

"Footprints" Episode #270

[Previously ...](#)

- Without informing Eric, Diane ventured to Los Angeles to make an attempt at reconnecting with Brian. He greeted her coldly, though, and insinuated that there is not much chance of patching things up between them.
- Both Alex and Dylan agreed to Courtney's idea of setting them up on a blind date.
- Ryan realized that Stan's efforts to make amends with him were based upon a desire to have Ryan take back the accusation that Stan raped Claire. Refusing to do such a thing, Ryan booted his father out of his life for good.

322 BAR & GRILL

"That's not really what I meant ..."

From his perch at the bar, Alex listens to the ongoing drama in one of the nearby booths. He's only risked a few glances over at the site of the intrigue, but he knows that it stems from a young couple. From what he can discern, the man said something about one of the woman's friends in the course of regular conversation and the woman took off running with the subject. Now Alex is listening to the man's attempts to backtrack, feeling partially amused by the argument and partially pitying the man for having to deal with such a vulture.

The battle wages on, alternately growing a little too loud for a public place and then falling into spells of silence, but it quickly becomes little more than background filler for Alex. He's too nervous to pay much attention to anything and any attempts to distract himself have been only momentarily successful, if that.

He gladly accepts his rum-and-Coke from the bartender and settles into an uneasy pattern of taking short sips and chewing on the straw. He hopes people won't be listening in on his conversation with Dylan tonight like he's been listening in on everyone else's. He's barely comfortable enough with the knowledge that he's on a date with another guy; having everyone else in the restaurant know -- even though he'll most likely never see any of them again -- is painfully unsettling.

Out of nowhere, the thought strikes him that this is his first time ever going on an actual date with a guy. Up until this point, he hasn't thought of it that way, but the concept of dating isn't exactly new to him -- and neither is being with a guy, exactly. Just not both concepts at once.

He can't quite tell if he's more excited or terrified. Possibly terrified. If there were a way he could bolt this instant without looking like a complete loser, he just might take it. An

enormous part of him is completely resistant to the idea of being here, doing this.

But he's been trying for days, ever since he agreed to Courtney's plan, to remind himself that this *is* what he wants. Maybe there will be some initial discomfort to trudge through, but this could be the opening for which he's spent years waiting. Maybe Dylan will turn out to be someone with whom he wants to get serious.

Six years ago, he thought he'd found that opening. He had fought admitting that he even wanted the opening for so long, but when it happened ... he wanted it. He wanted it more than anything he'd ever even had the possibility of having.

It used to be that hardly a day passed during which he didn't think of Seth and that one semester when it seemed like everything might actually fall into place. For a while he wasn't even sure what was the point of continuing to go through the motions: He'd had everything he wanted and then it was gone, just like that.

Is that where this is headed? Immediately he chastises himself for the stupid thought; a first date doesn't mean that anything more is going to happen. Especially not a *blind* date. But at least it will be good experience. Maybe he'll even get to meet some people through Dylan, who knows?

Yet he can't deny that he still wants it to be like it was with Seth during that first semester of college. What they had was so perfect, in its own little way. They couldn't let anyone else know about it, and half the time they were too uncomfortable to express what they were feeling even to each other, but sometime during the course of that semester, Alex realized that those feelings were enough.

Or he thought they were. Then Seth just took off and that was the end of that.

"Alex?"

The sound of his name, spoken in an unfamiliar voice, comes slicing into Alex's thoughts. His head instinctively jerks to the right, in the direction of the entrance to the bar, as if he knows who it is before his mind has time to register that he knows.

"You're Alex, right?"

Alex swallows hard.

DIANE BISHOP'S CONDOMINIUM

Clinging to Samantha with one hand and digging in her purse for her keys with the other, Diane lumbers up the stairs to the second-floor landing. She put the keys away just a

minute ago in the parking lot, and in retrospect it was an idiotic move, because somehow they've managed to get lost in the depths of her purse in record time.

Finally she pauses in the middle of the staircase and stops moving long enough to find the keys. As she completes her ascension of the stairs, a dark head begins to come into view.

"What are you doing here?" she asks.

Eric turns around with a start and she spots the bottle of wine in his hand. "Oh, hi. I've been waiting for you." He leans in and plants a kiss on her cheek.

"What are you doing here?" she repeats.

"Should I take that as a hint to scram?"

She shakes her head. "No, no. I'm just wondering. I didn't expect to see you."

"I've missed you," he says, smiling so that his deep dimples become even more pronounced. "I was hoping we could spend the evening together ..."

"That idea I like," she says, now able to relax. She's not sure why she became so paranoid at the sight of him; it's not as though she doesn't want to see him or spend time with him.

She unlocks the door, still holding onto Samantha's hand, and steps inside the spacious condo. It's only been a few weeks since she moved in here but the place already feels like home. After living in that hotel for so long, it's a relief simply to have a place that she knows is entirely her own.

She heads to the living room to set down Samantha's things and sees Eric disappearing into the kitchen.

"What do you want to do for dinner?" he calls out shortly after she hears the refrigerator being opened.

"I don't know," she groans. "Should we order out for something?"

"That sounds like an excellent idea." The refrigerator closes and a moment later he is with her in the living room. "How did your business trip go?"

"Fine. Nothing out of the ordinary." She's not sure if her answer sounds too clipped, but there's not much she can do about it now. He has no idea that she went to Los Angeles or why she went. Better to keep it that way.

Samantha scampers down the hallway toward her bedroom, no doubt to remove every toy she can manage from the toy chest so that they can all be left around the room. Diane has the fleeting urge to give her some kind of instruction not to make a mess, but she's sure it will go in one ear and out the other, so there's really no point.

"I've missed you," Eric says again, sliding his hands around her waist and drawing her closer. "I wasn't aware how attached I've become to spending time with you."

"Has anyone ever told you what a smooth operator you are, Mr. Westin?" Her lips spread into a playful grin that dissolves as she raises them to meet his.

The doorbell interrupts their kiss. Diane lingers in Eric's arms for a moment, gazing over at the door as if doing so will solve the mystery of who it might be.

"Hold that thought," she says, raising an eyebrow suggestively as she slips away from him.

She walks briskly to the door, hoping to dispel whomever it might be as quickly as possible so that she can return to Eric. But when she opens the door, all hopes of sharing an intimate evening with Eric are blown to pieces.

CLAIRE FISHER'S APARTMENT

Claire releases a frustrated grunt as she yanks on the zipper. She gives it three hard tugs and finally it slides back, revealing the inside of the duffel bag.

It looks like it's the right size, but there is no way she's going to contend with that zipper any more than she just did. So she stuffs the bag back in the closet and goes in search of another.

It's only going to be for one night, but this trip to the concert with Ryan is carrying all the pressure of a month-long excursion, she realizes as she investigates the other luggage options. She feels like it's necessary to make sure that everything is perfect about it.

Which means that she actually has to pack. First she was going to do it this afternoon, but then she decided to put it off until she had dropped Travis off with Paula and Bill so that she could focus. Now she's considering waiting until the morning, even though Ryan is coming to pick her up at 9 a.m. and she knows that she'll never have enough time to be packed and ready, no matter how early she wakes up.

Pack, she orders herself. Of course, that involves choosing which clothes to bring. All she needs is a change of clothes for the day after the concert -- but she also needs

something to sleep in ...

I never thought I'd have to go through this whole trying-to-impress-someone routine again, she thinks, although she also realizes that she and Ryan are well beyond that stage of casual dating. Things might have only turned romantic a short while ago, but with all the history and the intensity of the feelings between them, it's as if months -- at least -- have been tacked onto the official relationship length.

And yet, even with that added depth, she can't deny the anxiety that has been bubbling within her and increasing steadily as the trip grows nearer. She wants to go to the concert. She wants to spend time with Ryan. But something is still not quite right.

She knows what it is, even if she doesn't want to confront it outright. Her mind flashes back to her conversation with Paula the other day, when she admitted that she's been seeing Ryan. What if there is more than what he's told her about his involvement with Nick?

Would he lie to her like that?

An urgent pounding on the door tears her from her thoughts -- thankfully, perhaps -- and she makes her way quickly to the living room. The call carries such a sense of immediacy that it doesn't even strike her to glance through the peephole to see who it is.

But once she opens the door, she realizes that she should have. She never should have opened the door ... because now Stan is standing right there, without any barriers between them.

322 BAR & GRILL

"Uh, yeah," Alex manages despite the sudden tightness in his throat.

"I'm Dylan," comes the reply from the grinning young man, as if it were necessary. Alex has already begun to appraise him. His features are striking, sharp and defined and yet still boyish underneath a carefully ordered head of sandy blonde hair. He is tall, which Alex supposes makes sense in light of his being a pairs skater. And his choice of clothing for the evening is impeccable: a closely-fitting black button-down shirt and a pair of jeans that have been made to look "dirty" even though they're probably new.

Alex was pleased with what he picked out to wear tonight, but now, seeing Dylan, he feels strangely underprepared.

"Nice to meet you," Alex says as he extends a hand. Dylan takes it and shakes, and Alex finds himself paying particular attention to the grip. It's not weak or flimsy, and for some

reason he finds that reassuring even though, as he scolds himself, he should know better than to be so judgmental.

"So how's it going?" Dylan asks. He settles upon the stool beside Alex and grabs the bartender's attention long enough to order a drink whose name Alex has never heard.

Alex stares into the depths of his own drink for a moment before answering. "Okay, I guess. It took me forever to get here, though. I'm lucky I left early or I would've been really late, 'cause they were doing some construction or something on Burberry."

"Where do you live?"

"Out along Highway 22. It's kinda by the rink, actually. I live with Jason, actually--" He pauses suddenly, wondering if he shouldn't have brought up Jason because of Dylan's relationship with Courtney, but it's too late now. "--so he wanted to be pretty close to the rink."

"Makes sense." The first strains of awkward silence roll in between them and Alex begins to groan internally until Dylan picks up the slack. "I just got a place not too far from here. I really wanted to be downtown, even though it makes it more of a hike to get out to the rink."

"Downtown's nice. There's so much stuff down here."

"Yeah, I wanted to be in the middle of it as much as I could. I figured that would help me get used to being in a new place."

"So you just moved from Alaska?"

"I officially just moved, like, a couple weeks ago," Dylan says. There's something about the detached manner of his speech and the intensity in his eyes that gives Alex the distinct impression that he's being studied and scrutinized, and the idea makes him acutely nervous.

He goes for another sip of his drink and winds up drawing a long swig through the straw. "Did you grow up in Alaska?" he asks, feeling pressure to have an endless set of questions prepared so that he doesn't have to be left without anything to say.

"I was born in Anchorage and then we sorta moved a lot 'cause of my dad's job. We were in Seattle for a little bit and San Fran and Phoenix. And then my parents got divorced and my mom and I wound up in Portland."

"Jeez, you've been all over." *Way to state the obvious*, Alex tells himself with a mental kick in the pants.

"Yeah, totally. I only wound up back in Anchorage 'cause I was looking for a partner and this girl's coach called my coach to see if I wanted to try out, and it seemed like such a good fit that it was worth making the move."

"So you guys moved just because of your skating? Wow."

"Sorta." Dylan pauses momentarily to take his drink from the bartender, then goes on. "My mom's still working in Portland, so I went up there by myself."

"Whoa, really? How old were you?"

"Eighteen, so she just got me an apartment and it was cool. It was nice to have the freedom, actually." He spends a few seconds working on his drink, which is some sort of reddish-pink color. "I think that probably made a big difference in me being so comfortable with coming out and everything. I was pretty much on my own day-to-day from that point on."

"When did you?" Alex asks. Feeling like a doofus, he adds in a slightly quieter voice, "Come out, I mean."

"When I turned 20. My mom knew before that, anyway. It was just a matter of telling her. And my dad couldn't have cared less. He's got a new family and all that crap, so why worry that your oldest kid turned out to be a fag when you can blame it all on your ex-wife, right?"

Alex is a bit taken aback by the bluntness of Dylan's words and it startles him into momentary quiet.

"Courtney said you just came out," Dylan continues.

Alex takes it as a prompt to tell his story, which seems to have been the intention, since Dylan goes back to sipping his drink.

"I kinda ... well, I still haven't told my mom," Alex says, "but at this point, I'm not sure when or if I'm going to. She's caught up in her own little world and it's like, if I tell her it might just be more of a pain for me in the end."

"Who cares what she thinks? It'll feel good just to tell her. Either she's gonna love you for it or it can be your slap in the face to her. Win-win situation, right?"

"I guess so," Alex answers uneasily. "But ... we had this whole drama with Courtney and Jason and their friend Lauren ..." He tells the story in as condensed a version as he can manage, not sure how far into all of their worlds he wants to admit Dylan just yet.

"Wow, that is kinda dramatic," Dylan comments with a laugh once Alex is finished. "So have you never done stuff with a guy or anything?"

"No, I have. In college." The admission sounds strange to Alex's ears. This is the first time he's ever done any sort of explaining about his relationship with Seth. "My roommate and I sort of--had a thing, I guess, my freshman year. But he left the school and that was the end of it."

"And that was it?"

Alex nods, sipping on his rum-and-Coke again.

"Wow. God, first time I was with a guy was when I was, like, fifteen. I can't imagine going as long as you have ..."

"It kinda sucked, yeah," Alex says, anticipating where this is headed. "But I needed the time to get comfortable with it. I still am, in a lot of ways. All in due time, right?"

"I've been gay since the day I was born," Dylan says, a laugh breaking up the words slightly. "No secret there. It was rough to admit and all, but like I said, I know that my mom knew, I'm sure my dad did, and my friends totally must've. So once I acknowledged it, it wasn't so hard to get into it."

Dylan's experience is so different from his own that Alex can't help wanting to know more about it. "Your first time with a guy was when you were fifteen? How'd that happen?"

"It was another guy from the rink. He was a couple years older than me, but I wanted him and I knew it, and I was pretty damn sure I could have him if I went for it, so ... I went for it." Dylan seems to be relishing the memory as he speaks. "And then I was hooked."

"I can't imagine being so cool about being so forward with guys," Alex says. "But everyone's experience is different, I guess."

"Yeah. And c'mon, you had the college-roommate thing. That's kinda hot, too. What was he like?"

"He was an awesome kid," Alex says. "We were best friends, too, before everything just ... hit the fan. But he was one of those all-around perfect kids. Valedictorian of his high school, did all this community service, star of the soccer team--"

"Ooh, a soccer player?"

"Yeah." Alex has to grin now, although he's not sure why. It's such a different sensation to be remembering his experience with Seth as something purely fun, not the melodrama into which it evolved.

"Why don't we get some food?" Dylan suggests, picking up his drink from the bar once again.

"That sounds good."

"Yeah, I'm starving. And I've got a fun idea for later."

Alex finishes the last of his rum-and-Coke, trying to figure out just what Dylan means.

DIANE BISHOP'S CONDOMINIUM

She doesn't want to give Eric any more information than he needs about the identity of the man at the door, so she simply shoots Brian a look that demands to know what he is doing at her home.

"I needed to see you," Brian says, the words gushing forth as if finally released from the confines of a dam. "I--I felt bad about the way we left things."

"You could've called," she says coolly. She is sure that Eric must be paying acute attention to this scene at the door, but she has no intention of including him in it.

"I know. I ... We needed to do this in person."

"So you just jumped on a flight and came up here? How'd you find me, anyway?"

"I went to Vision and they said you'd just gone home. So they gave me your address."

Diane's mouth flies open with outrage, but Brian cuts it off by adding, "It's not like they don't know me, Diane. I used to work there."

She narrows her eyes at him. "How dare you stalk me up halfway up the West Coast and expect me to listen to whatever you have to say after the way you treated me?"

"I'm sorry. I was surprised to see you," he says, fumbling for the words. Diane smiles inwardly at this sign that the power has shifted back to her favor.

She is about to strike with another jab when she sees Brian's focus move past her, over her shoulder and into the apartment. Now she turns out of instinct. He's finally spotted

Eric.

"I didn't realize you had company." A dejected look washes over his face. "I'll go. But Diane, I really want to talk to you."

She folds her arms and stares him down, reveling in his moment of intense discomfort. After she made the effort to apologize and he blew her off, why should she go easy on him?

"I hope we can talk later," he says as he turns to walk off.

Diane watches him beginning to walk away, then looks back at Eric, who is observing the encounter stoically.

"Wait," she calls out, surprised to hear herself saying it.

Brian freezes in place and turns back to her almost instantly.

"We do need to talk," she says as a sinking feeling takes hold of her stomach. She turns back toward the living room -- and Eric. "This is Brian -- you know. Brian. We have to talk right now."

"Are you asking me to leave?" Eric asks, the words flicking out of his throat in disbelief.

"Yes. I'll call you later."

He shoots her a cold gaze and she can almost hear him accusing her of choosing Brian over him. *That's not what I'm doing*, she assures herself, although even her internal voice lacks conviction.

"Fine." Snatching the bottle of wine off the counter that bridges the kitchen and the living room, Eric storms out of the apartment.

He blows right past Brian, who remains out on the landing in the same spot in which he froze.

"You didn't have to make him leave," Brian says as soon as Eric's heavy footsteps on the stairs have subsided.

"I know," she says, hoping that he'll realize the weight of the decision that she just made.

CLAIRE FISHER'S APARTMENT

"You bitch," Stan spits, the looseness of his lips betraying his drunken state moments before Claire catches a whiff of the whiskey.

Her first instinct is to slam the door in his face, but no sooner has she gripped it then does Stan shove himself in the way. She gives a final push in an attempt to overpower him but his hand strikes out and gives her a rough push, knocking her back into the apartment.

Before she can make another move, he slams the door behind him and stands menacingly before her, rage burning in his eyes.

"You ruined everything," he says between heavy breaths.

She can feel her heart slamming against her chest and the air passages in her throat tightening up. "What are you talking about?"

"Damn bitches never can keep your mouths shut, can ya?"

"What are you talking about?" she asks again, her desperation increasing tenfold as he takes another lumbering step toward her.

"You had to go putting that nonsense in Ryan's head, didn't ya? You had to make him think that I'm some evil sicko -- why? Just so you can feel better about being such a goddamn tramp?"

Her protests freeze in her throat. She holds up two trembling hands in an effort to keep him at bay, but he continues advancing on her.

"You're not gettin' away with it," he huffs. She can feel the intensity emanating from him as his frighteningly forceful hands reach out and give her another shove. She staggers to maintain her balance and suddenly feels the couch against her knees. She tumbles over the side, onto the cushions.

"You're gonna pay for this." He lowers himself toward her and, as he grows closer in a sickening sort of slow motion, his liquor-heavy breath gripping her and his furious eyes tearing into her own, she realizes what's going on. That day from long ago flashes in her mind--

Flailing her limbs beneath him in a fruitless effort to hurl his weight off her--

His stinking breath assaulting her senses, rough hands tearing at her clothing--

"No!" she shrieks, a primal call from somewhere deep inside her being.

For a moment she thinks that he is going to relent. She feels his weight backing away and his presence becoming lesser. But it's only momentary.

She hears the click of metal and her breathing stops.

"We're gonna do this my way," he says as he pulls the gun from his pocket.

END OF EPISODE #270

Is Claire doomed to relive the past? Can Diane and Brian work things out? And is there potential for Alex and Dylan? Come over to the Footprints Forum to share your thoughts!

[Next Episode](#)