

"Footprints"

Episode #198

<The Day After #197>

[Previously ...](#)

**Claire resolved to be strong -- for herself and for the children -- in coping with Tim's death.*

**Courtney finally got Jason to open up about his grief over Tim.*

**Alex and Lauren shared a deep discussion that led to a kiss.*

**Nick was informed that he has 24 hours to pay his debt.*

MARSHALL APARTMENT

Alex knows before he reaches the door that it can't be something good.

The knocking -- pounding -- is too fast, too furious, for this to be a routine visit. Alex's heart races, as if trying to outpace the knocks and the quickness of his steps.

"Coming!" he calls, just steps away from the door. He reaches out over the final distance and grabs the doorknob.

"Jason," he says as he pulls the door open.

"Hi," Jason says. He steps right inside the apartment. Something is different about him -- the usual air of friendliness, of goofiness, is absent.

"What's up?"

"I really need to talk to--we really need to talk."

"Okay ..."

"This has gone on long enough," Jason says after a barely perceptible pause.

Alex's facial features harden in a sort of blank expression, and his body tenses even more. "What?"

"This whole ... thing. With Lauren and you and--and me."

"Where's this coming from? Everything is totally fine--"

"Everything is totally screwed up," Jason interjects. "With the way you freaked out on Lauren a couple months ago, I knew something had to be up. And after you kissed on New Year's Eve, I knew I had to speak up."

"Look, Jason, I know we're all friends and stuff, but this is really between Lauren and me."

"No, it's not. Not with--not after everything that else that's happened. I'm involved in this, too. I'm sorry I let it go this long ... I should have said something before. I wanted to after New Year's ... but then there was the whole thing with my brother--"

Alex can feel the tone of the conversation shift just enough, if only for a second, but he latches onto the change. "Hey, how are you doing with all that? Last time we talked--"

Jason seizes back the conversation. "I'm fine. And that isn't what this is about."

"Well, sorry," Alex says with a hint of sarcasm, "but I was under the impression that we were friends. I care about you, Jason."

Alex notices the flicker of something -- fear, perhaps -- dancing in Jason's eye as silence weighs down over them.

But the flicker is just that -- a flicker. It passes and Jason looks Alex directly in the eyes. "I know you do. And I think that's the problem."

KING'S BAY MALL

"Dammit!"

Courtney looks up with a start and sees Lauren wearing a pained expression.

"What?"

"This is hot!" Lauren cries, slamming the cup down on the small table between them.

"It's coffee!" Courtney fires back with a smirk.

Lauren twists up her face and sticks out her tongue, which has apparently recovered from the scalding, in response.

"So you were saying ..." Courtney prompts her.

"I was saying," Lauren continues, pausing to blow on her coffee through the hole in the lid, "that I think this new outfit will be perfect for my next little outing with Alex."

"Do you have a next outing planned yet?"

"I dunno," Lauren shrugs. "I'm sure we'll be doing something soon. I'll just make it appropriate for the outfit."

Courtney rolls her eyes, obviously amused.

"So what's the deal with you two, exactly?" Courtney asks after she takes a sip of her own coffee.

"You know, I'm still not sure. And I'm about to give up trying to figure it out."

"You *could* talk about it."

"We *could* ... but you know how bad I am with stuff like that."

"Point taken."

Lauren picks up her coffee and hovers over it, debating whether or not to risk another sip. She seems to decide against it and says, "We're definitely more than friends. There's dating, there's kissing, all that stuff. But it's not exclusive ... I don't think."

"You don't think?"

"I'm bad at discussing that stuff, remember? But I think it is progressing. He doesn't seem like he's holding back so much this time around."

"Definitely a good thing." Courtney pauses and a smile spreads over her face. "I am so glad it's going well! If there's any guy I want to see you with, it's Alex."

"Well, hopefully it keeps on working." Lauren wraps both hands around the coffee cup. "You know, if this keeps going the way I think it is, I can see myself and Alex winding up just like you and Jason."

FISHER HOME

"So I get off at 11," Claire says. "I'll get out of there as quickly as I can and come by to

get them."

"No need," Paula assures her. "Just let them spend the night here."

Claire looks frazzled by the simple decision. She dips her head and pauses a moment before answering. "I can come get them, really. It's no big deal--"

"I don't mind at all, Claire. Besides--" Paula kneels down to talk to her grandchildren, who have seated themselves on the living room floor. "--Travis, Samantha, you love to have sleepovers here, don't you?"

Travis nods his head enthusiastically, a broad smile covering his face. Samantha stares off into space.

"Well ..." Claire fidgets. She appears to be agonizing over this decision.

"What's the matter?" Paula asks.

Claire doesn't say anything for several seconds. Finally she draws Paula aside slightly.

"It's just that ..." Claire sighs. "I don't know, I would just rather have them in the apartment with me."

"Why?" But before the word is even done coming out of Paula's mouth, awareness sweeps over her face. "Of course. I'm sorry, I didn't--"

"Don't worry about it. I just ... worry. I know it's not really rational, but still ..."

"I understand, dear. Would you like to stay over tonight, too? You know you're always welcome if you'd rather not be alone."

"Maybe." Claire glances at her watch abruptly and then turns for the door. "I should get going."

"All right." Paula begins leading her to the door, but then pauses in her tracks. "Are you really doing all right, Claire?"

"What? Yeah, of course. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

The dead moment that passes before Claire's response does not go unnoticed by Paula.

"I'm fine," Claire finally repeats, making her way for the door. "You can keep the kids tonight, okay?"

She bustles out the door before Paula can do anything more.

FITCH MANSION

Nick pulls his car into the driveway. He turns the key and it falls into rest. He leans back in the leather seat, his stomach still twisting in agony from his visit to the bank ...

"Are you sure?" Nick asks, intensity pulling his face together tightly.

"Yes," the other man replies emphatically. "As I already told you, your wife never authorized you to have access to these accounts. You'll have to have her come in here and grant you access."

A sigh rumbles from within Nick and passes through his mouth.

"She said she was going to give me access to the accounts," he mumbles, as if he is the one to whom he has to explain this mess. "We discussed it ..."

He reaches for his cellular phone with weak fingers and punches in the number that he has gotten to know far too well.

"It's Moriani," he says when there is an answer on the other end.

"Just the man I've been wanting to talk to," comes the response. "So, do you have the money?"

"I--Not quite." Nick can hear anger ready to explode from the other end of the line, so he quickly adds, "There was a mix-up. I have it, I just haven't been able to access it yet. I can have it in 48 hours--"

"You know what? Enough is enough. We've been waiting on you for how long now? I'm through with this."

Nick knows exactly what that means. "I can have it to you in 48 hours," he repeats.

"You better. Interest and all."

"I promise, I will."

"Good. And in the meantime, don't be surprised if you find a few surprises thrown your way."

Nick's breath catches in his throat. "No," he manages, trying his best not to sound as weak as he feels right now. "I'll get you the money, okay? You don't have to--"

He is interrupted by a click.

Nick turns off his phone and tosses it down on the passenger seat, rolling his head back with a groan. All he wants to do is pass out and not wake up -- but his mind is moving too quickly to allow for even a moment of rest.

How am I going to get out of this? he wonders as he slides out of the car.

FISHER HOME

Bill looks up from the stove, where dinner is underway, when he hears his wife enter the kitchen.

"Was that Claire with the kids?" he asks.

"Yes," Paula says. She opens the refrigerator and removes two juice boxes. Once the refrigerator is closed, she moves to head back to the living room, but freezes.

Bill can tell what this means. "Is something the matter?"

There is a moment of hesitation before Paula answers, "I think so." He urges her on with his eyebrows and she explains, "I'm worried about Claire."

"Why?" Bill moves away from the stove and toward his wife.

"She seems very ... on-edge."

"I'm sure that losing Tim is still eating away at her. Look at us--"

"That's what worries me."

"What?"

"We've been discussing Tim all the time," Paula says. "We've shared memories, we've wondered why this had to happen, we've broken down ... Claire isn't doing any of that, from what I've seen. If she is, she's keeping it to herself."

"That's how Claire is."

"I know. It's not healthy. She's trying too hard to seem as though she's fine, and she's an absolute wreck because of it."

Bill nods understandingly. "Different people grieve in different ways," he says, glancing back at the stove. "The most we can do is be there and encourage her to open up without making her feel alienated."

"I suppose you're right," Paula muses. "I just hope she decides to let all of this out before it's too late."

KING'S BAY MALL

Courtney clasps her hands together and squeals excitedly. "Ooh, I am so happy for you! I'm so glad this is finally coming together!"

"Thanks," Lauren beams. "I was so worried that it wasn't gonna happen."

"I knew it would," Courtney says. "It's too perfect! The way Alex came into our lives -- we needed a fourth Musketeer and he fit the bill so perfectly. We had fun with him right off the bat, and because of my dad, I was close to him right away. And even he and Jason have gotten close."

"It is pretty perfect, huh?"

"Totally." Courtney returns to her coffee for a quick sip. "I did get a little worried with all these stops and starts, but I know Alex has a lot to deal with, with his mom and all."

"We had a talk about that yesterday," Lauren says. "He finally opened up to me about that stuff ... I don't wanna go into details and violate trust or anything, but -- it was nice. It felt good to have him trust me enough to share all of that."

"I'm so glad you're happy!" Courtney enthuses, her smile growing even brighter. "And I know Alex must feel the same way about you."

MARSHALL APARTMENT

"Do you remember that night?" Jason begins pacing now, his steps slow and confined to a tiny area. His gaze is fixed on the carpet. "You must. It's--it's very clear to me, and I was at least as drunk as you. And I was barely awake."

When there is no response, he glances up. Alex is standing still, almost frozen. His arms are folded, once supporting the other as the fingers reach up to rest on his lips. His eyes are glued to the floor as if held there by some magnetic beam.

"I know you remember it," Jason says.

Still nothing.

"Are you ..." Jason stops, places his hands over his face, and exhales deeply. "Are you scared? Is that why you keep hanging onto thing with Lauren, even though it's not going anywhere?"

"That's not fair."

Jason looks over at Alex, almost surprised to receive a response.

"That's not fair," Alex repeats, looking up but still not directly at Jason. "It's not fair to--to accuse me of using Lauren."

"No, you know what's not fair? What's not fair is you doing this to all of us."

"I'm not 'doing' anything!" Alex counters, his voice forceful but tentative at the same time.

"Yes, you are, whether you want to be doing it or not. Stringing Lauren along or--I don't know what, without letting her know why you're really holding back. She likes you, Alex. A lot. And it's not fair to leave me in the middle of this, wondering, having to keep stuff from my other best friends -- my girlfriend, for God's sake! None of that is fair."

He watches Alex fall silent again. Alex turns his back, folding his arms up again.

Jason steels himself, knowing that he will have to be the one to push this along. "We need to get this cleared up."

Neither of the young men moves at all for a long moment, except for Jason moving his eyes around the room. Finally they fall back to the floor. He breathes slowly, trying to will

himself to do what he knows he must.

"Just tell me the truth, Alex," he finally says. "Are you gay? Or bisexual?"

For a second there is nothing, and Jason can almost feel the end of this upon them. But then Alex turns around, a look of very distinctive anger ruling his face.

"Just trust me, okay?" he fires. "I have everything under control. There's nothing to worry about."

He moves for the door and has it opened before Jason can even think of a reaction.

"Go," Alex says.

"What? Alex, no--"

"Go," Alex repeats. "You need to leave."

Jason lingers in place, leaving his gaze on Alex. Finally he begins walking, and goes through the door. When he is out in the hallway, he turns back to Alex.

"Don't do this," he urges.

Alex allows a moment of eye contact before closing the door.

Jason raises his hand to the closed door but lets it fall. He can't do it, not now -- he doesn't know if he can and, besides, Alex won't let him.

He heads down the hallway, towards the elevator, his head hung sadly as a shiver courses through his body.

END OF EPISODE #198

What did you think of this episode? What do you think is going to happen next? Visit the Message Forum to let us know and take part in a new discussion thread!

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