

"Footprints" Episode #277

[Previously ...](#)

- Still dazed from Sally's death, Alex went to share the news with the Chases. They immediately rallied around him, but he remained convinced that some of the blame belonged to him because of his refusal to rescue his mother from marrying Stan.
- Jason was strangely affected by the news that Courtney had set Alex up on a date with Dylan.
- In the aftermath of Stan's rampage, Claire again reminded Ryan of her lack of trust for Nick.
- A strained encounter with Brent at her parents' house sent Molly running, determined not to put herself through that kind of heartache anymore.

WINDMILLS

The golden bubbles spring to life inside the pristine glass of the champagne flute. Molly takes a few seconds to watch them quietly, fascinated by the sparkling energy inside the glass's slender body.

"It's been a while since I had champagne," she admits with a laugh.

"I felt it was in order," Eric says as a smile curls his lips. "Tonight feels like a time for celebrating, no?"

"I suppose, yeah." In truth, she has approached their date with equal parts excitement and nervousness. It's been so long she went out on a true date that she's almost forgotten how to feel to step outside of her comfort zone and risk a disastrous evening with a stranger in the hope of forging some sort of magical connection.

Eric lifts his glass. "Let's toast, then."

Molly follows suit, picking up her glass from the table and holding it aloft in anticipation of Eric's toast.

"To simplicity," he says, "and new beginnings." He clinks his glass against hers and they drink as the sharp ring lingers in the air.

He places his champagne down. "I've needed an evening like this so badly -- a chance to relax, share interesting conversation with an interesting person ... and escape from the rut I've managed to settle myself into these last few months."

Molly can't help widening her eyes. "Tell me about it!"

The emphatic nature of her agreement comes quite naturally; her encounter with Brent earlier made it clear just how acute her need to escape from that rut has become. For months, especially since Sarah signed the divorce papers, Molly has tortured herself daily over whether she and Brent could and should make an attempt at a relationship. It's gotten to the point of feeling like a neverending cycle lately -- an unbroken loop of indecision and conflict.

The chance to spend an evening away from that was too promising to pass up, and the possibility of finding happiness elsewhere was what gave her the strength to walk away from what would have no doubt been the same conversation she and Brent have had time and time again.

"Actually," she says, still caught in that train of thought even as she opens her mouth to continue the conversation, "I think the last time I had a 'night on the town,' I came here. And it was the obligatory disaster, of course."

"What happened?" he asks, leaning forward in that way that makes her happily aware that he's devoting his full attention to her.

She releases a sigh so heavy that it practically speaks for itself. "Somehow everyone and their mother decided to come here that night. My sister-in-law--she was married to my brother before he died, I mean--" She sees Eric's eyes react to that statement and she knows she'll have to return to it in a moment. "She was here with a man she's been dating, someone she probably shouldn't be dating, so that made things nice and uncomfortable when we bumped into them. And then there was this woman here who decided to come harass us ..."

A laugh escapes his lips. "This woman just arbitrarily decided to harass you?"

"No, no. We know her, unfortunately. She's--" Molly has to pause a moment to consider the relation. "She and my brother have a daughter together. Long story. Anyway, she and my sister have become friends, somehow, so Diane--this woman--decided to bother me on her behalf."

"Diane?"

"Yeah. She's a real piece of work."

"Diane Bishop?" Recognition sparks another grin from Eric as Molly nods.

"You know her?"

"I think I was here with her that night!" Eric exclaims. "The man you were with -- was his name Brant--"

"Brent." Molly goes quiet for a moment, basking in the amusement of the revelation. "Wow. So I guess you *do* understand what a pain Diane was that night."

"I told her how obnoxious I found it, actually," he says.

"Good! That scores you some major points." Molly lifts the champagne flute again, bringing it slowly to her lips as she waits for the smile to abate so that she can have another drink.

MORIANI HOME

"This gin is awful," Ryan says, not even bothering to look up from the bar, as he spies Nick entering the room out of the corner of his eye.

He hears the sigh of annoyance that Nick only makes a partial effort to conceal. "What's wrong with it?"

"I don't like it." Nevertheless, Ryan picks up his drink and takes a sip, taking care to make a face just to show that this gin isn't working for him. "We should keep getting the kind that we used to get."

"Fine." Nick's surprising lack of resistance tells Ryan that he must have something else on his mind. Sure enough, the bare minimum of necessary silence passes before Nick redirects the conversation. "I need to discuss a few issues with you -- business issues, that is."

He must see Ryan glancing out into the hall, because he hastens to add, "Katherine is out at some sort of dinner."

"Ah." Ryan takes his drink and settles into one of the armchairs. Maybe if he ignores Nick, he won't have to get involved in this.

No such luck. Nick busies himself at the bar as he begins, "I have a meeting with--"

"I don't want to hear about it."

"What?"

"I don't want to hear about it," Ryan repeats, a little firmer this time. "I don't want to be a part of this anymore."

"Oh, not this again."

"This'? It's a legitimate decision. I'm not interested in--"

"I don't care what you're interested in!" Nick sets his glass down roughly, and the ice cubes that he's just placed in it clatter together. "You are not going to back down on your obligations because Claire Robbins, paragon of virtue that she is, doesn't approve."

The swiftness with which Nick cuts to the core of the issue startles Ryan into quiet, and Nick rages on, his fury escalating with each word.

"You've proven that you're not the monster that she thought you were. Stan raped her, you didn't. That's out in the open now. And somehow you've gotten her to trust you again. Isn't that enough, Ryan? When is this going to end?"

"This is about more than proving she can trust me," Ryan snaps back.

"Nonsense. I'm surprised that any son of mine would be so oblivious. This is all about validation -- we both know that. And now that you've shown that you aren't Stan Lincoln Junior, it's time to get back to real life."

"What do you think I'm doing, playing a game? This *is* my real life. It's a hell of a lot more real than being your puppet for the rest of my life!"

"Oh, please, Ryan." Distaste sweeps over Nick's face and he returns to fixing a drink. "You wanted to be involved in my business from the moment you found out about it."

"Maybe when I was eighteen! It seemed a hell of a lot cooler than slaving away at some meaningless desk job for forty years." Ryan tosses back a sharp swig of his drink. "Thank God you made me go to college, though. At least that gives me some options to fall back on now."

A cruel little laugh escapes from Nick's throat. "Options? Such as?"

"I have a degree in business! That should be of some help in finding a job, I'd think."

"And I'm sure corporations will be scrambling to hire a man in his mid-thirties who hasn't held an official job since he worked in a hardware store when he was sixteen."

"I have experience," Ryan says, though suddenly it feels as though he's struggling to stay above water. "I've served on the boards of how many companies?"

"Big whoop. You can afford to play in the stock market." Nick takes a first, careful sip of his drink. "I'm telling you, Ryan, becoming Mr. Corporate America isn't going to be as easy as you think."

Ryan slams his glass down on the coffee table and springs to his feet. "I don't care how easy it's going to be! I want to make something of myself, for God's sake. I'm tired of running around like your lackey. It's pathetic."

Nick just stands there, his mustache on the edge of his glass, silently taunting his son.

"There's no use trying to explain this to you," Ryan says, dismissing Nick with a wave of the hand and beating a hasty retreat from the room.

He'll prove Nick wrong. He'll prove them all wrong -- Nick, Stan, Brent Taylor, even Claire. He almost lost Claire last night, but he's not going to let that happen. He's going to be the kind of man she needs.

His own man, for the first time ever, he resolves as he storms up the stairs.

CHASE HOME

"Try some of the asparagus, dear," Helen says, holding up the dish for Don.

He takes some -- though he barely reacts to it, good or bad -- and returns to his nearly mechanical eating. He's been sleepwalking through the entire day, at least for the brief periods that she's seen him; most of his time today has been spent in his studio.

"Thanks for cooking tonight," he says.

"It was my pleasure. Besides ... I felt like we needed something to make this day feel a little more normal."

"I appreciate it. I'm still feeling sort of dazed."

"I can tell." She takes a bite of the pasta and chicken dish that she prepared. "How are you feeling about this whole situation? I didn't want to bother you while you were painting, but I figured you might want to talk about it."

He sets down his fork. "To tell the truth, I didn't even get any painting done. I was hoping I might be able to direct some of what I'm feeling about Sally onto the canvas, but ... nothing seemed to fit."

"You can't force something like that."

"No." She watches him pick up his fork, then drop it again. It clanks loudly against the plate, but Don doesn't seem to notice. "I didn't even know what I was trying to say."

Helen is used to this pattern: When Don wants to open up about something, he leads the way down a scraggly path, and she has to supply the proper amount of prodding to keep him moving. "Well, what are you thinking?"

"I'm stunned," he says, staring off at some spot on the wall behind her. "I'm stunned that Sally's life is over. Someone I was married to--God, at one point I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life with her, for some ridiculous reason--gone, just like that."

"It's made me very aware of the fact that we're not getting any younger," Helen says.

"Absolutely. It was different when it was my parents ... *they* were the ones getting old. Having someone our age die -- it's a completely different thing."

"I know." Helen eats some more of her dinner as she thinks. "It makes me a little nervous."

"It makes me very nervous! But also ... very thankful."

Helen isn't sure what to make of that, so she waits for Don to explain further.

"I think about Sally," he says, "and I think about how she never found what she was looking for. She was never really happy. Even at the end, she was struggling to make something wonderful of a terrible situation. It makes me so grateful that I somehow wound up with the life I have."

"Me, too."

Don reaches out a hand and rests it atop one of Helen's. "God forbid anything happens to one of us ... at least we can know that we've had a wonderful life together and we have a wonderful daughter to show for it."

"It's so sad -- for her and for Alex, I guess."

"We need to keep an eye on him," Don says, squeezing her hands beneath his. "He has to live with Sally's legacy, and that's not going to be easy."

"He's going to need a lot of support," Helen says, recalling how unreachable Alex seemed when he delivered the news this morning.

Don nods. "I've tried to be there for him whenever he's needed it since he and Sally showed up in King's Bay. But now, more than ever, we need to be the family that he doesn't have."

JASON FISHER & ALEX MARSHALL'S APARTMENT

The smell of the pizza has been enticing Courtney for the entire car ride, and now that she's making the ascent up to Alex's apartment, she's about ready to tear the box open. She's put off eating for one reason or another -- first the news about Sally, then a promise to Alex that she'd come over and eat with him -- for most of the day, and now she's starving.

Something flutters in her stomach as she knocks on the door. She's not sure what to expect from Alex now. Only a few hours have really passed since Alex came over and broke the news of his mother's death, but that's a lot of time to spend thinking about something so earth-shattering.

But when the door opens, her worries about Alex fall away -- because she's face-to-face with Jason.

"Hey," he says, as a thick ooze that prevents either of them from moving or thinking with any ease at all settles over them.

"Hey. Is Alex here?"

"He just got out of the shower, I think." Nothing happens for a moment, and Courtney knows that Jason must be doing exactly what she's doing: trying to figure out what kind of encounter this is going to be.

She doesn't have the energy to argue with him, though, especially not when Alex is dealing with something so serious. But she's not sure what to say to pass the time until Alex emerges, either.

"Here, come inside," Jason says. She does, but she stands there awkwardly, her coat still on and the pizza still in her hands.

"How's he doing?" she asks finally.

"I'm not sure. He, uh ... he's been in his room for most of the day, and then I went to see my parents for a while. We haven't gotten to talk much."

"He came to tell my parents and me this morning and he was a total mess. I guess that's what you'd expect, but still ..." She decides that it's foolish to keep standing there like

some uninvited guest, so she goes to the dining area and puts the pizza on the table.

Jason plunges his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. "How's your dad taking it?"

"He's okay, I guess. He's been in his studio most of the day, painting, I guess. It's not like he and Sally were close, but it's probably still weird for him."

"Yeah, I bet."

The conversation suddenly hits a brick wall, and Courtney has no idea how to jump-start it. She casts a desperate glance at the hallway, hoping that Alex will arrive any moment now, and then busies herself by removing her coat and hanging it on the back of a chair.

"Are you gonna keep him company tonight?" Jason asks.

"Yeah ... I figured I'd bring over some food to make sure he eats something, and then I'll just hang out so that he's not alone. That's probably the last thing he needs right now."

"I know. But good luck -- when he gets withdrawn like this, it can be really, really hard to pull him out of it."

"Yeah." For some reason, her mind goes leaping back to nearly two years ago, when Tim died; as close as she and Jason were then, it took her weeks to get him to open up about losing his brother.

Thankfully, before she has to come up with anything else to say, Alex appears in the living room, pulling a sweatshirt over his head.

"Hey," he says, nodding at Courtney.

"Look what I brought," she says, gesturing toward the pizza.

"Thanks."

"Hey, I, uh, I think I'm gonna out for a little bit," Jason says, gathering his jacket off the couch and his keys from the coffee table. "I'll see you guys later."

"Later," Alex says.

Courtney doesn't say anything, but she and Jason make eye contact right before he slips out the door.

She recognizes the silent look of thanks that he gives her.

KING'S BAY PARK

"It's finally starting to feel like the holidays to me," Molly says, pulling her coat a little tighter against her body. Her gaze roams the tops of the evergreen trees and the navy sky as she walks alongside Eric, their feet kicking up the layer of unraked leaves that lines the paved trail.

"That doesn't usually happen for me until Christmas Eve or so," Eric says with a little chuckle. Molly isn't sure whether it's supposed to sound sarcastic or bitter.

She clasps her gloved hands together. "I was one of those kids who started with the Christmas music at 7 a.m. on the day after Thanksgiving. And I did all my Christmas shopping the first week of December."

"You were one of *those* kids, huh?"

"Yeah, I was probably pretty obnoxious about it," she laughs. "But I loved the holidays. I still do, I guess. They just feel different lately."

"I used to be a lot more enthusiastic about them," Eric says. "My second year of law school, though, I was so busy that I didn't fly back to Minnesota for Thanksgiving. Sometime while I was sitting in a cramped apartment eating a rather unimpressive dinner with two of my friends from school, I realized that there isn't anything inherently magical about the holidays."

"That's kind of a depressing thought!"

"Well ... I suppose so. But it's true, isn't it? Thanksgiving and Christmas, in and of themselves, aren't particularly exciting. It's what we make of them -- the gigantic meals, the gifts, the relatives coming out of the woodworks -- that makes them so special."

"I guess that is true." She stops walking as she considers that. "You're right. I guess these last couple of years have made the holidays feel so different. My brother ... Tim ... he died on New Year's two years ago."

"So I've heard," Eric says solemnly. "I suppose that would put a new twist on the holidays."

"My parents used to have an enormous party every New Year's Eve, at the top of the hotel downtown. But last year we just stayed at home and had a quiet night. Having a huge celebration doesn't seem so appropriate anymore."

They resume walking, scattering and crumbling the crunchy leaves beneath their feet. Molly draws a deep breath; the night's air is crisp and clean, and suddenly she realizes that her body is more relaxed than it has been in months.

"It's so nice to be out having a normal evening," she says with great relief.

"Well, I'm glad this hasn't been a colossal disaster," he replies, peppering the statement with a laugh.

"Not at all. You don't have any hidden psychoses, do you?"

"I don't think so ..."

"Well, you're not apt to begin, say, stalking me, are you?" She has to say it in a humorous way, even though the thought still makes her squirm, years later.

"Not that I'm aware of, no." Now he is the one who stops walking. "Is there a story behind this?"

She jams her hands into the pockets of her coat. "Unfortunately, yes." She launches into the story of Craig in as short a form as she can manage, not particularly eager to relive too much of it or to frighten Eric.

"I think you're safe," he says. "I don't foresee becoming psychotic."

"Good enough for me. I'm sorry to drag you down with that ... It's important to me, though."

"I understand. No need to apologize." He pauses long enough to take a deep breath, one that Molly sees emerge and float out into the night. "I am getting the impression, though, that you're not particularly confident about men in general. Is it all because of that?"

She feels her eyebrows lift in tandem as she answers, "A lot of it, yeah. And I followed that with another fairly disastrous experience -- with Diane's former sidekick, as a matter of fact."

"Brian?"

"Yeah! Wow, you're more in the loop than I thought."

"Let's just say I'm not particularly fond of him, from what I've seen."

"Nor am I," she says ruefully, remembering that day she walked into Vision and

overheard Brian and Diane discussing their efforts to split up Tim and Claire. It was like a slap in the face, hearing him revealed as such a creep after months of convincing herself that it wasn't going to turn out badly.

"Well, let's just say I've purged myself of Diane, at least in the personal sense. You don't need to have any worries about my involvement with her."

"Good. That woman has given my family enough grief to last years and years. She doesn't need to add anymore."

"Well, I promise ..." He looks her directly in the eyes. "... that I don't have any baggage you need to be concerned about."

"Glad to hear it." She pushes the words out quickly, sensing what is about to happen. As if in slow-motion, his face grows nearer and nearer to hers.

The moment seems so simple, so uncomplicated, that she can hardly believe it. It's not like it was with Craig, or with Brian, or like it's ever been with Brent.

Brent. A picture of his face flickers in her mind, and she realizes that it's been drifting in and out the entire evening.

That's what this is all about. She's had a wonderful time with Eric, but she's had a wonderful time because it's taken her mind off Brent. For a few hours, she hasn't had to worry about any of that.

She hasn't had to worry about him having been married to her sister, or the way Sarah would react if they crossed that line, or how even today when she was trying to get away from Brent, the only thing she really wanted was to pull him close to her.

Or the way that she spends hours agonizing over the fact that she knows exactly what she wants in life but can't have it.

Eric's lips are mere millimeters away from hers when it hits her.

"Wait," she says, surprised at the sound of her own voice. Is she really throwing away something so pleasant, so uncomplicated, for all of that?

Absolutely.

"I can't do this." She watches him begin to back away uncertainly, no doubt trying to ascertain what caused this sudden shift in moods.

"I'm sorry," she says, and the words begin to fly out of her mouth. "I've really

appreciated tonight, Eric. I've had a terrific time, and you've been such a gentleman, and--there's something I have to go take care of. I'm sorry."

She lingers for only a second, unable to believe that she's doing this, breaking away from a successful man who wants to be with her -- leaving him in the park, for God's sakes! -- to dive headfirst into something so complicated and ugly.

But as she darts back along the trail, trying to figure out the best place to go grab a cab, she realizes that she wouldn't have it any other way. She can't.

END OF EPISODE #277

What do you think of Molly and Eric's date and the abrupt ending? Did that scene between Jason and Courtney surprise you? Come share your thoughts at the Footprints Forum!

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