

"Footprints" Episode #272

[Previously ...](#)

- Alex and Dylan met for their date at 322. Though he was nervous at first, Alex began to relax as they talked more. Dylan announced that he had an idea for after dinner.
- Recalling Paula's warnings against hurting Sarah any further, Molly doubted that she and Brent could ever be involved.
- When Brian paid Diane a surprise visit at home, she asked Eric to leave, cutting their romantic evening short.
- A drunken Stan came to Claire's apartment with a gun, demanding that she retract the rape charges and then threatening to rape her "for real." Sally and Ryan happened to arrive at the building and rushed upstairs. Though Ryan managed to get the gun away from Stan temporarily, a fracas broke out and the gun was fired.

CLAIRE FISHER'S APARTMENT

Ryan breaks from Stan's grip and dives to the floor, the metallic explosion of the gunshot ringing in his ears.

A woman's cry pierces the air and Ryan feels his chest tightening even further. His vision suddenly blurred, he glances around frantically for the gun -- and the victim.

The gun is lying just a few feet away. With shaking, tingling fingers, he reaches out and grabs it.

Beside him, Stan scrambles to his feet. "Goddamn you," he mutters, out of breath, as he stares down at Ryan.

"Claire," Ryan gasps. He pulls himself to his knees and crawls the few feet to her side. "Claire," he repeats, grasping her hand.

"I'm fine." Her hand tightens around his. "Do you have--"

"The gun? Yeah." Ryan casts a nervous look in Stan's direction, but he is already making tracks for the door. "Do not leave!" Ryan screams, holding the gun in midair. Stan doesn't even bother looking back; he must realize that there is no way Ryan is going to fire the gun now, not even at him.

Ryan stares out into the hallway, the tingling sensation still coursing through his body. He can't get away. He can't stay out there--

"Oh my God," he hears Claire mutter, and instantly Stan's potential destinations are shoved to the back of his mind.

"What is it?"

"Ryan," she says weakly, pushing herself up to a sitting position. "Look."

His eyes follow the line of her finger across the room, toward the dining room table, where Sally is sprawled on the carpet. A pool of gruesome red is quickly forming beneath her.

MIRAGE NIGHTCLUB

Alex tails Dylan closely as they maneuver through the crowd. The combined scents of sweat, cologne, and alcohol invade his senses as he forces his way through, struggling to keep up with Dylan. No one here seems to be particularly concerned with the fact that there are other people here who might be trying to move around or have a good time; it's a complete free-for-all.

Finally Dylan stops walking, and a second later Alex comes up beside him. They're standing at a railing that overlooks the packed dance floor, and now that he's not caught in a crowd, the intensity of the thumping techno song that he doesn't recognize hits Alex fully.

"I just came here for the first time last weekend," Dylan says, simultaneously leaning closer to Alex and raising his voice to give himself a shot at being heard. "Doesn't seem like too bad of a club."

"It's pretty packed," Alex comments, at a loss for anything intelligent to say. He's too absorbed in taking in the whole scene. That night he went to The Lookout with Courtney was less of a shock than he thought it would be, and now he knows why: This is the type of place he was expecting. From his vantage point above the dance floor, he can see a lot of outrageously attired individuals and a lot of dancing that he's pretty sure he never would have imagined could exist.

"So this is seriously your first time at a gay club?" Dylan asks, the wonder apparent in his voice.

"Yeah," Alex shouts back. "They had, like, a--night or something at The Lookout a while ago -- I think they have one every week -- and I went with Courtney. But it was ... a lot different than this."

"It'll take some getting used to. But you'll wind up loving it. There's something about

having a place where we can go and just totally be ourselves ..."

Alex gives no response other than a nod. He's too busy watching the action down on the dance floor and wondering if he really ever will wind up loving this.

"I hope you're having a good time," Dylan says. He scoots closer as he speaks, ostensibly to be heard, but that brings his upper arm right up against Alex's. He leaves it there.

"Yeah, I am. This isn't someplace I'd normally go, so it's cool to have the chance."

"Well, hey, let's get down there and dance! I've gotta go to the bathroom first, so why don't you run over to the bar, grab drinks for us, and meet me back here?"

Alex agrees and, a moment later, finds himself pushing back through the crowd as he tries to retain his slippery mental grip on the name of the drink that Dylan has requested. After what feels like far too much effort just to walk from Point A to Point B, he reaches the bar, and he orders their drinks as quickly as he possibly can so that his mind can relax.

Then comes the waiting. He's not really sure what to do with himself as he awaits the drinks' arrival, but he's suddenly grateful for the fact that no one seems aware that he's standing here. He hates the feeling that he has to appear busy or important whenever he's alone, yet he can never quite escape it.

So he busies himself by glancing around and further studying the crowd. This is such a different environment than he's used to; college parties were never quite like *this*. He feels so out-of-place here, especially because everyone else -- Dylan included -- seems so at ease.

His gaze is still wandering over the unfamiliar faces in the crowd when, suddenly, he sees one that isn't so unfamiliar. In that moment of trying to confirm that it is who he thinks it is, the subject of his scrutiny turns around and their eyes lock.

It's him -- the guy from Cassie's and The Lookout.

322 BAR & GRILL

For the umpteenth time since she sat down half an hour ago, Molly puts her elbows back up on the bar. She has no idea what to do with her hands. Her instinct is to keep them on her drink, but she's not having anymore than one drink and if she goes through it too quickly, she'll have to go home.

As uncomfortable as it is being in a public place on a Friday night by herself, she knows

that her apartment would be downright depressing. She has no desire to sit around by herself, ruminating over her miserable state of affairs. Even Rex wouldn't be good company right now, and that's saying a lot. At least right now she can fool herself into thinking that she's out having a life.

She drops her hands back down to her lap and glances around again. There's nothing much of interest going on around her, unfortunately -- nothing to keep her mind occupied.

The worst part is that she knows where she wants to be right now, and there really isn't anything keeping her from going there. Except herself.

She's determined not to go running to Brent right now. Her mother was so troubled by the whole thing, and no matter how badly she wants to, she can't bring herself to disregard her family for one person.

So she lifts her drink and takes another sip, gazing straight ahead at nothing and willing the night's hours to pass.

She's been sitting like that for quite some time when a voice cuts into her thoughts.

"Hi there," the man says, and when she turns, a bit startled, she finds herself looking into a face that she has to admit is very handsome.

"Hi," she manages to answer.

"Are you doing all right? You look a little ... distressed."

"You could say that, yeah."

"I know the feeling," he says before flagging down the bartender and ordering a beer.

"Would it be all right if I sat here?"

"Uh, sure, yeah." His forwardness takes her by surprise, but she can't deny it that it's a little bit exciting, too. He's clearly somewhat interested in her, and that knowledge makes her feel amazingly hopeful.

His beer is delivered momentarily and he settles in at the stool beside her. She can feel his eyes examining her -- not lewdly, but with intrigue -- and she keeps her focus down in her drink.

"May I ask your name?" he says finally.

"Molly." A moment of indecision grips her before she extends her hand.

He meets it with his own for a very confident, very professional shake. "Nice to meet you, Molly. I'm Eric."

"It's nice to meet you, too." Now it's her turn to study him. He is incredibly handsome, even moreso than she realized at first; his clothing is crisp, professional, and obviously pricey.

"Do you mind my asking what's bothering you?" he asks as the bartender brings over his beer.

"Um, no, not at all." Truthfully, the idea of getting everything off her chest with someone who has no prior knowledge of the situation is incredibly inviting. "I suppose you could say I'm having some family issues."

"With whom? Parents? Children?" A grin breaks on his face as he adds, "Not a husband, I hope."

"No, not a husband. Definitely not a husband," she says with a roll of her eyes. "It's ... incredibly complicated. The bottom line is that my sister and I don't get along very well and now I have to make a decision that's either going to hurt her or make me miserable. My mother seems to be a big champion of Option B."

He takes a slow sip of his beer. "It's admirable that you're even having the debate with yourself. Plenty of people would choose their own happiness over a sibling's -- especially one they don't particularly get along with. I can tell that it's really bothering you."

"It's driving me insane. And the thing is, it's basically a decision about the rest of my life." *Put on the brakes*, she tells herself. *You don't want to frighten him off!* "How about you, Eric? What are you doing out for a drink by yourself on a Friday night?"

"Well ... I had plans with a woman that I've been seeing, but tonight it became very clear that I'm never going to be a high priority for her. And frankly, I don't have the time or the energy to invest in being someone's amusement on the side."

"Ouch."

"It probably wasn't a wise decision to get involved with her in the first place," he says, resting his chin on his hand as he gazes off at nothing in particular. "But what can I do about it now? You live, you learn."

"Absolutely."

The conversation continues in much the same vein while they finish their drinks. Molly

feels no pressure to go into great depth about her problems, but Eric seems more than willing to be a sounding board and she's happy to bounce things off him. More importantly, he's paying her his undivided attention. Somehow that makes things seem much less complicated all of a sudden.

By the time her drink is done, she feels unburdened enough to admit that she needs to go home and get some rest. The idea of facing the empty apartment doesn't seem so horrid anymore.

And when Eric asks for her phone number, she hesitates for only a moment before jotting it down.

MIRAGE NIGHTCLUB

Instinctively Alex drops his eyes to the floor. He's not sure where they go, exactly. Nowhere, maybe. Or everywhere. Anywhere to deny the eye contact that was just made.

Only in the seconds that follow that initial reaction does he remember where he is and that there isn't anything wrong with having been caught staring.

He risks another glance upward, only to realize with a strange sort of horror that the other young man is approaching him. The look on his face makes it clear that he recognizes Alex just as much as Alex recognizes him.

"Hey," he says when he gets close enough to be heard -- just barely -- over the music. His voice is surprisingly deep, an amusing contrast with his boyish face, and Alex cannot help smiling, for some reason.

"Hey," Alex responds.

He notices the other guy tapping his foot. "So we meet again."

His forwardness about the whole thing alarms Alex. If he had been the one to make the approach -- which he's not sure he'd ever have been able to do, honestly -- he would have felt the need to remind the other guy where they'd seen each other before.

"Yep," he says finally, for lack of anything better to say. His mind is too busy to produce anything useful, apparently.

"It's kinda weird that we keep seeing each other all over the place, isn't it?"

"Very weird, yeah." *Think of something else to say!* he urges his mind, in a state of near-frenzy. "My name's Alex, by the way."

"Nice to meet you, Alex," comes the response, but he stops before the other half of the introduction can emerge.

In a second Alex knows why. Dylan is beside him again. His arm snakes around Alex's waist before Alex even has an idea of what is happening.

And the other guy raises a hand in a parting wave. "See you around," he says as he turns and walks away.

"Who was that?" Dylan asks, scrunching up his face in faux brattiness.

"I'm not sure," Alex admits as the bartender places their drinks in front of him. They take them and move back to the railing.

They chit-chat as they drain the drinks, although Alex is more than a little distracted by his visual interrogation of the club for--well, whatever his name is. But he doesn't see him anywhere.

The drinks are gone in just a few minutes. So is much of the physical space between them. Dylan has kept his arm around Alex's waist and now has his torso pressed against Alex's side.

"Let's go dance," he says, more of an announcement than a suggestion.

Alex follows happily enough. The alcohol has started to move his feet and his shoulders in time to the thumping music. Dylan's hands don't leave his body as they head out onto the floor, and he's suddenly grateful for that, because it somehow makes him feel less violated by the hands that reach out from the crowd to touch him -- as they have doubtlessly grabbed at countless others tonight -- as they push their way toward some open space.

He's only danced with another guy once before, that night that he and Courtney went to The Lookout, and it's still a somewhat strange feeling. But he begins to warm up to the feeling of Dylan's hands on his body, on his hips and his chest and around the small of his back. He even reciprocates the touches as the songs go on.

"I hope you're having a good time," Dylan says, leaning in so that he can be heard.

"I am," Alex says. "Are you?"

"Very good." A mischievous twinkle lights in Dylan's eye and, a moment later, his lips are upon Alex's.

The sensation is strange, so familiar and yet so foreign, and it takes him a few seconds to ease into it. But Dylan's eagerness spurs him on and his mouth finally melts into Dylan's as the music rages on.

CLAIRE FISHER'S APARTMENT

Claire watches from the middle of the living room as Ryan hangs up the phone.

"They'll be here soon," he says, "but we've got to do something to stop the bleeding. Can you get a towel or a blanket or something?"

She nods and makes a move to go find something, but shock keeps her in place, staring at Sally as she has been the entire time that Ryan was on the phone. For this to be happening -- especially right in her living room -- it's unfathomable.

She pulls herself free from the imaginary shackles that are holding her feet to the floor and hurries down the hallway. Flinging open the linen closet, she grabs the first towel that she sees, then pauses. They're using her towels, the ones she uses after her shower every day, to stop the bleeding of a woman who's just been shot. In her living room.

The surrealism of it all is almost too much, even as she flies back down the hall with the towel. She stuffs it into Ryan's extended hand, wanting to help but also wanting no part of this mess.

"Dammit," Ryan mutters as he kneels beside Sally. Claire sees him cringe for a moment before pressing the towel down over the gory hole that has been torn in her stomach.

"She's lost a lot of blood," Claire says, her eyes following the pool's trail out over the carpet.

"I know. We just have to keep her from losing too much more before they get here." He presses the hard knot of the towel down even harder. "I can't believe he got out of here. His fiancée got shot and he got away."

"They'll catch him." Even as she speaks the words, all sorts of terrifying possibilities are surging through Claire's head.

"Yeah, they will. He's not smart enough to stay hidden for long."

Claire keeps awaiting the sound of sirens and the clamor of paramedics rushing into the apartment, but they don't come. She begins pacing through the living room, around the coffee table and behind the sofa, anything to keep her moving.

"I want to take you to the hospital, too," Ryan says.

"I'm fine."

"You should get checked out, Claire. Besides--" He stops abruptly, obviously fumbling for the right words. "Stan was really roughing you up. You should get checked out."

She doesn't respond. She knows that he won't back down, but there's no way that she wants to go to that hospital, filled with people she sees every day, and have them know what happened. No way.

Sally's body spasms under Ryan's hands, and both he and Claire jump back. Quickly he tries to recover the hole with the towel, but something is different now. The air is even stiller, even more eerie.

He locks eyes with Claire as the sirens finally emerge in the distance. It doesn't matter how quickly they get here now.

The offensive crimson stain just lies there in the middle of the carpet.

END OF EPISODE #272

Did you expect that ending? Will Stan be caught? What do you think of Alex and Dylan? And how about that encounter between Molly and Eric? Join us in the Footprints Forum to share your thoughts!

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