

## "Footprints" Episode #266

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

- While Claire defended her situation with Ryan to both Molly and Brent, Ryan remained unaware that Katherine had agreed to assist Nick in separating the couple.
- Alex was disturbed by the news of Sally and Stan's engagement but seemed to resign himself to the fact that his mother will always make poor decisions.
- After learning that her new skating partner, Dylan, is gay, Courtney began to get an idea ...
- Jason and Lauren continued to grow closer -- an observation not lost on Alex, who was surprised by the new dimension in the "friendship."

### **CLAIRE FISHER'S APARTMENT**

"Coming!" Claire calls out as she scrambles to her feet. Instead of planting a hand on the carpet to help herself up, though, she slams it down right on top of a Lego and has to suppress a curse.

"Mommy," Travis says, apparently oblivious to the fact that she is about to answer the door and might have to focus on someone else for a moment. "I'm gonna make these people have a pool."

She puts the door on hold and turns back to him. "That's a good idea, sweetie. Do you have enough blue ones for that?"

He nods without even looking at the pieces spread out before him. *Guess trial and error is as good a way to find out as any*, she thinks as a grin forms on her lips.

She deftly undoes the dual locks of the door, still half-watching Travis as he debates how best to go about building a pool for the people of Legoland, and pulls it open.

"Hey," she greets Ryan, hoping she doesn't sound too off-kilter. It's not that she's upset to see him, just surprised. She's still trying to grow accustomed to the idea of Ryan being a part of her normal, everyday life, instead of some face from the past that keeps popping up and threatening to disrupt the careful balance that she has constructed.

"Hey," he responds with a smile. He's obviously pleased to see her, a thought that pleases her more than she might have expected it would. It's been a long time since she felt like someone wanted to spend time with her, not out of a sense of obligation or concern but, rather, simply to be with *her*.

"Are you busy?" he asks, and only then does she realize that she has already let the minimal conversation lapse.

"Um, no, we're just playing with some Legos in here."

"Sounds exciting. Do you mind if I come in?"

"No, go right ahead " she says, although she has to swallow hard to force it out. The truth is, she's not sure how she feels about him interacting with Travis, but she does want to be closer with Ryan, and Travis is an enormous part of her life. There's no way around it.

Still, she feels a pervading sense of uneasiness admitting Ryan to the apartment, knowing that Travis is only a few feet away, blissfully unaware that all the weight of his mother's past could conceivably come crashing down upon them at any moment. But she has to trust Ryan more than that ... she has to believe that he isn't simply a younger version of Nick. Or Stan. She has to trust in that, if nothing else.

"So what brings you by?" she asks.

"I have a surprise for you."

"What kind of surprise?"

"One that you're going to like, hopefully." Ryan's hand moves into the pocket of his khaki pants. "Do you remember what we talked about over dinner the other night?"

*How weird is it that we're coming full-circle like this?* she wonders, at a loss. A nearly overwhelming discomfort washes over her as the thought of an engagement ring flickers in her mind. He wouldn't be that crazy, would he? She hopes not.

"Umm ... How we thought *Signs* was going to be a good movie?" she guesses, hoping to lighten the moment a bit. The comment does spark a grin on Ryan's face, as she was sure it would, since they spent at least half an hour after the movie -- which followed dinner -- dissecting it and complaining about disappointing it was.

He shakes his head. "Not quite. But it does involve something that we needed to get into the movie ..."

"Tickets?"

"Precisely. Do you remember anything else about the dinner conversation?" While she struggles to produce some sort of guess, trying to remember some of the less weighty topics they discussed that might involve tickets, he adds, "Come on, I know I wasn't the

only one at that meal."

Suddenly it hits her. "Concert tickets?"

"We have a winner!" Ryan announces as he pulls two tickets from his pocket. "You said you hadn't been to a concert in forever, and that you'd read about Alanis Morissette playing at the Puyallup Fair, so ... clear the date on your calendar."

He holds out the tickets to her and she takes them from his hand, casually reading the print. "Thanks a lot! I really want to see her, actually. I can't believe you thought to do this."

"I just want to make you happy," he says softly, reaching a hand out to brush back her hair. His fingers lightly graze her cheek but she can tell that is as far as it will go; he seems to be aware of the necessary boundaries around Travis, a fact for which she is enormously grateful. Still, the moment of intimacy tells her that he means what he says.

"This'll be a lot of fun, Ryan. I've only gone to the Puyallup once, anyway. We could probably spend the whole day there."

"Sounds good to me. Do you know how exciting it is for me to think of having a normal day out with you? No drama, no pain, just the two of us enjoying ourselves."

Before she can respond, the telephone's sharp cry interrupts.

She moves quickly to the coffee table to grab the portable and nabs it before the second ring is over. "Hello?"

She should have known. Ryan bringing her the tickets was a wonderfully pleasant surprise. It's only natural that some bad news would appear right away to temper it.

## **CHASE HOME**

Alex has to wait only a few seconds after ringing the doorbell before receiving an answer. The door flies open to reveal Courtney, clad in a t-shirt with sleeves rolled up to her shoulders and a pair of shorts, her hair thrown up messily.

"Hey! Come on in," she says, not even bothering to question why he's here. That's a good thing, because he really has no idea why, either. He was out running errands and thought that a visit to the Chases might be in order.

"How's it going?" Alex asks, feeling the need to be at least courteous before launching into his own business. Maybe he *does* have a reason for being here, after all.

"Not bad. I just got back from a run, so I stink." She crinkles her nose and reaches up to pull the band out of her hair. Her thick, black hair comes tumbling down awkwardly, part of it still caught up where the ponytail was. "As soon as I can motivate myself, I've really gotta take a shower."

"Well, I can distract you for a while, if you want."

"Good! I'm not in any mood to do anything at all productive. But I just got a good workout, so I think I earned a snack. You want something?"

"No, I'm fine, thanks." He follows her back to the kitchen, continuing to talk as they walk. "So guess what blessed news I got yesterday?"

"What?"

"We're gonna have a wedding."

She turns away from the pantry, where she has begun exploring. "Who's getting married?"

"My mother," he says, dropping her title with all the weight of an atomic bomb. "To that Stan creep."

Court shakes her head, seemingly in disbelief, then buries it back in the pantry. She emerges with a granola bar. "What is wrong with your mom? Doesn't she realize what a sleazeball he is?"

"I think the sleaze is what attracts her."

"She was married to my dad!" Courtney counters, taking mock offense.

"Yeah, well, it was all downhill from there."

"Did I hear my name?" Don calls out. A moment later, he emerges from his small painting studio, just off the kitchen, and joins the two around the island.

"My mom's getting married," Alex fills him in.

"So I overheard. I take it you're not too thrilled with her choice?"

Alex rolls his eyes. "That would be a giant understatement. I don't think she could have made a *worse* choice." He stops to consider the possibilities for just a second, then

revises his statement: "I take that back. She always manages to amaze me with her horrible decisions."

"What's so bad about the groom-to-be?" Don asks, although Alex can tell that it is more for the purpose of playing devil's advocate than actually trying to defend Sally's decision.

"He's super sketchy," Courtney answers before Alex has a chance to put it into words. But her assessment is quite true, so he joins in with a nod.

Don looks confused. "Meaning?"

"Basically ... he's white trash," Alex says, feeling a hint of laughter creeping up on him even though it's really not funny at all. "He comes over drunk sometimes, he doesn't really work, he's a slob, you know the type."

"He really weirds me out," Court adds.

"Have you tried reasoning with your mom?" Don asks.

Alex lets out a sigh. "I tried. The minute she broke the news to me, I tried. But of course, she didn't even want to consider what I had to say. I almost got the impression that she *wanted* me to do something wild and crazy to stop the wedding or something."

Courtney finishes chewing a bite of her granola bar and then says, "I wouldn't put it past her. After the stunts she pulled with my parents ..."

"I know. But I told her, I'm not gonna make a huge fuss and 'rescue' her or whatever. She can make her own mistakes if she wants. Hopefully she's smart enough to realize what a big one this is."

"I hope so," Don says, though he doesn't sound convinced that it's very likely. "Alex, I just want to make sure you know that you are a part of this family, even though you're not technically my son. I know it doesn't make things any better with Sally, but you do have us."

"Thanks," Alex says, his voice taking on an appreciative quiet. Even through his falling-out with Courtney, he knew that he still had a place in the Chases' home, but having it reaffirmed provides a definite sense of comfort now.

"Hey Alex," Courtney says, breaking the somber moment. "I've got something to talk to you about."

Don tips his head towards his studio. "I'll disappear back in there."

Courtney holds up a hand. "No need. We're gonna go upstairs anyway."

Alex just looks at Don and shrugs in resignation. He's interested to hear what Court has to say and doesn't particularly care where they get into it.

"All right, you two crazy kids run along now," Don says with obvious amusement.

Courtney takes Alex by the hand and begins to lead him out of the kitchen, but before they pass into the short hallway that leads to the living room and the stairs, Don's voice stops them.

"Oh, and Alex--"

Alex pauses in his tracks and, a second later, Courtney does the same.

"Have you told your mother yet?" Don asks. "About ..."

For some reason, Alex feels a momentary burn in his cheeks as he shakes his head. "No. I just--I don't know, it's never seemed like the right time. I have no idea how she'll react -- or if she'll even care. Why?"

"Just wondering," Don says as he dismisses the question with a wave of his hand. "I'll see you two later."

Alex follows Courtney up the stairs to her room, but Don's inquiry continues to itch on his brain.

## 322

"So I hope he finds *something*, at least. He needs the boost of confidence," Lauren concludes, lifting her Sprite and bringing the straw to her lips.

Trevor leans back against the padded booth and begins drumming his hands upon the table. "You think our food's almost ready?"

"I hope so." She sets down her glass. "You know, there has to be some job he could get, right? Something not completely horrible?"

"You would think," Trevor answers absently, though she doesn't seem to notice.

"Maybe I can help him find something," she goes on. "I'll keep my eye out for anything that might come up at Willis, at least. I didn't want to tell him that and get his hopes up,

but it could help. I don't think advertising is what he really wants to do, but it's worth a shot."

He sends a hopeful gaze out over the restaurant, but no luck -- there is no sign of their waiter. "You spend an awful lot of time at that apartment," he says, deciding to turn his attention back to Lauren even though he's incredibly tired of hearing about Jason's move and Jason's hunt for a job and Jason's everything else.

"We're hanging out a lot more these days. He's having a rough time of it, plus Courtney's been so busy lately ... it's weird, I never thought Jason and I would be the ones to become better friends after that whole Alex thing." She stops dead in her tracks, her eyes suddenly wider. "Oh God, I didn't tell you about the other day. I went over to help Jay move his stuff in and Alex was there getting moved in, and we wound up being alone for a couple of minutes. It was *so* awkward."

"Forget the other day -- you barely told me anything about what happened with this Alex character," Trevor says.

"It's not rocket science, Trev. He's gay, he tried to have a relationship with me anyway, and I was stupid enough not only to completely miss the fact that he was gay, but to totally fall for him, too."

"That kinda skips a lot of the details, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, maybe. The whole thing is really embarrassing. And it makes me mad, still, even though I know I can't totally hold it against him."

"What happened? I mean, did he make the first move, or did you, or what? How did you two wind up together?"

"I wanted him for, like, forever before anything actually happened," she explains with a sigh. "His mom used to be married to Courtney's dad a long time ago, and then she showed up and was trying to get him back, so Alex came here to try to get a handle on her, I guess. He started hanging out with Courtney and Jason and me, and of course they were together, so it kinda make sense for Alex and me to pair off anyway. Plus he's totally hot and we were hanging out all the time and really getting along."

Trevor does another quick scan of the restaurant but it turns up unsuccessful. Still no waiter and no food. "So you had a crush on him anyway. That probably made it a lot easier for him to go along with the whole thing."

Her pale blue fingernails tap along the side of her glass. "Yeah, basically. I set myself up for the whole thing."

"That's not what I meant," he cuts in. Ever since they were little, Lauren has been so quick to fall into the trap of self-pity, and he can see it happening now. "But it wasn't like he had to be totally proactive about it. You wanted something to happen and were ready to take whatever you could get of him."

"Pathetic, huh?"

"No! It's normal. You want someone and you take whatever opportunity you get with them, even if in hindsight it's ... a little less than brilliant." He smiles warmly, hoping to ease her at least a little bit. "So were you guys together and then, bam, he's just like, 'I'm gay, sorry?'"

"We were really on-and-off for the last few months," she says. "Like, things started to get pretty serious, and then he really pulled back. Of course I didn't realize that was a huge sign, but at least I got the clue that something was up. We didn't even talk for a while because it was really weird. But I was still hoping that it'd work out and we'd wind up together at the end of whatever was going on."

"How'd you wind up finding out, then? You didn't, like, catch him with a guy or something, did you?"

"Nah, I haven't progressed entirely to Movie of the Week status yet," she quips, managing a grin that he has to share. "We were at this party and I was kinda hooking up with this guy, and then he turned out to be a total jerk and I got really upset. So of course Alex is there and he saw what happened and came over to reassure me, and I wound up kissing him."

He can't help himself. "You really didn't see it, did you?"

"No, I *really* didn't." Thankfully she doesn't take the comment too harshly, at least from what he can see. "But then he wanted to go upstairs -- to talk, he said, even though I was thinking something else might happen -- and he wound up telling me it was never gonna work out."

"So at least he told you up-front ... eventually ... and didn't keep leading you on."

"Sorta," she interjects before quickly adding, "I started crying, so he left to get me some tissues, and Jason came in. I guess he'd seen us go upstairs and followed, but he knew already--"

"Wait, Jason knew?"

"Yeah ... long story. But he couldn't exactly tell me when Alex had told him in confidence, you know?"

Trevor nods, although the thought that the entire debacle might have been prevented had Jason shared Alex's secret does hit him hard. His sister never would have had to go through all this pain if Jason had -- or had been able to -- say anything.

"So Jason comes into the room, sees me crying, and assumes Alex told me everything. He starts trying to make me feel better and makes some joke that I can't exactly blame myself for Alex being gay--"

"And Alex hadn't told you that part yet?"

"Nope."

"Wow. You guys had your own little soap opera going there."

"Tell me about it. Like right after Jason said that, Alex comes back in," Lauren continues. "And then he finally told me, for real."

Trevor sneaks in a sip of his beer before noting, "Jeez, talk about drama."

"Seriously."

He can tell how heavily the entire situation still weighs upon her, even all these months later. "I'm sorry you had to go through that, Lauren. I can tell it must've been a huge blow for you to deal with. I wish I could've been here to help you through it."

"Well, you came back eventually, and you're here now," she says. "And that's all that matters. I don't wanna lose touch again like we did for a while there, Trev."

"Me neither. I--I really didn't want to face Mom and Dad then, and I guess cutting you out made that a lot easier. I wish I'd handled it better."

"I'm just glad you're here now. But ..." She holds up her index finger and he spots a disconcerting twinkle in her eye. "While we're on the topic of spilling our guts, you still haven't told me anything about school or why you still haven't graduated."

"It's not a big deal. It's just--you know school's never totally been my thing. I guess I'm not really into it, that's all."

"If you weren't into it, you'd be trying harder to get it over with instead of promising to finish up every semester," she says, leaving no room for him to claim otherwise. "So what's up? There has to be more to the story."

His initial instinct is to deny that there is anything more than what he has told her, but

seeing the look on her face, the look that only a sister could have, he knows there is no use. And suddenly, it doesn't seem worth trying to cover up. He might as well come clean.

## **CLAIRE FISHER'S APARTMENT**

"When is it? ... What do you think?"

Ryan listens to Claire's end of the telephone conversation, trying to gather whatever information he can about the nature of the call for now. From the outset he can tell that it is disturbing her; her face has grown progressively paler, her posture more rigid and tense. She suddenly seems to be light years away from the happy, surprised woman with whom he was sharing a quiet moment just a minute ago.

It must be about Samantha. He hears her repeat a date, about two weeks from now, then watches her jot it down. Her voice quivers at one point and betrays the nervousness that she seems to have acquired from the telephone line. Her questions are disorganized, frenzied, as if she's trying to collect whatever answers she can right now in the hope that eventually she will stumble upon the piece of knowledge that will put an end to her worrying.

While he waits, Ryan cannot help watching Travis as the little boy continues to play with his Legos. The set must be a new purchase, because the red bucket is sitting just to Travis's left, with the pieces laid out in small piles that Claire must have formed after removing them from their plastic mini-packages -- which are sitting, crumpled, upon the coffee table.

"What are you making there?" Ryan asks, kneeling beside Travis. He feels ridiculous being so nervous about addressing a child, but he has the distinct feeling that this first real encounter has to go just right.

"A house," Travis answers. He doesn't seem perturbed by the question, even though the answer was blatantly obvious to Ryan well before he even asked. "They're gonna live in it," he adds as he points to a pile of three Lego people.

Ryan has to rummage around for what feels like a painfully long time before he can come up with another question, though he's fairly certain that Travis takes no notice of the silence. "Is that a pool?" he manages at last. He hopes it is. What other big blue blob might appear in the middle of the front lawn?

"Yep. You can make 'em swim like this." Travis grabs one of the inch-high figures and sets it face down on top of the bumpy blue surface of the "pool," then begins to wiggle it around.

"Better be careful he doesn't drown."

For the first time, Travis actually looks up at him, his mouth and eyes wide open. "That can't happen! See?" He taps the Lego person against the blue pieces. "They can't really go through it, it's just pretend."

"Ah," Ryan answers, unable to keep himself from cracking a smile.

"All right. Thanks, Jim. I'll see you then," he hears Claire say from across the room, where she has wandered with the phone.

In an instant Ryan is on his feet. "What was that?"

"It was my lawyer," she explains. "A date's been set for Samantha's final custody hearing."

"That's a good thing, right? You've had to sit around while Diane had her for all these months. Now's your chance to do something about it."

Her head is already shaking insistently. "This trial period has been pretty smooth. There's no reason for Diane not to maintain custody."

"Yeah, but ..." He stops, realizing how desperate he is to see her happy with the child she has come to love as her own. "There's a chance, Claire. And you can always have shared custody. You raised Samantha until this last year--"

"Diane is her biological mother."

"It doesn't matter. She's comfortable with you and Travis. Even if the judge decides that she does need to be with Diane, you can't be cut out entirely."

"I know," Claire says, now nodding, though she doesn't seem to believe that entirely.

Not knowing what else to say, Ryan draws her into his arms. She doesn't fight it. *You need to be with that little girl*, his mind whispers even though he knows he shouldn't say anything more about it. *And I'll find a way to make it happen, if need be.*

## CHASE HOME

"Okay, what's going on?" Alex asks impatiently as soon as they are inside Courtney's room.

"This is good news. Calm down," she says, immediately able to see his wariness.

He shoots her a skeptical look. "Is it the kind of good news that I'm going to like, or the kind that's going to make me think you're a crazy--"

"You're gonna like it."

"Then spit it out," he says with a renewed glow that boosts her hopes for what she's about to propose.

"My new skating partner," she begins uncertainly, realizing that she has no idea how to raise the issue smoothly. "Dylan. He's gay."

It is a moment before Alex gives evidence of any reaction -- and when he does, it's a rather unaffected one. "So what? Half the world is these days, I think ... that's what it seems like from stuff I've read, anyway. I'm not seeing it up close and personal."

"My point exactly! You can't really tell unless you go to, like, a club or a bar, and seriously, how many good relationships wind up starting in places like that?"

"Probably not many."

"See where I'm going here?"

"I think so," he says, the wariness returning.

She waits a minute, hoping he'll relent or at least say something else, but when nothing comes, she jumps right back into it. "Come on, Alex, it'll be fun! He's a nice guy and he's really, really cute. You'll like him."

"So what? Just like that I get a blind date?"

"Well, I've gotta talk to Dylan about it first ... but I wanted to see what you thought. Do you want me to ask him?"

His front teeth slip down over his lower lip in consideration. "I don't know, Court ..."

"He's not seeing anyone, and he said he hasn't had much chance to meet many people in King's Bay yet," she adds hastily.

"You really like playing matchmaker, don't you?"

"I find it kinda satisfying, yeah. Come on, I just want you to be happy! This is a good start."

He looks down at his hands, contemplating, and then raises his eyes back to her, a slightly humored gleam in them. "You do remember that you tried to set me up once already -- with Lauren. We all know how that turned out."

"Hopefully we don't have the kind of complications with this that we did there," she says, matching his amused twinkle.

Finally he sighs, his shoulders slumping. "Fine. See what he thinks."

"Woohoo!" She plops down onto the bed, bouncing up as she playfully charges, "You know you're excited. At least a little bit."

His dimples deepen as his lips spread into a grin. "Shut up."

## 322

"You can tell me, Trev," Lauren coaxes.

His hands ball together and he absently cracks one of his knuckles, torn. From the beginning, he's known that he would have to tell the family eventually -- that, or they would find out someplace else. But he's not ready to explain it to his parents yet ... and he won't be until he really has something to show for himself. But it's just Lauren, and--

"All right, I'm gonna come clean with you," he says before he even realizes that he has made the decision. There's no turning back now. "But you've gotta promise me that you won't say anything to Mom and Dad."

"You've got my word."

He doesn't doubt that right now she means it, but he can see her impatience growing, and it makes him panic that perhaps the promise won't mean as much once he's actually spilled to her. "I'm serious, Lauren. Not a word to either of them until I decide it's time."

"Fine!" she promises quickly, but she must realize that her eagerness is making her appear less sincere than she truly is, so she adds in a more solemn tone, "You can trust me, believe me. Whatever you say can stay between the two of us for as long as you want."

"Okay, cool." He prepares himself with a deep breath and a slow exhale. "Look, Lauren, I haven't been into finishing school for awhile. I don't know, I feel burned out on it. I wanna get my degree at some point, but I don't think I can do it right now."

"And Mom and Dad wouldn't really see it that way."

"Right. They don't consider taking time off and finishing later an actual option. So I ... I went behind their backs and did what I wanted."

"You haven't been going to school?"

"I'm still enrolled, but I only took one class this semester. I couldn't handle another four months of writing papers and sitting in lecture halls," he admits, trying to gauge her for some sort of reaction.

She makes it easy, offering him a comforting smile. "I can understand where you're coming from."

"Good, thanks. It feels nice to hear that from someone whose opinion actually counts." He forces a small grin, not wanting to get too grim on her, but it feels it fade quickly. "I've actually been doing something with my time, though."

"Is this gonna be something that makes me want to beat you over the head? 'Cause so far, you're not doing too badly."

"I haven't had a clue about how any of you would react, that's why I didn't say anything 'til now. I've, uh ... I've been modeling."

"Modeling?" The anxious mask on her face cracks -- with relief, he hopes. "You mean, like, clothing?"

"Yeah ... I'm not, like, a hand model or something!"

"Well, modeling could mean clothes ... or it could mean, you know, porn or--I don't know. So that's your big secret? That you're modeling instead of going to school? That's not such a big deal."

He nods slowly. "Well, it would be to Mom and Dad."

"True, yeah. I'm not gonna say anything -- although you are gonna have to tell them eventually."

"Obviously. With any luck some of my stuff is gonna be showing up in print soon, so there's the chance they might see it anyway. But I wanna wait 'til I have something to show for myself."

"That's not a bad idea," she muses. "So are you gonna be in, like, real magazines?"

"Yeah. This is the real deal, Lauren. Or the beginning of it, at least. I've made some

really good contacts and--I don't wanna jinx it or anything, but this could be going somewhere big. I feel like I've really got a future with this." He knows as soon as he speaks the words that they must sound foolish, but thankfully, Lauren doesn't treat it that way.

"If you really enjoy doing it, then I'm happy for you," she says. "And I hope it works out the way you want."

"Okay, that's my story," Trevor says hurriedly. "Now I think it's time for you to be honest with me."

"Honest about what? I already told you all about Alex--"

"Not about Alex. There's nothing for you to admit there, right?" He pauses long enough for her to shake her head. "About Jason."

He swears that he sees her skin drop a shade of color but he can't be sure. "What do you mean?"

"You're starting to think of him as more than just a friend who needs your help, aren't you?"

"No! No way, Trev. I--he just broke up with my best friend! That would be totally ... ridiculous."

"Maybe," he agrees, trying not to sound too accusatory. "But it doesn't mean it's not possible."

"Here we go," announces the waiter as he comes up beside them, having somehow gone completely unnoticed until this moment. He sets down their food and Trevor flashes Lauren a short but meaningful look: He knows that he's on to something. When the waiter departs, Trevor allows the topic to drop, but he knows that neither of them is going to be forgetting it.

## **END OF EPISODE #266**

*What did you think of Trevor's admission? Is Courtney's effort at matchmaking going to turn out well? And what might the custody battle mean for Ryan and Claire as a couple? Visit the Footprints Forum to share your opinions and predictions with the rest of the audience!*

[Next Episode](#)