

"Footprints" Episode #293

Previously ...

- Ryan accompanied Nick to a meeting of the investors for Camille's new company and ran into Molly there. Nick was intrigued to learn of the connection.
- After spotting Jason and Lauren having lunch together, Courtney reprimanded them and then admitted to Dylan that she saw them kissing after the party.
- Bill observed the scene with Courtney and asked Jason and Lauren what was going on, but they both clammed up.
- Paula told Sarah that she knows she has to deal with the truth about Ryan -- soon.

ALEX MARSHALL & JASON FISHER'S APARTMENT

Alex Marshall sits in his bedroom, his fingers pecking away at the keyboard of his laptop computer. He's in the midst of a rare spurt of fluid creativity, inspired, oddly enough, by preparing his dinner. He'd wanted to leave everything there and rush to the computer to write at that very moment, but he couldn't bear to leave the kitchen such a mess, so he finished cooking and then brought his food with him to the bedroom.

Now the plate of stir-fried chicken and vegetables rests a few inches away from him on the desk, nearly forgotten. A few bites into the meal, he realized how much the eating was impeding his writing -- and though choosing food over the agonizing writing process is usually a much easier choice, this time his creative flow was great enough to overturn standard procedure.

He's still typing away furiously when the doorbell rings. He pauses but doesn't rise from his chair. Maybe he should just ignore it. But it could be important ...

Seconds later, as part of him still tries to figure out why he even got out of the chair, he stands at the front door.

"Hey, you!" Dylan Carrington says excitedly as soon as Alex opens the door.

"Hey," Alex says. He pastes a smile on his face in an effort to hide his disappointment. It's not that he doesn't want to see Dylan, but he was actually getting work done, and chances are that's about to be derailed.

Dylan comes inside the apartment, throws an arm around Alex, and plants a quick kiss on Alex's lips. "So how has your day been?"

"Good," Alex responds with a nod. "I actually, uh, managed to find some random

inspiration to write, so I got onto a little bit of a productive streak."

"That's great!" Dylan says, smiling enthusiastically, as Alex realizes that the hint he was attempting to drop has failed miserably.

"How was yours?" Alex asks, trying to mask what has evolved into slight annoyance.

"Interesting, actually. I had quite the little adventure this afternoon."

"What happened?"

"Let's sit down and I'll tell you about it." Dylan leads Alex over to the couch, and they sit down together, Dylan's arm moving from Alex's shoulder to his back.

"So, Courtney and I decided to go out for lunch after practice," Dylan says. "Except she was in a horrible mood -- like, really terrible -- and she wouldn't tell me why. But when we get to the restaurant -- the one Jason's dad owns -- before we even sit down, we see Jason and Lauren eating together."

A wave of nervousness floods Alex's system. He has a bad feeling about where this is going.

"Courtney absolutely flipped," Dylan continues. "She went up to them and was like, 'You two have some nerve!' and all of that, and then she grabbed me and we left before they even really got to say anything."

"That's all that happened?" Alex feels a temporary sense of relief setting in.

Dylan quickly eradicates it. "Not even close. So get this: After the party at Lauren's house, Courtney realized she had forgotten her purse, so she had that Whitney girl take her back to get it ..."

Oh God, Alex thinks. He can see where this is going. And after how insistent he was, and how much Jason agreed, that they needed to be careful about the Courtney part of this whole scrambled equation ...

"... and she saw Jason and Lauren in the backyard, kissing. They didn't know she'd seen them, of course, but -- God! It's quite the little soap opera, huh?"

"Yeah, really." Alex has to suppress a gulp, but his throat is suddenly very dry. He has the urge to grab the phone and call Jason's cell to tell him about this, but he knows he can't do it right now.

"I really can't believe they would do that," Dylan says. "I mean--God, Lauren and

Courtney are best friends. You would think Lauren would at least have enough respect not to get with Jason!"

Alex sits up, moving away from Dylan's hold instinctively. "Why shouldn't she? It's not like she's going after him to be malicious or to get back at Courtney or anything like that."

"Still, it's her best friend's ex. And not just any ex -- that was a major relationship, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, but ... Courtney was the one who dumped Jason. She's made it totally clear that she wants nothing to do with him. Why should he and Lauren have to keep themselves from going with this just because of Courtney?"

The intensity of Dylan's reaction surprises Alex. "Because!"

"Because what? They're all adults. They can do whatever they want--"

"Still! It's pretty tacky, don't you think?" Dylan narrows his gaze at Alex. "Why are you so determined to stick up for them, anyway?"

FISHER HOME

When she hears the key in the front door, Paula Fisher is standing by the stove, stirring a pot of spaghetti sauce. She hadn't planned on starting to cook dinner until Bill arrived home, but the distraction, however minimal, has proven necessary.

"That smells good," Bill says as he enters the kitchen.

"It should be ready in a few minutes. There's some garlic bread in the oven, too." Paula stops stirring the sauce and moves mechanically over to the salad bowl, which is filled with lettuce but still needs other additions. She can't bring herself to look at Bill.

"How was your day?" he asks. She feels him coming up behind her, and her body tenses.

"It was all right. I spent a few hours out in the garden, and Sarah came by for a while." Her hand trembles as she picks up the knife and begins to slice the tomatoes.

"Where are Claire and Travis?"

"One of Travis's friends is having a birthday party tomorrow, so they ran to the store to get a present. They should be back soon."

The sounds of her unsteady tomato-chopping fill the silence, and Paula wonders if Bill is as aware of the tension in the air as she is. How could he be? But how could he miss it, either?

"We had a little bit of excitement at the restaurant today," Bill says.

"What happened?"

"Jason and Lauren stopped in for lunch, and so did Courtney, separately. I was coming out of the kitchen and ..."

She hears Bill's voice in the background, but the static in her head keeps threatening to overwhelm the story. She feels a flare of concern for Jason, but it's muted, at least for the moment. She simply cannot find the strength to move her mind off the track it's been on since this afternoon.

She sets down the knife, leaving the slices of tomato in a pool of juice on the cutting board. The mess doesn't even bother her.

"Bill," she says, bringing her head up from the food for the first time since he walked in. "I can't do this anymore."

His face immediately fills with worry, and she feels all the worse for springing this on him. "Can't do what?" he asks, obviously confused.

She takes a deep breath, then spits it out: "There's something you need to know -- right now."

RYAN MORIANI'S LOFT

Ryan Moriani leaps up from his knees at the sound of the knock on the door, leaving the half-empty cardboard box in the middle of the living room floor. His hand goes to the doorknob, but before he turns it, he takes a glance behind him at the half-arranged loft. Looks good so far.

"Hey!" he exclaims at the sight of Claire and Travis in the open door.

"Hey," Claire says. She's already looking past him at the loft, so he steps aside to let her in. Travis trails in behind her, looking a little confused.

"How you doing, buddy?" Ryan asks him.

Travis shrugs. "Okay."

"Just okay?"

Another shrug. Travis's face scrunches up as he considers the question. "I get to go to the Enchanted Village tomorrow."

"Oh yeah? What for?"

"My friend Steven is having his birthday there."

"Cool! Are you excited?"

Travis nods his head vigorously.

"This is looking really good," Claire says. She's in the middle of the living area now. "I didn't think you'd be so organized yet."

"I'd rather just have a rough couple of days and get all moved in than drag it out for weeks." Ryan strolls across the wood floor, reminding himself that he needs to get an area rug for the open space near the entry. When he's close enough to Claire, he leans in and asks, "What's the Enchanted Village?"

"It's an amusement park," she says, laughing a little.

"Ah. Hey, Travis! You want something to eat?"

The little boy shrugs once again. "Sure."

"Well, I don't have much," Ryan says, moving toward the kitchen, "but I think I do have some ... Oreos."

"I like Oreos," Travis says, already following Ryan's path.

Ryan pulls the box out of the cupboard and then peeks his head out of the kitchen. "What do you say, Mom? Can we have a couple of Oreos?"

He sees the resistance in Claire's expression, but he puts on a pathetic expression and looks to Travis, who takes his cue and does the same.

Claire grins as she waves her hand. "Yeah, fine. Just take off those ridiculous faces."

Ryan grabs an Oreo, hands three to Travis, and heads back into the living area. "Hey, guess who I ran into today."

"Who?" Claire asks.

"Molly. I went to an investors' meeting for a new company that my father convinced me to invest in, and she was there. Turns out she's working there as one of the designers."

"Weird! Small world, I guess."

He nods, then slides up behind Claire and wraps his arms around her waist. He breathes deeply as he surveys the loft again.

"I'm glad you have your own place," she says. "It was pretty pathetic when I was living with my in-laws and you were living with your father, huh?"

"It's not pathetic for you to be living there. You need to be around people. Besides, staying in that apartment after everything that happened there would've been ridiculous."

"Yeah, you're right." She leans back into him, and he breathes in the scent of her hair.

"So you like it, huh?"

"Very much, yeah. You must be so excited."

"I am. It's ... really, really nice to have a place of my own. It's something I should've done a long time ago."

Even as he says it, he feels as if he's said too much. He hasn't, of course; Claire notices nothing, and there's no reason that she should. But he's made his break from Nick, and -- even though he can't say anything about it to Claire -- that's the best part of the whole thing.

ALEX MARSHALL & JASON FISHER'S APARTMENT

"I'm not 'determined to stick up for them,'" Alex says, his prior annoyance growing exponentially. "It's just--logical."

Dylan leans against the back of the couch, an unreadable mask on his face as he studies Alex.

Alex can't take that look. "What?"

"I get it," Dylan says, slowly, methodically.

"Get what?"

"This is, like, some sort of 'Get Out of Jail Free' card for you. Because you still feel guilty about the whole mess with Lauren and Jason."

"That doesn't make sense," Alex says.

"No, it totally does. 'Cause you know he probably would be good for Lauren, and if she's willing to trash her friendship with Courtney for him, then it means she has to be really into him ... which means she's over you, which means you can stop feeling so guilty about what happened with you and her."

Alex shakes his head emphatically. "No way--"

"That, or ..." A sly smile crosses Dylan's mouth. "You're still hung up on Jason, so maybe you want him to go ahead and get together with *someone* so that you have more of a reason to force yourself not to like him."

"That's not it!"

"I dunno. He is pretty damn cute." Dylan picks up one of the pillows from the couch and tosses it at Alex.

Alex lets it fall to the floor. "It's not either of those things, Dylan. I just don't think Courtney has any place getting upset for them if they've wound up wanting to be together."

"Mm-hmm."

The dismissiveness of Dylan's tone pushes Alex over the edge. He stands up, but before he can move, Dylan grabs his wrist.

"Hang on," Dylan says, suddenly sounding much sweeter, much less contemptuous.

Alex jerks his wrist out of Dylan's grip.

"Alex. Come on. We can agree to disagree, can't we?"

"We could," Alex says, "if you didn't make it sound like I had some hidden agenda."

"All right, I'm sorry. I really am. Obviously we don't feel the same way about this whole situation. We can leave it at that, can't we?"

A moment later, Alex is nodding slowly. "I guess so."

"Good," Dylan says. "Besides, I came over here to do something much more interesting than argue ..."

He pulls Alex back down onto the couch.

FISHER HOME

"What is it?" Bill asks again. Paula can tell by his face that he's expecting the worst, but ... a different kind of it. The wrong kind. He looks concerned, terribly concerned.

She just starts shaking her head. "I--I wanted to tell you for so long. I wanted you to know from the beginning. But I knew I couldn't ..."

"You couldn't what?"

He moves closer to her, reaching out a hand to touch her. She backs off. She doesn't want to feel his touch right now, not until this is out in the open. It would make it far too easy to stop.

"I did something," she says, "something I knew you wouldn't like. I knew you'd never let me do it if I told you -- I thought that maybe if I took care of it first, then you'd be okay with it. It would be all sorted out, and there'd be nothing for you to worry about."

"Paula, what are you talking about?" he asks immediately. But she can see the change in his reaction. The lines in his face are hardening, changing right along with his mood. With his feelings toward her, even.

Flashes of the time this all came out -- when she told the kids about her other son, nearly three years ago now -- go racing through her head. For so long, it's seemed like a horrible, distant memory, with the way they've been able to get back to normal. But now, somehow, it's starting to feel like it was just yesterday again. Like it's a living, breathing creature in the room with them, towering over them, threatening to crush them.

"I needed to do it," she says. Her voice breaks, and she realizes how detached from it she feels. "You have to understand that. I needed to know. I had no idea it would turn out to be such a mess--"

"What did you do? Paula--"

"I looked for him."

For a split second, Bill is completely quiet. He's absorbing the statement, trying to make sense of it.

And then it clicks. She can see the moment that the pieces move together in his head.

"I thought we agreed that you wouldn't," he says, the kind of confident denial that sounds as if it expects to negate her announcement.

"I couldn't go the rest of my life without knowing. He's my son, Bill. After we lost Tim--"

"You should have had more respect for him than that! You should have had more respect for this family!"

"It's not that I was trying to replace him. I know I never could. We never could." She gasps for breath. "But it hit me so hard, that I had another son out there. Another son who could be living, who could be dead, who could have a family, who could need my help. I had to know."

Bill goes quiet again. Paula watches him carefully, waiting for the explosion. She can see it preparing itself as the tension bubbles just below the surface -- the calm before the storm.

When it comes, it's quieter than she expected, but it cuts deeper. He sounds wounded, betrayed: "I can't believe you would do this!"

The guilt comes back to her in full force. Greater than ever, maybe. She should have just left this alone.

She couldn't have left this alone.

Bill aims one more disbelieving, disgusted look at her and hightails it out of the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" she calls out, following his path.

"Why should I tell you?" he fires back.

The front door opens roughly and then closes even more violently, and she is left standing in the dining room, amidst the ashes of the times they've faced this before. It's the same mess, the same betrayal, making its hideous presence known yet again. The thing buried below the solid foundation, the thing that couldn't harm that foundation unless someone unearthed it.

But she went and dug it up, and she had no idea of the mess that would find down there. But she got what she wanted -- she found him. And when Bill finds out how twisted it all

is ...

Paula chokes down another gasp, blocking the tears, because she knows that Claire might walk in the door any minute, and she doesn't even want to try to explain.

END OF EPISODE #293

What did you think of Bill's reaction? Should Paula have just kept quiet about her search? What did the disagreement between Alex and Dylan show you? Join us in the Footprints Forum to voice your thoughts!

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