

"Footprints" Episode #224

[Previously ...](#)

**Courtney and Jason left for Whitney's party after convincing Alex to go with them.*

**Lauren agreed to go to the party even though Alex would be there.*

**Andy told Brent that he planned to leave King's Bay and offered to let Brent have his apartment.*

WHITNEY'S HOUSE

The lights have been turned down entirely throughout the lower level of the house, a pleasant three-bedroom home that bears the decorative stamp of the four young women who reside there. Black lights have been set up to fill the darkness, and beneath them every white article of clothing and every glowstick are beaming with an intensity to match that of the party that is threatening to burst the house at its very seams.

Near the center of the living room, Jason and Courtney are rocking to the beat of the hip-hop music, their legs entwined and their bodies practically connected. Each is holding a plastic cup with the latest concoction from the bar, trying to keep it far enough away from their bodies so that if the dancing causes it to spill, it won't land on either of them.

Courtney sings along to the Jennifer Lopez song that has overtaken the room. She stares into Jason's eyes and his gaze is just as locked upon her. Their bodies move together, Courtney rocking over the top of his left leg.

The song's laid-back beat continues, fading out until it can no longer be heard. There is a momentary pause before the next song comes on, but it is enough time for the couple to stop dancing. They each take a sip from their cups.

"Man, it is *hot* in here," Courtney says as she fans herself with her hand.

"Yeah." Jason wipes his brow, which is covered in sweat. "Some party, huh?"

"It's bigger than I thought it was gonna be." Courtney glances around the room, surveying the throng of guests. "Have you even seen Whitney?"

Jason shakes his head. "Nope. She's probably headed upstairs already."

Courtney hits him in the chest but it is clear that she sees the humor in the comment, too. "Be nice," she scolds.

"Fine, fine. I'm just being honest."

She acknowledges that he is correct with a raise of the eyebrows but doesn't contribute anything else. She continues washing her eyes over the room and a moment later hits him again -- this time, in the arm, much less aggressively. "Hey, look!"

"What?"

"Lauren. She's still talking to Nate!"

It takes Jason a moment to find Lauren's blond head across the room, but he manages to do it. And there she is, in a tight white tank top that reads "Abercrombie" across the front, talking to the same guy she has been talking to since Jason and Courtney starting dancing half an hour ago.

"Wow," Jay says. "You think somethin's going on over there?"

Courtney doesn't answer for a second as she evaluates the situation. "I dunno. Looks like they're having fun."

Over on the other side of the room, Lauren is indeed having fun. She smiles broadly as she listens to Nate tell her about his ill-fated camping trip last weekend.

Damn, she thinks as she watches him, barely listening to what he is saying. *Maybe I'm finally having some good luck*. A navy blue ringer T-shirt, with lighter blue trim, is hugging every curve of what she estimates to be one nice body. A pair of khaki cargo pants are hanging at just the right point on his hips, and when he makes an upward motion, she can catch a glimpse of his Tommy Hilfiger boxers.

Yes. Damn, definitely, she says mentally, resisting the urge to lick her lips. She raises the plastic cup to them instead and drains the last of the fruity concoction.

"That's nuts, huh?" Nate says, wrapping up his story.

"Yeah, sounds like it," Lauren agrees. "Sounds fun, though."

"It was. It was frickin' awesome." Nate downs the remains of his beer and places the can on the table next to them. Lauren notices that it falls over in an instant, having barely been placed down straight at all. She looks up at Nate and sees a flicker of wooziness pass over his eyes.

"You're real cute, you know that?" he says finally. He reaches out a hand to brush her dark blonde hair back behind her ear.

"Thanks," she manages after what feels like a horribly awkward silence to her. *Did I just blow it?* "You, uh, you're really cute too." *Cute? Is that the right word?*

His head nods up a little. "Thanks. Why don't I ever see you around?"

"I don't know," she shrugs, smiling again even though it feels a little forced. "I haven't been around Whitney much lately. I hang out with Courtney and Jason more, and you're always with Whit--"

"I have been *missing out*, dude."

"Huh?"

"You're hot, Laur," Nate says. "Seriously hot."

Lauren can feel her cheeks flushing and hopes that the darkness of the room will hide it. "Thanks."

She sees him moving in closer and his lips are on hers before she realizes it. She almost pushes him away, a little stunned, but gathers herself enough to enjoy it. To kiss back a little, even. And then to kiss back a lot.

"Hey," he says in a half-whisper as they part many moments later. "You, uh--" He tips his head towards the staircase. "You wanna take this in private?"

The question catches Lauren completely off-guard, but something is telling her to do it. And as she drinks him in again -- that oh-so-promising body, the killer eyes, everything -- she can't seem to find the contradictory voice that should be there.

CLAIRE FISHER'S APARTMENT

Claire offers a friendly -- but very uncertain -- smile as she opens the door. "Hey."

"Hi." Andy returns the smile.

A wave of relief, at least the beginnings of it, washes over Claire. She wasn't sure what state she would find him in when he came to visit, after his phone call several days ago to tell her that he had decided to leave King's Bay. He had explained his confrontation with Katherine and his sudden urge to get away, and all of it had worried Claire. She's spent the last few days wondering whether he has finally been pushed too far, whether he's gone over the edge. But seeing him here, in front of her, is sweeping those concerns

away. Andy looks like himself, a man very in control of his mindset and his decisions.

"So this is it, huh?" she says, stepping out of the doorway to invite him inside.

He comes into the apartment and takes a deep breath as he turns around to face her. "I guess so."

"You're sure you want to do this? That leaving is the best decision?"

"Absolutely," he replies with hardly a pinch of hesitation. "I need to go. I need to be away from my mother and from everything that's happened -- I need a chance to be my own man, Claire. Do you realize that my entire life up to this point has revolved around my mother?"

"You're right," she agrees, and then finds that she has to pause before what she wants to say next, because she is suddenly choked up. "I'll miss you. A lot. We've been through so much in the last year--"

"That's why I have to go," Andy cuts in, his tone more somber now.

She recognizes the glazed look that wipes over his face. "Don't keep doing this to yourself, Andy."

His eyes jerk up from his hands to her, trying their best to look confused. But what shines through is surprise -- surprise that she is able to read him so well. "What?" he asks, not sounding convincing at all.

"Stop blaming yourself." She sees his mouth moving with the seeds of protest and adds, "Tim--what happened to him was *not* your fault. You have to let go of that. I'm not blaming you, the Fishers aren't blaming you, no one is. You can't keep treating yourself like some killer."

"I'm not--" But he cuts himself off as he turns his back to her, jamming his hands into the pockets of his khakis. He barely hesitates before shifting gears completely. "I can't let go of it, Claire."

"It wasn't your fault, Andy. Please, you have to believe that. Tim isn't gone because you had to leave the pier early." She stares at his back, reliving yet again the horror of New Year's Day and suddenly able to feel Andy's anguish.

He says nothing. Claire takes a step toward him and her arms dangle awkwardly at her sides. "You have to let go of this ... I can't let you leave here tonight knowing that you're still blaming yourself."

"You're right," he says finally. "I know you are. My brain does, anyway ... But another part of me keeps insisting that I should feel responsible for this because I am, because if I'd just stayed put ..." This time, Claire doesn't need to interrupt. Andy tapers off, knowing that he isn't getting himself anywhere.

"Just please, Andy, don't go through life blaming yourself for this. You're going to Seattle for a fresh start, right? You have to leave all these ghosts behind."

He agrees with a weak nod, clearly fighting an internal battle. As she observes him, it occurs to Claire that she has done all that she can right now. It isn't possible for her to change his mind completely tonight -- but hopefully, she'll give him the ability to do it himself.

Silence envelopes them briefly, but Andy breaks the seal. "I should get going. I have to get the last of my things from the apartment." Claire nods as he adds, "Are the kids still awake? I'd love to say goodbye to them."

"They've been out for a while," she says. "Big day. We went to the mall and the park."

"Ahh," he answers with a broad smile. It fades and he swallows hard. "Thank you so much -- for everything."

"And thank you for being such a terrific friend. I wish we'd gotten to get to know each other under less, uh, stressful circumstances--"

"But the friends who are by your side through the tough times are the ones who really count, right?"

"Mm-hmm," Claire answers as she reaches up to wrap him in a hug. "I'm really going to miss you."

"I'll miss you too." Andy allows the embrace to linger. Finally he steps back and keeps his gaze focused on Claire as he says, "I should get going."

"Yeah." She finds herself fighting misty eyes. "Keep in touch, okay?"

"I will. I promise." He moves for the door and pulls it open quickly. "Take care."

"You, too." She watches as he leaves the apartment, glancing back just briefly before he shuts the door behind him.

WHITNEY'S HOUSE

"Hey, Alex!" a girl he recognizes from some other party calls out as she dances past him. For a moment Alex leans off of the wall, thinking that she's going to stop and make small talk. Thankfully, she keeps going.

He moves his head and shoulders slightly to the music, keeping with the beat without making too much of a spectacle of himself. He tosses back another slug of his drink and shakes the plastic cup to check how much he has left.

He settles his weight back against the wall and takes in the scene all around him. Bobbing bodies, grinding couples, drinks everywhere ... Somehow he feels removed from it all. But maybe that's just because it's been so long since he got out.

Truthfully, he *is* glad that Jason talked him into coming, even though he feels a bit awkward right now. He knows that it's good to get out and socialize and do stuff ... and he has missed it. It just hasn't felt like the right thing to do in so long.

He isn't even sure that it feels like the right thing now. He's not even sure why he came -- except that when Jason got on the phone, he couldn't say no. He knew he couldn't from the moment that Jason spoke.

This has to stop. He knows it has to. And he thought it had -- at least, he hoped that all this time apart from the others would help. But it didn't, he can tell that much. Not one bit.

You have to stop this, his mind warns him, and he feels the same old battle revving up inside himself.

And he knows that despite every warning his mind might issue, he still won't listen.

WHITNEY'S HOUSE

"It's not a tough question," Nate says, reaching out a hand to cup the back of Lauren's head. "You wanna go upstairs or not?"

"I, uh ..." She feels his fingers toying with her hair. He tips her head back slowly and brings his lips back to hers. Steam fills Lauren's brain and her decision is made.

Then they part and reality sets in again. Suddenly, the decision really *is* made.

"I can't," she gulps, mortified to hear herself speaking the words. "I mean, it's not a good

idea, not right now."

His hands leave her immediately. "Fine, whatever," he shrugs. "Lemme know if you change your mind, k?" Before she has time to begin trying to salvage the situation, he is gone.

"You are such an idiot," she mutters to herself. She keeps her head down, unable to watch him snaking his way through the crowd and away from her. *Of course he wasn't gonna stay and hang out. If you just would've said yes ...*

"Hey." The voice from behind startles Lauren, but her instinctive turn reveals that it belongs to Courtney and her nerves settle down.

"Hey," Lauren offers weakly.

"What's wrong? I saw you talking to Nate for, like, forever ..."

"Yeah, and then I blew it."

"What? How?"

"Cuz I'm an idiot," Lauren says. She lifts the empty cup to her mouth and gets what she can out of it.

"How are you an idiot?"

"He asked me to go upstairs with him. I ... didn't want to. Or didn't think I should."

Courtney doesn't waste an instant in responding. "Good!"

"No, not good. I just totally blew any chance I had with him."

"It wasn't worth *having* the chance if that's all it was!" Courtney says forcefully. Lauren looks away from her.

"I should've just said yes ... that's the only way I'm gonna get a guy anyway. Face it, if I don't put out, I'm not gonna get anything else." She turns her back to Courtney and begins to move away, reaching out to take a fresh drink from the guy behind the bar.

Courtney fights her way through the thicket of people to keep up with her friend. "Stop it, Lauren. Don't start yourself on this again."

"It's true," Lauren says, turning around. She sips at the drink as she continues, "That's how I got such a good prom date senior year. Jeff knew I was gonna put out at the end of the night, that's the only reason he went with me."

"That is not true! Why do you get so down on yourself?" Courtney waits for some kind of response and then, abruptly, grabs the drink away from Lauren. "You are better than that, you know that."

One corner of Lauren's mouth curls in a sarcastic snarl. "Am I? I thought it was gonna be different with Alex -- I thought we totally connected. If I couldn't make that work, then I can't make anything work. Face it, I'm a loser."

She snatches the drink back and begins downing it. Courtney watches her, wanting to say something but suddenly unable to come up with any words that she thinks would work. So she just keeps watching her, hoping that maybe this way, she'll be able to protect her from doing anything stupid.

BRENT TAYLOR'S APARTMENT

"Come on in! It's unlocked!" Brent calls from his spot on the couch. Truthfully, he just doesn't feel like getting up right now. His whole body is exhausted, even though he's hardly done anything today.

The door opens slowly and he sees Andy appear in the open doorway. "Hi," Andy says as he steps into the apartment. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine. I'm wiped, though." Brent tosses his head onto the back of the couch. "You getting ready to head out?"

"I have one more set of boxes to move out to the car and then I'll be ready." Andy begins moving back towards the second bedroom, which he had converted into an office.

"I'd give you a hand, but ..."

"Don't worry about it," Andy says, pausing.

"I just wish I could be of *some* use," Brent says. "You've been living in a hotel because of me--"

"It just seemed easier for you to move in here right away. Besides, Danielle needed to be here with you to take care of you."

Brent raises an eyebrow knowingly. "Is *that* why you didn't want to be around here?"

"It would have been a little awkward, yes. But I really don't mind staying at the hotel."

"Yeah, I know, but--"

"No buts. And you're in no shape to help carry things, so just relax. I think I can handle it."

He disappears into the extra bedroom and emerges with just a few things, a load that he can manage quite easily. Brent watches as he exits the apartment.

Brent grabs the remote control off of the coffee table and switches the TV off. He's had enough of it for the day. He turns his attention to his bandaged hands. Part of him wants so badly to unwrap the bandages and see the damage ... just for the sake of seeing it, so he can maybe have some tangible idea of what it is that's keeping him holed up like this.

Andy's return jerks him from his thoughts. "Did Danielle go out?"

"Yeah, she ran to the store. Do you wanna wait around to say goodbye to her?"

"No, I should get going." Andy stops his movements and fiddles with his keys, clearly swept up in thought. "Besides, I think we've said all that we need to say to one another. There's no need to push it any further."

"Yeah, you're probably right." Brent hoists himself up off of the couch, trying to do it without putting too much pressure on his hands. "So you're outta here?"

Andy exhales deeply. "I guess so."

A strange silence lingers between the men for a moment.

"Hey, thanks again for the apartment, man," Brent says. "It really has made things easier."

"Glad to be of assistance. And thank *you* for being such an excellent friend. I'm going to miss having you around."

"Same." The moment is clearly uncomfortable for Brent as he fumbles for something to say. "It'll be good for you to get away, though. You need some time to do your own thing."

"After all this mess with my mother ... I do, absolutely."

The silence returns briefly, but Brent forces it aside. "I'll keep an eye out for her, okay? I'm gonna make sure that Moriani doesn't get away with anything else."

"I appreciate it." Andy takes another look around the apartment. Suddenly it doesn't feel like his anymore -- and that's a good thing, because it makes leaving just a little bit easier.

"All right, good luck, man," Brent says, clasping Andy's hand in his for a firm shake. "With everything. And especially with Maggie."

Andy's face lights up just a bit. "Thank you. Good luck with your recovery, and with Sarah ..."

Brent's eyes widen and do a little roll. "Thanks, I'll need it."

Their hands separate and Andy begins to turn for the door. "I'll give you a call in a few days to let you know how everything is going."

"All right, sounds good." Brent watches, waiting for Andy to take the necessary step. And finally, he does.

"Bye," Andy says as he heads out of the apartment, finding himself unable to look back.

"Bye," Brent calls after him. The door shuts and Brent goes to lock it. He moves to the window and watches through the dim blackness of the autumn night as Andy gets into the car.

"Good luck, buddy," he says softly.

WHITNEY'S HOUSE

"Hey, are you even gonna *try* to have fun tonight?"

The voice rattles Alex. He turns sharply and finds Jason standing to his left, a Corona bottle in his right hand.

"I am," Alex says, though even to his own ears it sounds horribly unconvincing. "I'm just sorta trying to chill tonight, you know?"

"You've been doing an awful lot of 'chilling' lately, dude. C'mon, party it up a little! Go a little nuts tonight."

Alex's discomfort becomes immediately apparent.

Jason leans in closer, wanting to lower his voice but not able to do so very much thanks to the music. "How've you been? I mean, the last time I saw you--"

"I've been okay," Alex says with a shrug. "Thinking a lot, I guess."

"Yeah?" Jason's lips curl around the tip of the beer bottle as he takes a swig. Alex tries not to focus on it but finds himself unable to do so. It does seem to him, though, that Jay is trying to figure out what to say next.

"Have you figured anything out?" he asks finally. "Like ... I don't know ... You feeling any better about this whole thing?"

"Kinda. I mean, it's like I've gotta figure out my whole life now or something--"

"Huh? I can't hear you!"

Alex moves in closer to repeat himself, and he feels an electrifying tingle as he speaks, his lips just inches away from brushing against Jason's ear. "I was saying, it's kinda like I have to figure out my whole life now -- like I've gotta make these huge decisions about who I wanna be and stuff."

"Yeah, I can imagine," Jason nods. "Look, bro, I'm behind you 100 percent, like I said before. If you wanna talk or just have someone to hang out with or whatever, I'm totally here." He gives Alex's shoulder a squeeze.

The touch sends that same thrill through Alex again. He can remember the feel of Jason's hands on him that night ... almost two years ago now. For that instant, everything was right. Everything was going to turn out perfectly.

And then it all got shot to hell, of course. But the unbelievable sensations of that moment -- the sensations he had thought he would never feel again -- have stayed with Alex, and he's called on them more times than he can even remember. If only that feeling would stay. If only ...

He looks up at Jason, meeting his eyes -- so supportive, dazzling with kindness and intelligence and that crazy spark of humor. *That's everything I want.*

He's *everything I want.*

And suddenly, that long-ago night and that perfect moment don't feel so far away anymore.

Alex swallows hard and reaches his hand up to touch Jason's cheek.

END OF EPISODE #224

What did you think of this episode? What will Alex do next? Is Lauren about to do something she'll regret? And how about Andy's farewell? You're invited to come share your feedback over in our [Message Forum!](#)

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