

"Footprints" Episode #228

[Previously ...](#)

**Jason's slip drove Lauren to ask Alex about his sexuality, and he finally admitted that he is gay. Lauren struggled to accept the news and stormed out, blasting the guys for making a fool of her. Courtney entered and asked what was going on, but Jason and Alex didn't tell her.*

**Molly told Matt that she understands that she played a role in the end of Sarah and Brent's marriage and never wanted to see her sister get hurt.*

**Stan informed Ryan that he is planning to relocate to King's Bay.*

MARSHALL APARTMENT

Not here. Of course not. Why would she be?

She only knew I was gonna be out all night, Alex thinks bitterly. He locks the front door behind him. Certainly no reason to wait around at home.

Then again, he considers as he double-checks Sally's empty bedroom, she's probably been out all night herself with that new boyfriend.

Whatever. He's almost glad he doesn't have to deal with his mother right now. How would he even face her after everything that happened last night? She'd probably accept a simple "Fine" or "Fun" or something like that anyway, but he isn't so sure that he wouldn't give away that something big went down.

Something big. Jeez. The whole memory of last night -- Lauren asking him flat-out, him taking charge and stopping Jason from interrupting and then admitting it, actually admitting it -- plays like a fuzzy, slow-motion movie clip in his head. It's almost like he was just an observer, like he wasn't really there.

But he was. He definitely was. He can still feel the numbness that surged through his veins as he spoke the words. He can feel the terror that flipped his stomach when he realized he'd actually *said* it, and the relief that washed over him at Jason's reassurance.

It had felt so good to feel Jason patting him on the back and hear him say how proud he was. Even after Lauren ran out of the room upset, even later when he was falling asleep, Alex kept recalling how incredible it felt to know Jason was standing by him.

It means nothing more than friendship, though, Alex knows that. In his weakest moment last night, when he could barely keep himself from reaching out to caress Jason's cheek -- even then he knew it wouldn't--couldn't--ever happen. He'd been able to see Jason's

love for Courtney burning brightly, and he'd been able to feel the depth of his own loyalty to Courtney and Jay. He couldn't do it. He can't now.

And then Lauren ... The very thought of her makes him want to grab the phone or pop over to her house, full of hope that she's had enough time to digest everything and cool off. But still--

The ringing of the phone jerks him away from his thoughts. He hesitates, stopping to wonder how long he has been pacing around the apartment thinking. But on the second ring, he makes a beeline for the kitchen, and he has the phone before it can ring a third time.

"Hello?"

"Alex. Hey. What are you up to?" Jason's voice asks.

"Nothing, I guess."

"Good. I'm coming over there. We've gotta talk."

CHASE HOME

The softness of the down comforter deflates under Courtney's body. The feathers fall and then rise again, reaching up to caress her and soothe the tension and exhaustion of last night.

She lies there, eyes closed, pillow held tightly to her head, body melting into the bed, for several minutes. She slept a few hours at Whitney's before Jason drove her home this morning, but it was fitful, unfulfilling sleep, and now it feels like it didn't happen at all.

Jason practically dragged her to that bedroom in Whitney's house. They managed to snag some blankets and pillows, and find some open space on the floor. And Jason wanted to go to sleep right away. He refused to tell her anything about what had sent Lauren flying from the room.

Even when Courtney tried to move away from whatever that drama was, Jason didn't seem very interested. He returned her kisses halfheartedly and was almost totally unresponsive to her touches. Eventually she managed to fall into a hazy sleep, but thoughts of Lauren running away and Jason and Alex's strange behavior kept weaving themselves in and out of her consciousness.

When she woke up before dawn this morning, she was hoping she'd be able to get up and

find Lauren, but climbing over all the bodies and combing all the rooms in search of her -- especially considering the toll last night's partying did -- didn't seem appealing enough to do. And when she and Jason finally got up and left, Lauren was gone.

Now she realizes that, like last night, these thoughts are overriding her sleep. It's not happening now ... and it won't until the situation gets figured out, she has a feeling.

Lazily she lies buried in the covers for a few minutes longer. Finally she reaches out and grabs the phone off of the nightstand and punches in the very familiar sequence of numbers.

The answer comes on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Lauren! Hey," Courtney says. "How are ya?"

"Um ..." The pause on the other end of the line is full of drama just waiting to be told. "I just got out of the shower. So at least I feel like a decent human being again."

"Did you just get home?"

"Hour, hour and a half ago. I had to eat something before I showered. I was staaaaarving."

"Staaaaaarving, huh?" Courtney laughs.

"Yup. So ... how was your night last night?"

"Not bad. Nothing too great. But, uh ..."

"What?"

Courtney hesitates, and then: "Laur, what happened last night? I saw you flying outta that room like a bat out of hell. Jason and Alex wouldn't tell me what went on."

"Court ... Hey, listen, you wanna get together and talk about this? I think it'd just be easier in person."

"Oh, uh, yeah, sure. Where and when?"

"Cassie's? Half an hour? Is that okay? I just don't feel like sleeping right now. Maybe it'd be better to do something and try to talk about it." She sighs and her exhaustion carries over the phone line. "Besides, I could go for a huge cup of coffee right now."

"Yeah, that sounds good. I'll see ya there."

"Kay. Bye."

Courtney hangs up the phone and springs out of bed. She begins rifling through the closet, looking for something she can toss on quickly without looking like too much of a mess.

Finally, she thinks as she pulls on a navy blue Gap sweatshirt. At least someone is being kind enough to let me back in the loop. Maybe now I'll have some idea of what the hell is going on.

FELICITA'S CAFE

"Mmmmm," Molly hums appreciatively as she chews, rubbing her stomach exaggeratedly as she looks directly at Samantha.

The little girl giggles at the sight of her aunt looking so goofy.

Molly finishes chewing and, now wearing a super-serious expression, looks across the table at Claire. "I think she's laughing at me, Claire."

"You did look pretty funny," Claire shrugs.

"Gee, thanks," Molly says with a roll of the eyes. Smiling, she goes in for another forkful of the eggs that inspired the exaggeration.

"You're entitled," Claire says as she finishes chewing her current bite of waffles. "This place is amazing."

"I know. Only way to get powered up for an all-day shopping spree, that's what I say."

"I agree wholeheartedly." Claire looks over at Travis, who is holding a half-eaten piece of toast in his hand as he stares at an elderly woman and a man who appears to be her son sitting across the restaurant from them.

"I don't know if the kids are as excited about the food as we are," Claire laughs. "Maybe we're turning into a bunch of oldies."

Molly shakes her head. "Not what I want to hear ... but I think you're right."

"There could be worse things."

"Yeah." Molly stops in thought and puts down her fork for the first time since their food has been served. "Yeah, but at least you've got something to show for it."

Sensing the change in mood, Claire puts down her fork, as well. "What do you mean?"

"You've got the kids ... you've got a career you love ... I don't know. I kind of thought I'd have those things by this point, too."

Silence falls over Claire for a moment. When she speaks, her voice is soft. "Hang in there, Mol. You're going to find what you're looking for."

Molly's gaze is now fixed firmly on her plate. "I'd like to think that, I really would. But there just comes a point when it becomes hard to believe."

"I can understand losing faith. I know that all too well, believe me. When Tim died ... I just couldn't believe that anything good was ever going to happen again. It was like I wanted to believe I was being sentenced to an eternity in hell. But there have been mornings I woke up and realized how lucky I am to be alive and to have what I do."

"I am lucky, I know that. In some ways, at least. God, I sound like I'm sixteen years old ... but all I want is to find something that'll last. Something real. Like what you and Tim had. What you still have."

"Yeah ..." Wistfulness sweeps over Claire and, for a moment, she is no longer there in the cafe. She is back in a happier time, a time that made more sense. It has to be possible to find that again.

"Molly, can I ask you something?"

"I guess, yeah. What?"

Claire draws in a deep breath. "That dinner party your mom threw this summer--"

She doesn't even have to finish the statement: Already shame has washed over Molly's face. "Claire--"

"What's going on, Mol? *Did* something happen between you and Brent? Do you have feelings for him? Is that why Sarah lost it that night?"

Molly picks up her fork again, but only so that she has something to occupy her. "It's not

that simple. Sarah's looking for someone to blame ... but things have been bad between them for a long time. It's been hard on Brent, too."

"So what, you--you and he do have something--"

"It's a weird dynamic, a really weird dynamic. I have a feeling no one is going to get what they bargained for or what they want out of it."

More questions are poised on the tip of Claire's tongue, but she restrains them. The look in Molly's eyes is too fascinating. It's the look Claire is sure she had a minute ago when she thought of Tim, a look full of memories and hopes and a shattered reality. A look of longing.

MARSHALL APARTMENT

"How ya doin'?" Jason asks as Alex lets him into the apartment.

"Good. Better than I thought I'd be," Alex says. He shuts the door and locks it without thinking twice about it.

"Yeah, that must be weird." It looks to Alex as though Jason is studying him, like he's trying to determine how Alex is *really* dealing with the events of last night.

"I'm sorry," Jay says suddenly.

"Sorry? For what?"

"For letting the cat out of the bag. Or ..." The familiar twinkle of amusement flashes in Jason's face and Alex feels relieved. "... out of the closet, as the case may be."

Alex laughs a laugh full of not only amusement, but relief. His friend is still here, and he's not acting strangely. He's not letting what has happened between them change the way he acts or speaks.

"Don't be," Alex says firmly. "You have no need to be sorry. It needed to happen. I was going to tell Lauren -- I had to. That was why I brought her upstairs."

"That made me worry, dude. I was wondering what the hell you were up to." Jason strolls over to the couch, leaning up against its back.

"I was about to go down that road all over again. When she kissed me ... It was like I fell

back into it, like I wanted to make it work so I wouldn't have to deal with any of this. Except that there was this other part of me -- this part that was never there before -- that was telling me I didn't need to do that anymore."

"Good! I'm really happy you got to this point. It's no small feat."

"Yeah ..." With a heavy sigh, Alex turns around, hands stuffed deep into his pockets. "I guess."

Jason is quiet for a moment while he tries to read what is going on. "What's wrong?"

From the back, he watches Alex's shoulders shrug. "I don't know. It's just ... weird -- being at this point. That I actually did it, you know?"

"Yeah, I bet." Jason comes off the couch and stands up. He is tempted to cross the patch of carpet standing between himself and Alex and offer a comforting hand on the shoulder or something, but somehow it doesn't seem appropriate.

"Can I ask you a question?"

Alex's inquiry -- a request for permission, really -- cuts into the silence swiftly and suddenly.

"Uh, yeah. Of course," Jason says.

"Okay. Well ..." Alex balls his fists together and begins cracking his knuckles. "Now that we're getting everything out on the table, there's something I need to know."

Jason swallows hard. "Yeah ... ?"

"Yeah." Deep breath. "Why are you doing this -- being so good to me, I mean? Why haven't you freaked out and bailed yet?"

CASSIE'S COFFEE HOUSE

"Oh. My. God." Courtney inhales another giant gulp of the mocha in front of her. "This is exactly what I needed this morning."

"I could go for a magic wand or something," Lauren grumbles from across the table.

"Magic wand?"

"Yeah. To make last night go away ... or maybe make this whole thing with Alex and me go away. Just -- poof, into thin air."

"Was last night that bad?" Courtney asks.

Lauren's brown eyes widen. "Ohhhhhhh! It was just ... wow. Beyond the realm of what I ever could've expected."

She goes back to mulling over her own hardly touched drink, a steaming mug of coffee and chocolate that is usually one of her favorite treats. "I guess I should've seen it coming," she says dolefully. "But you know how I am -- completely oblivious. A real idiot."

"What happened, Lauren? When I saw you and Alex kiss and then head upstairs, I thought something *good* was going on." She pauses as a new possibility strikes her consciousness. "He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No, no, no." Lauren shakes her head emphatically. "I mean, he didn't attack me or anything."

"Good. I figured Alex wasn't the type to do something like that, but you never know ..."

Lauren's eyebrows jump as she shares a private joke with herself. "Nope. Definitely not *that* type."

Confused, Courtney watches for a few seconds and then says, "You know, I could *maybe* be of some help to you if you'd tell me what in the world is going on."

"All right ... You said you saw us kiss, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, so after that thing with Nate I was in a terrible mood. I talked myself into going to talk to Alex. Maybe I was hoping something would happen, maybe I just wanted him to make me feel better. I dunno. So I started asking why things didn't work out between us, and I kissed him."

"And?"

"It was weird. He, like, didn't kiss back at all. But he didn't push me away, either. And then he told me we needed to talk, seriously."

"... which is why you went upstairs."

"Exactly." Finally Lauren draws a long, slow sip of her drink, but as it goes down into her unwelcoming stomach, she realizes that it was more to allow her to stall and think than because she wanted to drink it. "I ... I don't know how much I should say, Court."

"What do you mean?"

"It's ... complicated." Lauren risks a look up into her friend's face and, seeing it so full of confusion, she is tempted to spill the whole story. She's so used to being able to do that with Courtney. But she can't, she shouldn't, not now. "I will tell you that it is definitely totally over between Alex and me," she says.

"All right," Courtney says, showing a touch of disappointment. "I'm sorry."

"I am, too. But it's for the best that I know. Believe me."

Court looks down into her mocha and then back up at Lauren. "So what, you don't feel comfortable telling me what happened upstairs?"

"No, it's not--well, yeah. I mean, I don't know if it's my place to tell you or not."

"What? You were in the middle of it."

"I know, but ... like I said, it's complicated. Just go see Alex first. Ask him about it."

Courtney accepts the instructions with a baffled crinkle of her brow. What in the world is going on? Is Alex in as bad shape as Lauren? She has to find out. And she will.

MARSHALL APARTMENT

Jason glances up at Alex only briefly and then focuses somewhere across the room. "Because I understand."

"What?" Now reality is truly becoming distorted for Alex. Is he hearing what he thinks he's hearing?

"I understand what you're going through," Jason says. But the tone isn't what Alex would expect, and all too quickly his mind flashes back to the painful memory of that night last spring when he misunderstood Jay ...

"I mean, sorta," Jason adds, clearly remembering the same instance. "That fear, that it's something you don't want to be and can't ever be. Because people make you think there's something so wrong about it that there has to be something wrong with *you*."

"Yeah." Hearing the words from someone else's lips -- from anyone's lips, for that matter, because he hasn't dared speak them. Not this clearly. And not for a long time.

"I can relate, I guess, in a way. I got teased about it all the time when I was younger. I got called a fag and a pansy and whatever else more times than I can count, just because of skating. I got used to it. I got used to getting angry about it and wanting so badly for it not to be true."

Alex's voice comes out like a whisper now. "But it wasn't ... was it?"

Jason shakes his head. "That's the thing. I'm not gay, Alex, I know that. But it's something most guys don't even think about! I was trying to figure it out when I was 13, 14. That's something I've never totally gotten past."

"... which is why you got so freaked out when ... when I--"

"Yeah. I'm sorry for that--"

"No, I'm sorry. That was the last thing I should have ever done. It was totally a violation--"

"Forget it. Seriously. I want to put that behind us. I want us to be able to be friends with no hangups between us, no weirdness."

Alex pauses, then reaches out to take Jay's outstretched hand. "Deal."

They shake as Alex reminds himself how fortunate he is to have a friend like this. But only a friend ...

"All right," Jason says. "Now it's your turn to tell."

"Tell what?"

"I dunno ... Your story, I guess. You know -- how'd you figure it out? Have you ever been ... involved with someone? I wanna know, dude. You should be able to talk about this stuff."

Alex nods, but already the temptation to share -- finally -- is being overridden.

"No," he says quietly. "Not yet."

"Huh?"

"Not yet. I'm just ... I'm not ready yet. This is happening really fast."

"All right." Now that pat on the back doesn't seem so inappropriate to Jason and he offers it happily. "When you're ready to talk, I'm here."

"Okay. Thanks." The urge to open up and tell Jason everything is still strong, but Alex knows he can't do it now. But he will, someday -- someday soon. And then maybe he'll be able to put all that behind him, as well. At long last.

FELICITA'S CAFE

"Nevermind that," Molly says quickly. The words snap Claire back to the present, cutting short her contemplation of Molly's situation with Brent.

"So ..." Molly picks up her fork now and returns to her food. It looks to Claire as though she is making a concentrated effort to change the subject. "Hey -- has that Ryan guy been bothering you anymore? It was kind of creepy when I ran into him at the hospital. I was just talking to him, and then we he introduced himself--"

"He likes to play those sort of games," Claire says with a sigh. "But no, I haven't seen him since that day, actually."

"You think he got the hint?"

It isn't the first time that the possibility has crossed Claire's mind, and again she is not as filled with relief as she would imagine she'd be. "I don't know. Maybe ..."

"It would be nice if he did! It sounds like he's practically been stalking you."

"Yeah," Claire says as Samantha's juice cup -- with a lid, thankfully -- goes toppling to the floor.

Claire leans down to pick it up and replaces it on the table in front of the little girl, who responds with a smile that is equal parts appreciation and amusement.

"To tell the truth," Claire says, "Diane has me a lot more worried than Ryan."

"I would imagine, yeah." Molly gazes over at her young niece. "Everything is going to work out, Claire. Samantha is and always will be a part of our family."

"... which means that Diane will, too."

"Just what we always wanted, right?"

Meanwhile, outside, the man removes his hand from above his eyes. The glare is no longer a problem -- he's seen what he needed to see.

Interesting ... *very* interesting. So *she's* here, huh? That certainly puts a new twist on things.

"I'll hafta look into this. Definitely hafta look into this," Stan Lincoln mutters to himself, casting one final glance inside the cafe before he starts off down the street again.

END OF EPISODE #229

What kind of trouble is Stan going to cause? What will happen when Courtney finds out the truth? Did Jason and Alex's talk shed any light on their storyline for you? Your comments, questions, and predictions are all welcome over at the [Message Forum!](#)

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