

"Footprints"

Episode #184

[Several Days After #183]

[Previously ...](#)

**Alex struggled to explain himself to Courtney, Lauren, and Jason, and remained confused about his own feelings.*

**Lauren told Alex that she is okay being simply friends with him.*

**Jason urged Alex to get in touch with his real feelings and stop trying to please others.*

**Matt and Sarah attempted to figure out how life will work now that they know they share a child.*

MARSHALL APARTMENT

"Can you hand me that angel?"

With his eyes, Alex scours the tabletop, crowded with the ornaments and decorations and knickknacks that have been temporarily released from cardboard boxes for the holiday season. Sally points, directing him to a small gold angel ornament. He picks it up and hands it to her, and within a moment it is hanging on a branch of the Christmas tree.

"Looking good," Alex says, stepping back and taking in the full picture of the tree. And it does look good -- better than he can remember it looking in some years.

"I'll agree with that." Sally moves back from the tree as well. "I don't think I've had this much fun decorating for Christmas in a long time, either."

"Me neither." There is a pause before Alex continues. "Maybe it has to do with being settled here, or something. 'Cause we're not moving in or really adjusting to a new place anymore."

Sally considers this quietly. Alex is quick to add, "I don't know if that makes any sense. I'm just feeling all philosophical today."

"It does make sense. I feel it too, now that you mention it." She sighs and her shoulders fall. "That's really kind of pathetic, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"That our holidays have always been such a mess."

"They haven't *always*--"

"They have," Sally says. "You were just too young to realize it for a while. It was Christmas and you got presents, and that was all that mattered. But even then ... It wasn't enough. It's my fault -- I didn't do enough. I was always too caught up in my own things to make the holidays what they should have been for you."

"Mom ..."

"It's true, Alex."

He wants to protest -- he feels like he should -- but he can't do it. He offers her a sympathetic look instead.

"Even your first Christmas was crazy," she continues. "Don had left me not long before, and I was so bent out of shape that I didn't even try to make it good for you. I just stayed here, moping, pretending it wasn't Christmas so I wouldn't have to feel any more awful than I already did. Did you know that we didn't even have a tree that year? Your first Christmas, and I couldn't even make the effort."

Alex is silent.

"And the worst part is that it wasn't an isolated incident. That's how I raised you. I really did an awful job."

"We don't need to get into this now, Mom."

"Probably not. But it's in character for me to ruin a good time, right?" She grins bitterly. "This is stuff I've wanted to say to you for a long time, Alex. It's taken me so long to get to the point where I can say it out loud."

"I just want you to know how sorry I am," she says, reaching up a hand to touch his cheek. "I'm sorry that I messed up so badly in raising you. I'm sorry you have to be this-- this *way* because of me."

Messed up so badly? Sorry you have to be this way? Alex realizes that his heart is now pounding at what feels like a million beats per minute. What is she saying?

CHASE HOME

"And so I'm offering this simple phrase, for kids from one to ninety-twoooo, though it's been said, many times, many ways, merry Christmas ... to yooooou ..."

"Would ya shut up?" Courtney says, tossing a piece of cookie dough at Lauren. It hits her squarely in the cheek and Lauren indeed stops singing along to the Christmas music. She turns sharply to Courtney and does her best to look offended as she picks up the piece of dough. And then, without warning, she tosses it right back at Courtney.

"I'll sing however badly I want, thank you very much," Lauren smirks. "It helps me get in the Christmas spirit."

Courtney returns to flattening the dough with a rolling pin. "Less goofing, more cookie-making. We're working on a deadline here."

"What deadline?"

"My deadline."

Lauren crinkles her brow in confusion.

"I have decided," Courtney announces, raising her index finger, "that we need to be eating these things ASAP, which means we've gotta get 'em made first."

"Ah." Lauren returns to kneading the dough that she had set down on the counter when the song overtook her before. "So are we just gonna pig out on all these cookies by ourselves?"

"Nah. We'll leave some for my parents, and we can give some to the guys ... but yeah, I guess we will get to pig out."

"Works for me."

The conversation comes to a natural lull, but in that short space Lauren can feel the tone changing. She can tell what Courtney is going to do before she does it -- namely, change the subject entirely.

"So you never told me what happened with Alex," Courtney says. "You said you were meeting him and that was it."

"He basically just told me what he told you -- that he needs support right now and he wants all of us as friends." Lauren's voice is considerably more somber now, and Courtney can easily read between the lines.

"So I gather the part where you talked about your relationship didn't go too well?"

"It's not that it went badly ... He basically said he's not sure how he feels and he needs

to step back from it for a while."

"I'm sorry," Courtney says after a pause.

Lauren shrugs. "It happens. Not every single relationship works out. Oh well. I'm lucky to still have him as a friend, right?"

"Absolutely," Courtney nods. "How do you feel about that?"

"Okay, I guess ..." Which, Courtney can tell, means 'not very happy.'

"I'm really sorry," Courtney says. "I know it hurts to be on the receiving end of something like this--"

"It's more than that. I feel stupid, 'cause I let myself get so attached to him -- to the idea of us being together -- even though it wasn't going that well all along. I kept thinking something was happening or was about to happen even though it never did. It's really hard to let go of all that, you know?"

"Yeah. And you have every right to take some time to get over it. No one expects you to be okay with the whole thing overnight."

Another moment of silence, this one longer and more reflective, comes upon them. The girls sit with their separate thoughts, considering each other and Alex and the entire situation. Lauren finally breaks it. "So what do you think is going on with him?"

"Huh?"

"This whole thing about how he needs support from friends and everything. It sounds like there's something going on that we don't know about, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," Courtney agrees. "I wish we could figure it out. Maybe we could help him, if we had some idea what was going on in his head."

Newly arrived, Jason stands in the entrance to the kitchen, still unseen by the girls, turning over in his head all his past encounters with Alex. *Maybe we could help him ...*

MATT GRAY'S APARTMENT

Sarah can't help looking at the building, at this hallway, a little differently. Now it's not just a part of town that's less upscale than the parts to which she is accustomed. It's a

place where part of her daughter's childhood will be spent, a place that may be the backdrop and possibly more for Victoria's memories of her youth.

Honestly, she isn't sure that she likes it. Actually, she knows she doesn't like it -- it's more that she is unsure whether she is comfortable with it. It's not that Matt lives in a seedy area or a dumpy building, but Sarah always assumed that her children's upbringing would take place in whatever setting Sarah prepared for them. And now Victoria will be spending time in a place that's ... well, a little below Sarah. She feels awful saying it -- snobby, ridiculous -- but knows it is also a genuine feeling.

With all this swirling in her head, she knocks on the door. It takes only a second for the footsteps from within to become audible. Shortly the door is opened, and Sarah is greeted by a sight that gives her momentary pause -- Matt in a tightly fitting white tanktop.

She pushes the thought aside and smiles. "Hey. You busy?"

"Not at all. Come on in," he says, stepping aside. Sarah enters the apartment and can't help seeing it for what it is -- a bachelor's pad. It just doesn't have the finished look of a family home.

But she doesn't have much time to consider that. "What's with the package?" Matt asks.

Sarah glances down at her hands, almost surprised to see the wrapped package she is carrying. She shakes her head, as if clearing it, and smiles again. "I guess this would be why I'm here."

"That for anyone in particular?" he asks, his words hardened by the rough New York accent and yet softened by the distinctly playful tone.

"Enh," she answers, shrugging. "Who here would I have a present for?"

Matt responds with another shrug, and Sarah looks around dumbly for a moment before Matt reaches out. "Just give me the damn thing," he says with a grin.

"Here you go," she says. "Merry Christmas."

"You didn't have to get me anything."

"Sure I did. I think we're way beyond the gifts-optional stage, don't you think?"

He agrees with a nod.

"Go on, open it," she urges.

"If you insist." He undoes the wrapping paper, finding it to be a strangely unfamiliar experience. It doesn't seem like that long since he opened a gift, but as he runs the idea through his mind, he realizes it has indeed been quite a long time.

"Oh, wow," he says as the wrapping falls away and the gift comes into sight. "Thanks ... this is--it's awesome. Thank you."

"I thought you could use one of these," she explains. "For starters, I mean. I'm sure you'll get to build up quite a collection as time goes by."

"I bet I will."

"Besides," Sarah adds, "it's kind of symbolic. I want you to see how much I want you to be a part of Victoria's life, and how much I want her to be a part of yours. You're her father and I want her to be your daughter, no matter what happens with you and me and Brent ..."

Matt can see her starting to get wistful. "Thank you. I really appreciate it. And," he says, setting down the framed photo of baby Victoria on the coffee table, "now it's my turn."

"What do you mean?"

"I've got a little surprise for you."

MARSHALL APARTMENT

"I suppose I'm lucky that you turned out as normal as you did," Sally says. "Lord knows I didn't contribute much to that. But somehow you managed to grow into a wonderful young man."

Alex feels his balance returning. For a minute he thought she was referring to--well, just everything. *Nevermind*, he tells himself as he attempts to refocus.

"Don't blame yourself," he says. As soon as the words are out of his mouth, he regrets them. He didn't want to say that -- he doesn't want to let Sally think that he is okay with the haphazard way in which she raised him -- but he didn't know how else to respond. And now it's been said and he can't take it back.

"I'm so sorry, Alex," Sally continues. "There was so much I never gave you. I didn't give you the attention you should have had ... It was my fault you never had a real male role

model."

Alex feels that awful discomfort resurrect itself in the pit of his stomach yet again.

Sally strokes his arm. "Maybe that's why things have been hard for you sometimes -- socially, I mean. Well, not *maybe* -- I know that's a large part of it. I could tell you had trouble relating to other kids, especially boys, I suppose, and I know that was my fault for not giving you a father or someone to play that part for you. I knew all along that it was my fault ... but I didn't want to accept that. I wanted to blame it on luck and fate and all of that, but I am the one to blame."

Alex just sits in silence, staring into her face, trying not to swallow the lump in his throat too obviously.

She sighs and drops her head. "I'm sorry, I probably brought this up at a terrible time. But I've recognized it for so long and I've always intended to discuss it with you, but ... I suppose I never have because I was avoiding having to confront it. So I'm sorry, Alex, I want you to know that. I'm so sorry I never gave you the chances I should have."

"Forgive me," she says, drawing him into her arms. "Or try as best as you can, please. I know how badly I messed up, and I don't think I could have ever forgiven myself if you had turned out badly ..."

Her sentence drifts off and she pulls Alex closer. He allows her to do it but makes no move of his own; everything she has said has left him feeling numb.

CHASE HOME

"Hey," Jason says, stepping forward. The girls turn, looking quite happy to see him, although he half-expected them to flare up in anger at the sight of him.

"Hello!" Courtney exclaims. She bounds over to him and throws her arms over his shoulders, planting a quick yet passionate kiss on his lips.

"Hey." Lauren offers Jason a smile as she watches the couple greeting each other so easily, so happily.

"How'd you get in?" Courtney asks.

"Your mom was sitting in the front room," Jason says. "She saw my car pull up, I guess, 'cause she had the door open for me before I was even near it."

"Well, I'm glad you dropped by. You can do some taste-testing for us," she tells him. "I think there's a tray ready to come out soon."

"Yep," Lauren confirms, peeking into the oven. "They just need a couple more minutes."

Jason moves over to the counter, littered with cookie cutters and other debris from the baking. He steals a small piece of cookie dough from the bowl, which earns him a swift smack on the hand from Courtney. He just smiles at her.

"Looks like the two of you are in quite the good mood," he says.

"It's Christmas," Lauren says. "Makes me crazy."

Jason just shakes his head, chuckling at her.

"We're doing pretty well," Courtney says. "But right before you came in we were trying to figure something out."

Jason tries not to seem affected by this shift in conversation. "What?"

"Alex. Have you noticed him acting strangely lately?"

The question takes a moment to settle into Jason, and it takes another moment for him to consider it. Finally he shrugs. "I don't know. What do you mean?"

"He's been acting weird with both of us," Courtney explains. "He even ... he broke things off with Lauren."

"He did?" Jason's reaction is instantaneous and intense.

Lauren nods. "Uh huh."

"Did he say why?"

"Something about not being ready for anything like this right now," she says. "He said he really wants my friendship, but that's all, at least for now."

"And he gave me this whole thing about how he needs all of our friendship and support right now," Courtney adds. "Something's up."

"Hmm." Jason puts a hand to his chin but keeps his gaze down on the floor.

"I just wish we could figure out what's going on," Courtney says. "If something's bothering him, I'd like to think he could tell us and let us help him through it."

Flashes of Alex's nearly naked body, so close to his own -- of Alex's hands, roaming his body -- explode in Jason's mind.

"I don't know," he says with another shrug. "If ... if it is anything, he'll tell us in his own time, right? We can't force anything."

"I guess not," Courtney says. "I just hope everything's okay."

There is a moment of silence, almost of reverence, as the grim topic falls by the wayside. "Are those cookies ready yet?" she asks Lauren.

"They should be," Lauren says, again opening the oven. "Let's see."

As the girls move on, Jason finds that he cannot pull himself away from the subject of Alex. He keeps seeing those images, hearing Alex's words, feeling the twisting confusion in his stomach and in his head. He smells the cookies being removed from the oven, waits while they cool, watches the girls decorate them, is even fed one -- but it seems as though no time passes and none of it matters at all. He cannot escape his thoughts, and he cannot put aside the feeling that things are about to take a turn for the worse.

MATT GRAY'S APARTMENT

Sarah can't help grinning. "Oh, really?"

"Yep," Matt says. "Actually, you've got great timing, 'cause I just picked these up a little while ago and I was gonna bring them over today."

"Them?"

"Hang on a sec." He slips out of the room but reappears in a second -- carrying what Sarah can see is a dozen yellow roses.

"Here you go," he says, handing her the roses.

"Thank you."

"I know it's kinda a weird gift ... but I was thinking, I had to get you something with some meaning, you know? And I'm not so good with all that creative stuff, so ... I figured

I couldn't go too wrong this way. 'Cause yellow roses are supposed to be for friendship, right? And I figured I needed to show you that I wanna get ours back on track and all that ..." He trails off, offering her a sheepish smile.

"Thank you," she says again, reaching a hand up to his cheek. "This means a lot."

She looks around the apartment and finally it hits her -- she realizes what's missing: the decorations. There isn't a sign within Matt's apartment that Christmas is a few days away.

"So what are you doing for Christmas?" she asks.

"I dunno. Not much of anything, I guess. It's not really a big deal for me."

"You should come over to my parents' house."

"I don't think that would be such a good idea ..."

"Brent is going out of town," she says. "He's going to San Diego to spend Christmas with his family. And I'd like to have you there -- it would be nice for you to spend the day with Victoria, too."

She can see Matt considering it, but he shakes his head. "No. It would just be too weird. It's too soon after all this stuff. But hey -- would you mind if I stopped by earlier in the day to see Victoria?"

"Not at all. I should be there 'til about three, so come by whenever you want."

"Sounds good. So ... Brent's not even making the effort to stick around for the holiday?"

"It'll be better for us to be apart," she says. "It would just be a miserable day if we were trying to keep everything together, and Molly would be there ... probably not a good idea."

"No, I guess not. You talked much with Brent lately?"

"Hardly at all. I think space is the best thing for us right now. Everything will get sorted out eventually."

"I'm glad you're looking at it that way," Matt says. "You're dealing with this really well."

"As well as I can."

"Well, I'm proud of the way you're handling it. I'm impressed."

"Thanks," she says with a lift of the eyebrows. She checks her watch. "Anyway, I need to get going. I told my mom I'd be by to pick up Victoria in fifteen minutes, so I've got to hit the road."

"Okay. Well, thanks for the picture," he says, leading her to the door and opening it. "I really appreciate it."

"And thank you for the roses." She steps out of the apartment. "Merry Christmas, in case I don't get to see you before then."

"Merry Christmas," he smiles as he closes the door.

Sarah pauses in front of the door for a moment before she turns and begins walking down the hallway. Snippets of the conversation come back to her, over and over. *What just happened in there?* she wonders as she walks. *What's happening?*

She just keeps walking, not even trying to answer the questions. Not now ... not yet ...

END OF EPISODE #184

[Next Episode](#)