

## "Footprints" Episode #248

### [Previously ...](#)

- Jason received support from Lauren in the wake of his breakup with Courtney. He was surprised to hear her say that she doesn't blame him for everything that happened.
- Lauren worried about her brother and the distance he has created between himself and the family.
- Sarah stood by Diane's side at the hospital, hoping for an improvement in her condition, but then left abruptly to go take care of something important.

## FISHER HOME

Jason listens to the closing of the front door as it echoes through the house. The sound comes as an enormous relief to him: It means that Bill is gone.

Normally he wouldn't be so happy to have his father leave for work in the middle of a discussion, but right now it is exactly what he needs. Bill had been able to see the disappointment over what happened with Courtney written all over his face, and he still doesn't think he could explain the whole situation to anyone else if his life depended upon it.

Maybe the fewer people who know, the less real it has to be ...

Unfortunately, this is painfully real, and it's not going to vanish anytime soon. As much as he wishes there were something he could do to erase his latest fight with Courtney, he knows that there isn't. Nor can he erase the happenings that led up to it -- two years' worth of secrets and shame and undesired lies.

When Bill asked him what was wrong a few moments ago, part of Jason really wanted to lay it all out there, to get the opinion of someone not directly involved in the situation. But every time he thinks about how to relay the story, he realizes how badly it makes him look -- and feel. He couldn't stand to be told by anyone else how much he screwed up.

And yet now he has his cell phone in his hands, one finger hovering above the "talk" button with a staunch determination that Jason knows he won't be able to fight.

He can't. This can't be buried. He needs to talk about it with someone.

He wishes he had the strength to call Courtney and try to hash this out, but he knows that he doesn't.

His finger stabs the button with a confidence that he only wishes the rest of him possessed right now.

"Hello?" comes the reply on the other end after only one ring.

"Hi," he says, needing to force the simple word through his throat.

"Jason?" She doesn't need to wait for confirmation. "Hey ... what's up?"

"I dunno." He shrugs to himself and then paces over the living room floor a few steps, collecting himself. "You busy?"

"Oh, uh, no, not really. Why?"

"I was wondering if you wanted to hang out, or--just talk, or something. God knows I could use it."

"Yeah, yeah, no problem. You wanna come over here?"

"Sure."

She hesitates a little before saying, "You still sound pretty bummed."

"I am. Not even gonna try to lie."

"Well, then," she says, her voice suddenly morphing into a much more positive jingle, "I think there's something I can do about that."

"What?"

"Come over here. It's a surprise."

"All right," he says uncertainly, making a face even though there's no one there to see it. "I'll, uh, I'll see you in a little bit."

"Okay. I'll be here. Bye."

"Bye."

He ends the call and replaces the phone in the side pocket of his carpenter jeans. What kind of surprise is this? He's not sure he wants to find out.

But anything beats sitting here alone with his thoughts, and he *is* intrigued. So he grabs his car keys off the coffee table and sets out on his way to visit Lauren.

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*There ya go, you old bat*, Courtney thinks, her mind assuming a wry tone of voice as she stalks away from the booth. The thought of going back there to refill drinks or deliver the check is enough to make her cringe. The order took maybe 30 minutes to get filled -- a little slow, maybe, but not enough for the female of the older couple occupying the booth to start ragging Courtney as badly as she did.

It's not like she could have done anything about it ... she can't exactly storm into the kitchen and start making the food herself. But of course that doesn't really matter when your food is taking a little long to come out, huh?

She repeats her silent vow never to harass any kind of restaurant staffer again. That's one thing she's gained from this job. That and some money that's been handed right over to her parents and sucked back up by skating.

It'd be nice to be working on getting a real job, using her money to get herself on her feet, get an apartment, all that sort of stuff. Although she's not sure what a "real job" would entail, anyway. Majoring in art history seemed like a good idea at the time, and she definitely enjoyed the subject matter, but now that she's trying to address the prospect of what to do with that degree ... It seems distinctly unapplicable.

*At least I can still skate while I figure out what to do*, she tells herself as she lifts an empty glass off one of her other tables with a smile and takes it back for a refill of Diet Coke. Although with everything that's happened between her and Jason, even skating isn't such a sure bet. She can't keep skating with him -- even the most professional of relationships would be strained, awkward, and probably impossible.

She doesn't want to think about that right now. She doesn't want to think about Jason, or about the fact that everything she'd imagined her life was going to be seems to be fading from sight. Or more appropriately, exploding before her eyes.

She hides the complex web of thoughts from view as she swoops in on another table, asks how everything is, and promises to bring some more napkins. She goes and grabs them, trying to keep her mind blank as she delivers them.

Turning to survey the battlefield before she makes her next move, she notices that one of the small booths over to the side, which happen to be right next to some of her tables, has been filled by a very good-looking young man. His looks are enough to catch her eye

for a moment, and she watches him poring over the menu.

Strangely, he looks to be alone. There is no sign of a purse across the booth from him, indicating a date who's gone to the bathroom. There isn't even a second menu there. She finds herself wondering why a guy like that is eating out alone, and why he didn't just sit at the bar--

And then, suddenly, his eyes come up. Her body fills with a sense of embarrassed dread as she realizes she's been caught staring.

Not that it's that bad, but still ... it's embarrassing. Especially since she'll have to be bustling around in that area the whole time he's eating.

His lips curl up in a smile, revealing a pair of very cute dimples in the middle of his tan cheeks. But before she can shy away, the smile quickly gives way to a different expression -- a quizzical one that narrows his eyes and furrows his brow. Courtney gets the uncomfortable sensation that she is being examined very closely, but she doesn't turn away for fear of what is going to come next.

"Hey!" he calls to her, raising a hand. It's not so much a greeting as a call for her attention, and it accomplishes that.

But what comes out of his mouth next makes her freeze in place.

"Courtney!"

He knows her name.

## **MATT GRAY'S APARTMENT**

"The party can now officially begin," Sarah announces as she troops into the apartment, arms full of accessories for the little girl toddling in beside her.

"I don't know what kinda parties you're used to," Matt says as he takes some of the things from her and moves them to the living room floor, beside the old sofa, "but we didn't used to have diapers at the ones I went to."

"You didn't? Man." Sarah sets down the final bag and closes the door. "I always thought there was something a little weird about running around with diapers on our heads."

"We could do it tonight, if you really want." He flashes her a goofy grin.

Sarah decides not to make light of the double entendre in his statement, though she's sure he must have noticed it, too. She picks up the grocery bag that she just set down. "Let's get some appetizers going."

"Good thinking. Nothing like doing a little eating while you finish cooking."

He picks up Victoria and has a little chat with her as Sarah steps around the small divider into the kitchen area. It's nothing impressive to look at, but as far as her nose can tell, Matt has transformed it into one of the grandest kitchens she has ever experienced. The aroma of the pasta-and-seafood meal hits her at once and she breathes it in deeply. Growing up in the home that she did, she's always known when to appreciate the tastes, smells, and even the sounds and sights of good cooking. Matt definitely knows what he's doing.

He joins her in the kitchen, taking care to set Victoria down at the entrance before he returns to the stove. Sarah watches him as he checks up on everything. The toned muscles of his back and arms expand and contract under the fabric of his t-shirt with every little move that he makes. It's a sight that fills Sarah with a discomfiting sense of excitement.

She turns back to the matter that brought her into the kitchen -- unpacking the grocery bag. She sets the ready-made vegetable platter on the table.

"Isn't it a little ridiculous to have appetizers for the two of us and a toddler?" she asks as she places the plastic lid of the platter on the side.

"Nah," Matt answers, still leaning over the stove. "You can never have too much food."

"Typical man." She pulls out the bottle of wine that she brought and rummages through a few drawers until she finds what she needs to open it. "Do you have wine glasses?"

"Do I have wine glasses? Ha!" He reaches over and flips open a cabinet. "Of course I do. Typical man, huh?"

"That's right," she says softly, unconsciously stepping back again to watch him in action. "You know, you just keep on amazing me."

"They're glasses. It's not *that* big a deal."

"I know, I know." She brushes a loose wisp of dark blonde hair back behind her ear. "But I mean, being such a good father, and the cooking, and -- and the fact that you gave me another shot even after I was such a pain in your ass. You've had one surprise after another."

He doesn't react with the kind of amused smile that she expected. Instead, he keeps his focus down on the stove as he responds -- perhaps a little defensively, "What, you don't have any tricks up your sleeve?"

"Me? Please. Of course I do."

"Like what?"

"Like ..." She pauses in consideration, but suddenly it hits her. "Like the thing I'm not gonna tell you about right now."

That gets his attention away from the stove. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I do have a little 'trick up my sleeve,' as you call it. A big one. But you're gonna have to wait to find out what it is."

## **DAIRY QUEEN RESTAURANT**

"We could have just talked at your place," Jason says as he follows Lauren through the front door of the restaurant.

"I thought you could use a little change of pace," she says, leading the way to the counter.

"Change of pace how? From cleanliness to total filth?" He gazes around the restaurant in amusement. Like in most fast food joints, there are pieces of paper, fallen French fries, and other miscellaneous scraps littering the brown linoleum squares of the floor.

"Ice cream. It'll cheer you up."

He squinches up one eye. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not eight years old."

"You could fool me sometimes," she smiles. She faces the counter long enough to get the attention of the older man behind the register.

"I'll have a large Mint Oreo blizzard," she says, and then she turns to Jason. "What about you?"

He looks a little bit surprised. "Same, actually."

"All right, so *two* large Mint Oreo blizzards," she tells the man. He punches the order into the register as Lauren pulls out her wallet and a \$10 bill. She hands it to the man, but Jason stops her with a hand on her arm.

"I'll get my own," he says.

"No, no, no. You're in mope-mode and I'm gonna help you out of it. I think I can afford to splurge for a little ice cream."

He pulls back, though a bit hesitantly. "All right. Thanks."

"My pleasure."

They step back from the counter to wait and Jason almost immediately takes a straw from the dispenser and begins fiddling with it.

"Having fun?" Lauren asks after he spends nearly a full minute toying the straw, without taking any notice of her.

He glances up at her, then back down at the straw, and then sets it aside. "Oh yeah, tons."

She picks up the straw and entwines it between her fingers. "This is gonna get easier."

"I hope so. I can't stop thinking about it ... I can't stop thinking about her. I just wanna make all this crap go away."

"I wish I could. But we have to wait it out, I guess." She sighs, her eyes now planted on the straw. "I'm not sure how to reassure you."

"Well, I wouldn't expect you to have all the answers."

"Me? Please. I'm lucky if I have *any* of the answers."

That gets a small grin out of him.

"Look," she says slowly, not quite sure how to word what she's thinking, "this is gonna let up eventually. It's not gonna hurt this bad forever ... Courtney's gonna ease up at some point."

His expression indicates that he's not so certain of that.

"And if she doesn't," Lauren adds carefully, "then maybe this really was for the best. And maybe you two will be better off apart, in the long run."

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"Courtney!" the young man calls out again. But the surprise has her paralyzed, and she doesn't react for what feels like a very long moment.

Finally she takes a few uncertain steps towards him. "Yeah?"

"I knew I recognized you," he says, standing. He begins to approach her, and without realizing it she moves back a step.

He must be able to see her confusion, because he extends a comforting hand. "You don't recognize me, do you?"

She shakes her head instinctively, but then pauses to re-examine him before answering. He's tall, towering a good head above her at the least. And he's thin, but not lanky. She can see a strong chest underneath the light black sweater he's wearing. His skin has an appealing tan that goes perfectly with his medium brown hair, cut in a shaggy style that offsets the boyish quality of his face. In a way, it all looks familiar. But she still can't place him.

"Um, no." She scrambles one last time to remember him, but she can't. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. It's been a long time." He shakes his head as he adds, "I wasn't even sure that was you at first. You've definitely ... grown up."

She can feel him looking her over and a deep blush follows in her cheeks.

"Trevor," he says, breaking the awkward silence and extending a hand. "Lauren's brother."

"Ohhhhh!" Of course. Now she can see in him the picture of the teenage boy she has always associated with the mention of Lauren's brother. Only he's matured a great deal ... definitely matured.

"When did you get back?" she asks, clumsily meeting his hand with her own for a shake. His grip is sturdy, not overpowering but confident enough to make her take notice.

"Just today, actually. Speaking of which ..." He moves in a little closer and his tone turns conspiratorial. "Could you not mention to Lauren that you saw me? I wanna surprise her."

"Yeah, sure. So, uh, what are you doing back? Visiting?"

He shrugs, but in the quick movement Courtney can see him getting momentarily lost in some sort of consideration. "I guess so," he says finally. "It's been too long since I had any time with Lauren."

"She misses you."

"Good! I've missed her, too. But I guess that's what happens as you get older ... you just sorta get taken over by all this other stuff."

Courtney finds herself nodding and, oddly enough, thinking about Jason again. Damn him. He shouldn't be getting this much attention. "How are things? How's school?"

Trevor slips his hands into the pockets of his khaki pants and rolls his eyes around the restaurant for a moment. "Things are good. I can't complain." Then, suddenly, his focus sharpens and his gaze narrows in on her. "Are you all right?"

She knows that the look she shoots back at him must be as puzzled -- or, perhaps, startled -- as she feels right now. "It's nothing," she says hurriedly.

"Nothing?"

"I'm fine. Look, I need to get back to work, okay? I'll see you later."

"All right ..." The end of the word dribbles off his lips as he watches her walk off. "Catch ya later."

There's a sarcastic edge to the goodbye -- as if he knows that she's breaking away before he can do any probing into what's bugging her -- that ticks her off. As she heads back to the kitchen to grab another set of orders, she remembers the attitude she used to hear Trevor giving his and Lauren's parents back when they were all in high school. He was a much different kid then -- at least on the outside -- but obviously he hasn't had the chip knocked off his shoulder.

*As if I don't get enough of that around here,* she sighs as she grabs two more plates and heads back out into the sea of diners.

## **MATT GRAY'S APARTMENT**

"This has been really fun," Matt says, moving his fork over the empty plate one more time. He leans back in the chair and his hands move to his stomach. With a groan, he adds, "I don't think I could eat like this all the time, though."

Sarah shakes her head. "Please! If I could cook like you, I'd eat like this every day. Of course I'd probably just eat myself into an early grave, but still."

Matt cracks a smile and then begins stacking up the dishes. Sarah reaches out a hand to stop him.

"I'll get it," she says firmly.

"No, no, no. Hang out. I'll do it. It'll take two seconds to put them in the dishwasher."

She makes a move to stand, but his eyes tell her not to, so she sits back and brings her wine glass back to her lips. The rich burgundy slides down her throat, its feel now familiar after the numerous glasses she's imbibed tonight. Pleasant though the taste is, she's growing a little numb to it.

"This was kinda fun, having a big dinner like this, even if it was just the three of us," Matt calls across the tiny kitchen. "We should do it again. Might be fun to invite some other people next time."

"I think we'd better just stick to this happy little group."

Matt turns off the faucet, although Sarah isn't sure whether's he done rinsing the dishes or not. "Are ya gettin' antisocial?"

"I didn't say anything about being antisocial," she snips back. The words tumble clumsily off her suddenly heavy lips. "There are just certain people I'd, you know, prefer not to be subjected to."

"Ah-ha," he says after an uncertain pause. Then the faucet comes back on and starts to fade into the wall of her thoughts, which are running into one another more quickly than she can keep track of them.

When the faucet switches off and the background hum of the water ceases, her attention switches back to Matt, though she isn't sure why.

"You did a good job of being around Molly during the holidays," he says carefully as he sets the dishes aside. "You can keep that up."

"Doesn't mean I have to like it."

She can hear the hesitation before he speaks. "No, you don't, but that'd make the whole thing a lot easier, wouldn't it? If you sorta started to move--"

"Move on, I know, blah blah blah!" She bursts up out of her seat, flinging her arms in the air. "It's not that easy, Matt! I'm not just gonna get over everything that happened!"

"I'm just saying--"

"I know what you're saying! That I'm irrational, that I need to get over this, whatever. I've heard it before. The ten millionth spin hasn't made it any more interesting!"

He moves out of the kitchen, back at her, but she stomps backward and finds herself up against the wall.

"I'm getting the hell out of here," she says suddenly, trying to push her way past him with her shoulder.

"Oh no, you don't!" His firm grip wraps tightly around her upper arm. She tries to jerk away but her best efforts aren't enough. The thought of slapping him crosses her mind, but then he releases her.

"You're not driving home right now," he says in a tone that makes her grit her teeth.

"Well, I'm sure as hell not gonna sit here and listen to you lecture me!"

He drops his forehead into his palm and lets it lie there as he breathes heavily. "Fine. Then go ... go lie down for a while. I'll stay out of your hair. I don't want you to drive."

The idea of lying down does seem kind of appealing all of a sudden. "Fine," she says, spinning away from him, already on her way into the bedroom, "just leave me alone."

She doesn't even hear whether or not he responds. She slams the bedroom door behind her as soon as she can.

Hopefully Victoria didn't understand any of that. Sarah wants to go out and get her, but she can't face Matt like this right now. Not yet. She needs to get her head together. Lying down will help.

Sleep overcomes her quickly, more quickly than she had any idea it might. And in those last few moments of lucidity before the curtain swings closed, she finds her mind hissing curses at Molly. This is never going to stop ...

## END OF EPISODE #248

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