveal the same tan over his chest. Alex offers a smile, partially in hopes of easing himself, and the guy returns the gesture with a broad, natural grin that exudes charisma.

They fall into a rhythm as Madonna's "Impressive Instant" fills the club with its electronic blips and energetic beat. Alex does his best to brush aside the initial awkwardness of dancing with someone so close to his size after being so accustomed to dancing with girls significantly smaller than himself. Strange as the size difference might be, there is something strangely electric about feeling his legs intertwined with another man's, especially one this good-looking, that reminds him just how badly he does want to be here.

"What's your name?" the other guy asks, leaning in close enough so that Alex can feel his breath against his ear.

"Alex." He pulls back instinctively, having said what he needed to, but then realizes that there is more, so he leans closer again. "What about you?"

"Jeremy."

This time they part more mutually, moving their heads back so that they share another smile as they continue to dance. Alex feels an ease coming over him, the type of comfort that has thus far eluded him tonight. He's starting to enjoy this.

He starts casting his eyes around in search of Courtney, hoping that she isn't totally bored already. But sure enough, she's found some guy to dance with for the moment, and she appears to be having fun.

Alex is in the process of sweeping his eyes back to Jeremy when something stops them in their path. At first he hesitates on the face, trying to figure out why it's giving him pause. Then it hits him.

The coffee shop.

It's the same guy he encountered the other day at Cassie's, the guy who ordered the same drink as him and then tried to claim the one that was Alex's as his own. *So maybe he was staring back*, he thinks with a laugh. It is cut short as he locks eyes with the young man from the coffee shop, who obviously recognizes him, as well.

"What's wrong?" Jeremy's voice almost startles Alex. He was so caught up in his moment of eye contact with the coffee shop guy that he practically forgot what he was doing.

"Oh, uh, nothing," Alex answers with a shake of the head. He has no idea if he can be heard over the music but apparently his response is enough to placate Jeremy, who returns his focus to the dancing.

Alex looks out over Jeremy's shoulder, back to where the other guy was standing, but he's gone. He glances around, almost frantic, to see where he has gotten to, but there's no sign of him.

*Damn.* As much of a jerk as that guy was, there was something oddly intriguing about him.

*Probably the fact that he was a jerk*, Alex tells himself as he attempts to return his attention to dancing with Jeremy. Still, he can't help casting stray glances out over the club, in search of the other young man. But no luck.

The music sweeps to a close as Madonna's electrified voice sings the final chorus:

"Universe is full of stars  
Nothing out there looks the same  
You're the one that I've been waiting for  
I don't even know your name."

## **GRAYSON BEACH**

"I guess not," Brent agrees. He knows that Molly is right: Despite the way things might appear, despite the perfect romance of the setting and the undeniable pull between them, they do not and cannot have that perfect togetherness that they both want so much.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"You just did," he says, cracking a smile. Of course, he wants to hear what she is going to ask, but making aimless little jokes is his way of keeping at bay what he suspects will be another inquiry that forces him to examine himself, what he really wants, and how he can never have it.

"Funny. But seriously ..."

"Yeah, shoot."

"All right." Molly inhales deeply and holds the air in her lungs, releasing it only once her folded hands are being held right in front of her mouth. "Did you always ... I've been wondering a lot about when it was that I realized I wanted to be with you. So I guess I've been wondering when you realized you had feelings for me."

"I've been thinking about the same thing," he says. Truthfully, he's wondered about it for a long time. He's constantly attempted to pinpoint that moment when he came to the realization that it was Molly he wanted to be with, perhaps in some faint hope that he would realize that moment never existed and therefore he didn't need to be agonizing over their predicament.

"It was during the wedding," he tells her.

Her eyes narrow. "Your wedding?"

"Yeah." Quickly he adds, "Not during the actual wedding. When we renewed our vows. Sarah and I were rushing back from the jungle and we were swept up in the adventure of the whole thing, and still, I couldn't stop thinking about you. I kept thinking about how it'd be if I hadn't married Sarah and if I were with you instead--"

"Yet you went through with it and *renewed* your marriage vows?" Her voice is raw with fresh hurt and he feels the immediate need to cut it off in its tracks.

"Sarah and I had just rescued Tim and Claire, and it felt incredible to have accomplished that together. And we were headed back home to this church where our families were waiting, to prove that we hadn't made some impulsive mistake by running off and getting married. I guess I was trying to convince myself of the same thing. I didn't want to believe that I had let myself marry the wrong woman. Going through with that ceremony--it was like a way of showing myself that I was doing the right thing ... which, of course, I wasn't."

"No, you weren't," Molly says. She still doesn't sound thrilled but she is softening. He can tell that, if nothing else, she understands why he did what he did, even if his persistence

-- stubbornness -- is much of the reason that they are in the situation they're in right now.

"But forcing myself to do that -- it was what convinced me how important you were to me," he blurts out, not sure if that addition makes things better or worse. "I kept telling myself that the feelings I had for you would pass and in the end I would be grateful that I hadn't turned away from Sarah just to indulge in some passing fixation. But when I was saying my vows, I realized that they felt like some sort of sentence to deal with what I'd done. It wasn't complete, unbridled happiness -- which is how I'd have felt if I'd been exchanging those vows with you."

Molly is quiet, and he can only assume that she must not know what to say. He's just thrown an awful lot at her. So what comes out of her mouth next comes as a surprise to him: "I couldn't take my eyes off you while you were saying your vows, either. Maybe I didn't want to believe that you were saying them to Sarah. But standing there, listening to you say those words and wanting so badly to be the one you were saying them to -- that's what convinced me that I couldn't go through with marrying Craig."

"Wow," is Brent's immediate response. The sheer weight of everything that they've just said, the recognition of how much more complicated they made things, and the stunning effectiveness of such open communication are all hitting him hard. "If we had just stopped and really considered what we were doing ..."

"Things would have been a lot different. A lot easier, probably."

"I never should've gone through with that ceremony. All I did was put Sarah in the middle of something that she had no control over--"

"It's over. You can't change it," Molly says. "And weird as this sounds, the way that you handled everything -- the fact that you dealt with it and tried to make the marriage work instead of just looking for an excuse to slip out of it -- it made my feelings for you even deeper."

That is the last thing he ever expected to hear. "Really?"

"Yeah. Brent, you are a good guy. We both made mistakes, and so did Sarah. But you dealt with yours by trying to live up to the promises you made. I don't think you have any idea how admirable that is."

"I guess I have trouble seeing it that way," he says.

"That's what's so amazing. You were willing to give your life to Sarah and ignore everything between us because you had vowed to stand by her and you wouldn't let yourself go back on that vow. Not many people would have done that."

"Maybe," he sighs, still not entirely convinced.

Her arm wraps around his back, warm and comforting, and pulls him closer. He allows himself to lean into her shoulder, cold with the sting of the night but still so reassuring. Part of him wants so badly to reach up and kiss her, but neither does he want to ruin what they've just shared, so he forces himself to be content with simply being this close to her.

They fall into silence under the rising moon.

## **CLAIRE FISHER'S APARTMENT**

Ryan waits until the last possible moment to break the silence. As they walk down the hallway, approaching the apartment, he keeps feeling the urge to say something to begin winding down the evening -- as though this were a normal night out. But he forces himself to remain quiet until they reach the door and Claire is opening it up.

"All right," he says, rubbing his still-wet hands together in the vain hope of ridding his body of the unending chill that has taken hold of it. "Are you ... gonna be okay?"

Her sole response is a quick nod. It is really nothing more than a frenzied afterthought, part of the rush to get inside the apartment and no doubt barricade herself away from the world.

It's not enough to convince Ryan that he should leave her alone, not if she is in this much pain. "Claire, please. Maybe I should just sit with you for a few minutes ... You don't even have to talk to me if you don't want, but I really don't feel right leaving you like this."

To his surprise, she doesn't fight the offer, instead holding open the door behind her so that he can join her inside the apartment. Reluctantly he follows her, taking care to close the door and lock it behind him. For some reason, he is bombarded with thoughts of the New Year's Eve when they were locked in the cellar together -- the night her life officially fell apart, all because she was determined to catch him and Nick doing something wrong and Tim loved her too much to let her go on the mission by herself.

He watches as she strolls over to the window and gazes out of it. She seems to be lost in watching the rainfall that just minutes ago was beating down on top of them. Ryan ponders what to do with himself and has the fleeting thought that it was a mistake to invite himself in, but the thought of leaving her alone in this state is far more troubling.

He moves slowly to the plush sofa and seats himself carefully on it. He does his best not to sink into it, despite the tiredness that is washing over his muscles. Somehow relaxing seems entirely inappropriate right now.

"Do you remember the first time we kissed?"

Shards of the suddenly shattered silence go flying in all directions. They jab into Ryan, catching him entirely off-guard. Everything about the question -- its suddenness after so much quiet, the strangely removed tone of her voice, the fact that she's reflecting back on such a different time -- rattles him.

"Yeah," he says, and with that he is transported back to that March evening. Just like tonight, the rain was coming down with no end in sight, and they were out on the sidewalk in front of her father's house, too burdened by the thought of parting after such an exciting date even to care about the weather. The conversation had suddenly dropped off, lost between them, and Ryan had reached up to wipe a thick strand of damp hair from her face ... "Yeah, I remember everything about it, I think. Sad as that is, all these years later."

"That's not sad," she says with authority.

"Clinging to it isn't really getting me anywhere in life."

The comment passes, seemingly unnoticed. "Things were so much simpler then." Her voice carries a peculiar lilt as her eyes glaze over with the memory. She turns to face Ryan.

"Yeah, they were." Something about the energy in the air is very different now and it sends a surge through Ryan. He can't tell if it is pleasant or terrifying. Maybe both.

"I should go," he says, springing to his feet. This is too intense for him. For Claire to be reflecting happily on the way things used to be -- it's too much.

"Try and get some sleep," he adds on his way to the door. He fumbles with the lock but somehow manages to undo it. The doorknob turns reluctantly in his sweaty palm. "You'll feel better tomorrow--"

"Don't go."

As much as he wishes it didn't, those two words give him more than enough pause to make him freeze in the doorway.

"Please, Ryan, don't leave. Stay with me."

## **END OF EPISODE #257**

*Have Claire and Ryan reached a turning point? Should Alex try and figure out who this*

*mystery man is? Do you want to see Brent and Molly get past their hesitance about taking their relationship further? Join us in the Footprints Forum to make your thoughts heard and see what others think!*

[Next Episode](#)