

"Footprints" Episode #239

Previously ...

- *Sally's relationship with Stan widened the gap between her and Alex.*
- *Courtney wondered if Jason's deception would mean the end of them.*
- *Molly told Bill that she took a new job in the fashion industry.*
- *Matt asked Sarah to move on -- with him.*

FISHER HOME

"Now it's *officially* Christmas," Jason announces as he punches the 'play' button on the CD changer. The sounds of Mariah Carey's Christmas album begin to hum along underneath the rest of the action in the house.

He can hear the clinking of china and silverware coming from the dining room as Paula prepares the table for dinner. Bill and Claire are in the kitchen talking and working on the meal. A few feet from Jason, in the middle of the living room, Travis is making his own noises as he breaks in his new Christmas toys.

Jason looks to the stairs at the sound of footsteps. Molly bounds down the staircase.

"Hey," he says conspiratorially, hushing his voice and moving in closer to her. "Wanna give me a sneak preview of whatever your big news is?"

She pretends to consider it for a moment. "Ummm ... no, not really."

"Come on, throw me a bone here."

"You already got one -- at least you know I've got something to tell everyone. That's enough for now."

He debates pushing harder but realizes it is a lost cause. "Fine."

The sound of the doorbell pierces the air. Jason makes a beeline for the front door, nearly tripping over Travis in the process.

"Hey!" Molly hears him call out. For a moment she thinks it must be Courtney, come to make amends on account of the holiday. But the voice that responds to Jason does not belong to Courtney.

"Hey, Jay. Merry Christmas."

I thought she told Mom she wasn't coming, Molly thinks as she stands in the living room, unsure of whether she should make herself visible just yet.

"Merry Christmas," comes another voice behind Sarah. The front door closes and coats are hung up. A moment later, Jason leads Sarah and Matt, with Victoria in tow, into the living room.

"Look who decided to show up," Jason says, but he quiets immediately upon realizing that the only one there to hear him is Molly. The tension that Molly felt seconds ago is now ballooning out to fill the room.

"Merry Christmas," Molly says quietly.

Sarah looks as though she is going to reach out and slap her, but after a painfully long gap, she merely says, "Thanks." Then she leads Matt and Victoria to the dining room, where she can see Paula disappearing back into the kitchen.

"Hey," Matt whispers to Molly as they walk by her. "Merry Christmas."

"Thanks. It's good to see you."

"Good to see you, too," he says before heading off into the dining room.

Jason moves in close to Molly. "That wasn't so bad."

"No, it wasn't. But you never know with her ..."

"Give her a chance. I'm glad she brought Matt. Maybe he'll help mellow her out."

"Yeah, with any luck," Molly says, not entirely convinced that it's possible.

CHASE HOME

"Alex! Hi!" Helen says happily as Don leads the young man into the kitchen.

"Hey." Alex holds up a basket wrapped in plastic, with a bow attached to the top. "I just wanted to bring by a Christmas present I got for you guys."

Helen glides over to him and begins examining the basket. "Oh, wow! What's in here?"

"A bunch of stuff. Cheeses and crackers and cookies, stuff like that." He watches as Helen looks over the gift, clearly delighted.

"Thank you, hon," she says, taking the basket from him. She places it on the counter and then gives him a hug.

"Thanks, Alex," Don adds. He extends his hand and Alex takes it for a shake.

"Hey, uh, is Courtney upstairs?" Alex asks after a moment of inward battle.

Don nods. "She's in her room, I think. I can take you up there."

"That'd be great. Thanks."

"Come back in here when you're done so we can catch up a little," Helen calls after the men as they head out of the kitchen.

Alex agrees, and he and Don make their way toward the stairs.

"Listen, I'm glad you came by," Don says quietly as he leads Alex up the stairs. "I was worried that we wouldn't be seeing too much of you anymore."

Alex pauses in the middle of the staircase, looking surprised. "Courtney told us what happened," Don offers.

A cloud of shame moves in over Alex. "I--I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I know you were trying to help, I just couldn't--"

"Alex, don't feel bad about that. You had to get to it in your own time."

The young man doesn't make a move other than to continue diverting his eyes.

"I know things are rough with all of you right now," Don says, "but don't blame yourself. Everyone was caught up in this."

"Yeah, but I just kept leading Lauren on even though I knew how it was going to end. There was only one way it *could* have ended, the way I kept pushing it. I set her up to get hurt, basically. And I put Jason in a really bad position."

"Whatever happens between Courtney and Jason is happening because of them, not because of you. Your situation was just the catalyst for it."

"They were perfectly happy until I stirred the pot, though."

"Ignorance is not bliss, remember that." Don catches Alex's confusion and adds, "The issues that are coming up in their relationship now have been there all along. They just didn't have a reason to come out until now. But they would have eventually."

Alex understands the point immediately, realizing how much extra pressure he has been putting on himself. Still, the realization doesn't lift the pressure entirely. "Everything is just such a mess now ..."

"Things will get easier." The confidence in Don's voice makes Alex take notice. "Have you told your mother yet?"

"No. I--I don't even know where to start with her. There's so much we have to get through before we'd even be at the point where we could discuss this in any kind of productive way."

"So take your time. And remember that if you need something--anything--I'm here for you. I love you as much as I would if you were really my son, Alex. Don't forget that."

"Thanks," Alex chokes. "I just wish I even knew where to start putting things back together."

"Focus on working things out. The friendships you have with Court, Jason, and Lauren are too important to walk away from."

A little bit grudgingly, Alex nods. He knows that Don is right, but he's not sure that he even has the strength to take on the task.

FISHER HOME

"Guess who decided to make an appearance?" Sarah says, paused in the entryway to the kitchen.

Bill, Paula, and Claire all drop what they are doing to look up. Wide smiles bust out on the faces of the older Fishers immediately.

"Sarah!" Paula cries, hurrying over to embrace her daughter. "Merry Christmas. I'm so glad you came by."

Sarah returns the hug, a bit uncomfortably but very happily, and then steps aside. "I brought a little caravan with me. I hope you don't mind."

"No, not at all! Merry Christmas, Matt! And Victoria ..." Paula scoops up her granddaughter and immediately slides into baby talk with the giggling child.

"Merry Christmas, both of you," Bill says a little more calmly than his wife. "It's really good to see both of you. Especially together."

He and Matt share the briefest of looks, but Matt gets the message loud and clear: *I told you it could work. Keep hanging in there.*

"Claire, hi!" Sarah is saying. She and Claire share a brief hug. "It's been way too long."

"Yeah, it has," Claire says.

"I'm, uh, I'm sorry to hear about Samantha." Sarah thinks it best not to mention where she heard the news.

Claire tries to shrug it off, but even in the simple gesture, her pain is evident. "Hopefully she's comfortable with Diane. That's really all I can ask."

"I think she'll be fine," Sarah says, surprised at her own confidence in the statement.

"Sarah, could you give me a hand in the dining room for a moment?" Paula calls from across the busy kitchen.

"Sure, yeah." Sarah excuses herself from Claire and makes sure that Matt is okay. She finds him engaged in conversation with Matt and moves into the dining room.

"What do you need help with?" she asks Paula.

Paula sets Victoria back down and the little girl immediately scampers back into the kitchen. "Well, you could set out these glasses," Paula says, motioning towards a shelf in the china cabinet. "But I really just wanted to have a moment to speak with you."

"What about?"

"You coming here today. I'm so happy that you came."

"I wanted to. It helps to have Matt here ... but I wanted to be with you guys on Christmas. It seemed right."

"It is right," Paula says. "You belong here. Are you sure things will be all right between

you and Molly?"

"Yeah," Sarah answers quickly, but then she stops. She considers it for a few seconds and then repeats, more emphatically, "Yeah. I can handle it. She wished me a merry Christmas when I came in and I just took that and moved on. I promise, I won't ruin Christmas by making a scene."

Paula has to chuckle a little at the idea, even though the memory of what happened during this summer's dinner party is a little too fresh and painful. "Good. All I want is for all of you to be happy."

"I can work on that."

"Good. And there's something else ..."

"Yeah?"

"I need your help with something."

FISHER HOME

"I can finish that up," Matt says, pointing to one of the pans on the stove.

"Are you sure?" Bill asks, though he is clearly grateful for the offer. His attention is being pulled in several other directions by other parts of the meal.

"Yup, no problem." Matt steps in and takes over the stove, allowing Bill to move, a little relieved, to other matters that need attending.

"Should this come out yet?" Claire calls out, peeking into the oven.

Bill glances quickly at the clock. "Give it two more minutes. It should be perfect then."

Claire shuts the oven and looks around for a second, hoping to find something to do. It looks as though Matt and Bill have everything covered at the moment. She kneels down by Travis. "Hey, kiddo, how are those Pokemon doing?"

"Good," he says, not even looking up from the toys. He finishes a play battle between two figures and then hands his mother one of the figurines. "You can be him."

"Oh, I can? Well, thank you." She holds the figure up as Travis imitates the characters'

voices, outlining some secret plan. Claire has to chuckle at how lost she is in the world of Pokemon.

Another glance at the clock proves that she needs to turn her attention back to the food, so she hands Travis the figure and stands. "Mommy has to finish getting dinner ready. Hold that thought."

"Okay," Travis says, taking the figure back. Then he looks up at her and says, "Samantha should come play this with me."

"I know," Claire says after a moment of silence as she swallows the sudden lump in her throat.

"Why can't she come back yet?"

"Because," Claire says, still not sure what to say. "Because it's not time. She's with her other mommy, remember how I told you that? They have to have some time together." Her attention is only half on the oven as she turns it off and puts on a pair of oven mits.

Bill turns away from preparing the meal and leans over beside them. "Travis, you can go play with your cousin Victoria. I bet she wants to play." He holds out a hand for Victoria, who has been standing in the doorway, to join in.

The idea seems okay to Travis, but he still grumbles, "I want to play with Samantha."

Bill and Claire share a pained look. Neither of them has the heart to continue the line of conversation right now, so they let it fade. But it stays with both of them as they get back to preparing the meal -- the Christmas meal that Samantha won't be sharing with them.

FISHER HOME

"Yeah?" Sarah asks, a little shocked that she's the one being asked.

"It's something important," Paula says. There is a broad hint of reluctance in her voice, and it sounds to Sarah as though she is forcing herself to do this even though a large part of her would like to ignore it. "I need it to stay between the two of us for now."

"You can trust me ... What is it?"

"Well ..." Paula clasps her hands together nervously. "I was hoping--"

"Paula!" comes Bill's voice from the kitchen. He peeks out his head into the dining room. "Can you come in here for a second?"

She manages an uncomfortable smile. "Of course."

Bill slips back into the kitchen and Paula begins to head after him.

"Mom, wait," Sarah says. "What were you going to ask me?"

"It's--nevermind. Don't worry about it, dear." With that, Paula makes her way back to the kitchen, looking a little bit too relieved to have been interrupted.

Sarah begins removing the glasses from the china cabinet. *What was that all about? And why would she want my help with it?*

CHASE HOME

Alex's hand thuds twice on the half-open bedroom door. Courtney's reaction is immediate.

"Come in," she calls out, barely even looking up from the magazine she is reading -- not enough to see who it is.

"Hey," Alex says. His voice catches in his throat and the word comes out weakly.

"Hi," she answers as she does something of a double-take. Something sounds off about the way she greets him -- surprise, perhaps -- but she doesn't sound outright angry. Alex makes a mental wish that that is really the case.

"Merry Christmas." He hands her a box, covered in maroon and gold wrapping paper. "I, uh, I wanted to bring over your gift. And I was hoping we could talk."

She takes the present and places it on the bed. "Thanks. And yeah, good idea. We should talk."

For a moment, he is frozen, but then it all comes tumbling out at once. "Listen, Court -- I want you to know how sorry I am. It's not that I wanted to hide something so big from you, but ... I was trying to keep myself from really acknowledging it."

"I can understand that. It doesn't excuse what you did to Lauren--"

"I know. I know that. I need to sort that out with her, but ... I don't want to lose our friendship because of all this."

She appears ready to go on the offensive, but then she says quietly, "Neither do I." She breathes a heavy sigh. "Alex, I can understand you being confused. I can understand you not wanting everyone to know right away. But as much as I want everything to be back to normal, it's like ... I have this feeling that there's a lot we all need to work on. Trust, especially."

"I agree." He swallows hard. "Court, it's Christmas. You -- you and Lauren and Jason -- you mean so much to me. I know a lot has happened, but I want to at least know that there is still something to work on, and that we can try to get back to where we were."

"Absolutely." She hesitates but then opens her arms for a hug. "C'mere."

Alex is all too happy to join her in the embrace, despite the feeling that he is going to wake up in a second and find out that this was all a dream and he has to attempt the confrontation all over again. But Courtney feels very real in his arms, and for that he is infinitely thankful.

Now hopefully the rest will fall into place, he thinks.

FISHER HOME

"Dinner!" Paula announces as she sets the last platter of food on the table, but it is rather pointless. The family has already descended on the dining room and begun to figure out a seating arrangement.

She stands back and watches as Claire gets Travis settled, and Matt and Sarah do the same with Victoria. She notices Bill watching and they share a warm, grateful smile. The Sarah they're seeing with Matt is such a departure the daughter they've seen over the last months ... maybe things really are settling down.

Still, Sarah is careful to sit on the end of the table, with Matt next to her and Jason beside him. Molly is all the way across from Jason, placing herself and Sarah practically as far apart as they can be.

Oh well, Paula thinks as she assumes the seat beside the head of the table, at Bill's side. These things take time.

"All right," Molly says once everyone is seated comfortably. "I've got an announcement I'd like to make." She's been having some doubts about making the announcement since

Sarah showed up, but there isn't any reason to hold back ... she hopes. A quick glance over at Sarah reveals indifference. Perhaps it's calculated indifference, but that is far better than outright venom.

Across the table from her, Jason looks excited, as if he wants everyone to know that he was in on the fact that something was up with Molly. She grins at his goofy enthusiasm.

"Actually," she says, "I have told someone about this already -- no, not you, Jay."

He exaggerates his reaction, looking as crushed and deflated as possible.

"I told Dad the day that it -- well, the first part of it -- happened. But then I thought I'd wait until everyone was together." She pauses, savoring the anticipation on everyone's faces. "I've got a new job. I decided to try my hand at the fashion thing again, and I'll be working at Charlene Powers again, starting in a couple of days."

"That's excellent, Molly!" Paula says immediately. She has to glance over at Sarah, wondering if she is overdoing the praise, but tries to dismiss the concern.

Congratulations pour down from the rest of the table and Molly lets them subside before continuing. "There's more. Mom and Dad, this might be music to your ears ... I'm moving into my own apartment."

"You mean you don't want to live with your parents forever?" Bill asks with mock horror.

"Me moving back in here was supposed to be temporary anyway," she says. "It's time I got myself on the track to where I really want to be." She has to cast another glance down the table at Sarah, unable to keep Brent out of her mind entirely. For a moment she wonders how his Christmas in San Diego is going.

"That is good news, Molly. Congratulations," Bill says, raising his full wine glass in a toast. Everyone else follows.

"What a nice way to start off the meal," Paula says. "But before we eat, I think a prayer is in order."

Everyone seems to agree.

"This was possibly the most difficult year this family has ever had to endure," she says, bowing her head. "Not having Tim here for Christmas dinner ... it's hard for me to understand how that can be. But I know he's watching over us, and that he's still with us in some way. He always will be. We were blessed to have had him for as long as we did, and we're blessed to have his memory now."

She takes a peek up at Claire, whose folded hands are drawn up close to her mouth. Her eyes are brimming with tears.

"But we're all here, together," Paula continues. "Despite everything that has happened--" Unconsciously she slips in a moment of silence, and is sure that it is weighing heavily upon Molly and Sarah in particular. "--despite all of that, we were able to find our way back to each other for Christmas. And having everyone here, seeing that it's possible for the family to be together like this ... It gives me faith that love and hope are with us always, and they are the greatest gifts we have, the greatest gifts we share."

The table lapses into a moment of silence, observed even by Travis and Victoria, as though even the youngsters understand the significance of what has been said. And Paula is sure that everyone else can feel the same hope, love, and peace in the air that she can.

Christmas truly is here.

END OF EPISODE #239

What did you think of the Fishers' Christmas celebration? How about Alex's visit to the Chases? Join us in the [Message Forum](#) to debrief about this Christmas!

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