

## "Footprints" Episode #306

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

- Alex cut short an afternoon with Dylan to meet with Trevor and discuss the portion of Alex's novel that Trevor read.
- When Nick and Katherine took an aggressive stance regarding Ryan, Bill stood by Paula's side as she informed them that Ryan is as much her family as he is theirs.
- Matt confessed to Sarah that he had an affair with his sister-in-law that led to her suicide and his estrangement from his brother. Sarah admitted to having looked into Matt's background. Despite these revelations, the two agreed to be each other's support.

### **ALEX MARSHALL & JASON FISHER'S APARTMENT**

It's been getting worse. It has to be getting worse.

An hour ago, the computer's hum was barely perceptible, merely a background glow in the quiet air of the bedroom. But it has been increasing steadily, growing more and more noticeable, and now it has reached a full-blown buzz. The noise rings in Alex Marshall's ears, seeming to have conquered every bit of air around him as he sits staring at the irritating fluorescent gleam of the monitor.

Alex exhales heavily. He has been pondering the same words, scrolling the mouse back and forth, up and down through the document, for nearly an entire hour. Something isn't fitting, he knows that much, but he cannot fathom how to make the words on the screen any less disastrous than they currently seem.

He is reading a particular sentence for the fourth or fifth time in a row when, suddenly, everything around him goes black.

At least that's how it seems. It takes him just a split-second to realize that there hasn't been some major catastrophe like a power failure -- welcome though such an event might be at the moment.

"Guess who!" comes the familiar voice from close behind him.

"Hey," Alex says, and the hands fall away from his eyes. The offensive white of Microsoft Word -- is it *always* that bright? -- comes back into view, but only for a second. Soon Dylan has made his way in front of Alex and is straddling him, effectively blocking out the computer screen.

"You writing?" he asks.

"Trying," Alex says with a sigh. "I really have no idea how to clean this whole part up. Revision is almost as big a pain in the ass as the actual writing."

"Didn't you have somebody look this over? Maybe he can help you figure it out."

"Yeah, maybe."

Dylan lifts his eyebrows suggestively. Alex knows what that means: He has no idea how to respond other than to suggest a diversion.

"How'd you get in here?" Alex asks.

"Jason let me in. He's out there watching the World Series or something."

"The World Series was, like, three weeks ago."

Dylan rolls his eyes. "Whatever. I don't do sports." He stops, as if to reconsider, and then adds, "Athletes, that's another thing."

Alex manages a tiny smirk, but it's halfhearted.

Dylan must recognize it. "You in a bad mood?"

Despite his initial instinct to shake his head and change the subject, Alex says with a groan, "Kinda. Just frustrated, I guess."

"Why? What's wrong?" Dylan asks as his fingers begin working the back of Alex's neck.

"This stupid book. I'm so close to being done, but I'm completely stuck, and I can't shop the manuscript to agents 'til it's finished, and I can't even *try* to shop it to actual publishers 'til I have an agent ..."

"Don't worry about that stuff. Just get it written. That's the step you're on right now."

"Easier said than done."

"You worry too much."

"Yeah, maybe." Alex falls silent for a few seconds before adding, "And this month is a year since my mom died."

He feels the fingers on his neck slow down, get less seductive, more comforting.

"I'm sorry," Dylan says quietly.

Alex shrugs. "There's nothing we can do about it. Nothing anybody can do about it. It's just--weird, I guess."

"Yeah."

Silence comes over them again, but it's heavier. It's the grief in the air, the discomfort -- the type that can render entire rooms, auditoriums, stadiums quieter than a deserted stretch of road in the middle of the night.

"Look on the bright side," Dylan finally says. "That means it's been a year since our first date."

Alex knows that Dylan is only trying to lift his spirits, and he knows that the observation should make him feel at least a little better, but he's strangely unmoved by it right now. An entire year ...

"What?" Dylan asks.

"Huh?"

"You just looked all spaced-out."

"Oh," Alex says, feeling his tongue fumble in his mouth. "I--I don't know. I guess I'm just thinking about all these huge things, how it's been a year and how my mom really is gone and how I'm trying to carve out a path for the rest of my life, and it's like ..."

"Like what?" Dylan asks, leaning back just a few inches.

Alex swallows. "I never thought that this is where I'd be at this point in my life. This isn't how I ever pictured things being."

## **KING'S BAY PARK**

Pinpricks of light permeate the night sky. The sounds of downtown have faded considerably into the background for Sarah Fisher and Matt Gray as they sit facing one another on a blanket on one of the park's vast expanses of lawn, the remains of Matt's surprise picnic scattered around them.

"So, that's when she tried to tell me that what she did wasn't worth losing our friendship over, and I pointed out that ..." Sarah trails off briefly, then changes course. "Matt?"

"What's wrong?" She lets the question hang in the air for a moment, grimacing slightly. "I'm ruining our night with all of this complaining, right?"

"Not at all," he counters quietly. "I was just thinking. Go on."

"I guess there's not much more to tell. Diane pretty much tried to justify the way she dragged my entire family through public scandal and humiliation, as you know, and I wasn't going to hear it," Sarah finishes. She takes a deep breath before topping off her summation, averting her gaze. "She also pointed out that I was in no position to be judging her -- because of ... my investigation." There. She said it.

Sarah swallows hard. She's been afraid to raise this point again, especially since so much in her world has changed in the time since their last dramatic confrontation. But everything with Nicole and his brother still happened. And it's always going to be there, she realizes.

But, more importantly, Sarah finds herself hoping that he is always going to be there. When his lips curl into a smile, the wave of relief she feels within is surpassed only by the resurgence of her freshly realized love for Matt, something she hasn't had much time to sort out because of everything that has recently transpired with her mother.

"I'm glad all of that is out in the open," he begins quietly. "I really am. But I don't think right now is the best time to talk about it again, especially in light of everything that's happened with your family these last few weeks." He pauses. "Where do you think that situation is headed, by the way?"

"I'm really not sure," she answers, relieved at his decision to change the subject. They survived their first test -- the first mention of his past since he had told her his side of the story -- without incident. That's enough for now. "I know Mom had Ryan over for lunch at the house today, but I don't know how it went. I should probably call her when I get home."

"Call tomorrow," he suggests. "I think you've dealt with enough heavy stuff lately to last you a lifetime. And I've gotta say, Sarah, I'm impressed."

"With what?"

"Just by your actions as of late. I mean, come on," he chuckles, "you're actually defending your family. When was the last time that happened?"

"Shut up," she answers, exaggerating an eye roll and slapping him on the leg with mock indignation.

"I'm serious," he persists. "I'm impressed." A bolt of silence strikes, seemingly just as a

bitter, icy wind blows through. "Anyway, it's getting cold out here," he says, "I should probably drive you home."

## FISHER HOME

The carpet is soft under Paula Fisher's bare feet as she makes her way from the bathroom to the bed. She flips the light switch on the wall, leaving the warm, yellow glow from the lamp on her nightstand to light the room.

She pulls back the neatly made sheets and gets into the bed. The mattress seems to absorb some of the tension from her body almost immediately. She rests her head on the pillow and it does the same.

Eventually she reaches to the nightstand and picks up the paperback novel that's been sitting there, largely untouched, for weeks now. She hasn't had the energy to focus on reading. And, even though she opens it to a dog-eared page, it quickly becomes apparent that this will not be a night for reading. She holds the book in her hands and stares at the ceiling for several minutes, lost in thought.

Lunch with Ryan earlier went so well. It was the kind of conversation she'd hoped they could have: a chance to learn things about each other, to forge a path through the dense woods of the years that have separated them. But seeing Claire reject him, seeing him recoil in pain, cast an uneasy shadow over the whole experience. Watching her loved ones in such anguish is bad enough, but the encounter between Claire and Ryan only served to remind her of how intricate and complex the entire situation is.

She is still staring off into space when she hears footsteps on the stairs. Claire is already upstairs, she knows, and the footsteps are too heavy to belong to Travis. Paula braces herself.

Seconds later, Bill appears in the doorway of the bedroom. His eyes land on her almost immediately, and she feels a new tension grip hold of her. She is sure that he can feel it, too.

"Hi," she says, using the same careful tone that she has been using for weeks and weeks. "I didn't realize you were going to close up tonight."

Bill moves to the closet to hang his jacket. He doesn't look at her as he speaks. "We had someone call in sick, so I decided to stick around."

"Oh." Paula finds herself at a loss for words. She contemplates trying to immerse herself in the novel, but that seems nearly as tiring an option. "We had a little incident earlier."

"What happened?" he asks. There's a certain amount of concern in his voice, and it reassures Paula to think that, underneath all this ugliness and awkwardness, he really does care -- if not for her directly, then at least for the family. Not that she ever doubted his love for the kids, but still ...

"Travis decided it would be a good idea to play basketball in the dining room, since Claire wouldn't let him go outside once it got dark. One of the vases became a casualty."

She waits for him to respond, but when he doesn't, she adds, "That pink-tinted one that Molly bought last year. It was beyond repair, so I had to throw it away."

Still no response. Bill closes the closet door and begins moving toward the bathroom.

"Bill," she says, unable to bear it any longer. "Are things ever going to feel normal between us again?"

She begins to worry that he is not going to answer that question, either, but he pauses by the bathroom door and, after a moment of silence, answers quietly: "I don't know."

Paula accepts that with a sigh. Why should he know? She certainly doesn't.

"Where do we stand, then?" she asks. "This--it's so strange not knowing what you're thinking, not having any idea what you think about our relationship now."

Her worries hang in the air, unanswered. With each passing second, they sound more foolish and more desperate to her ears.

Finally he turns to her, making eye contact for the first time since he entered the room.

"I'm not sure," he says. His voice is still quiet, and there's something raw about it that makes her believe he is being sincere. "I--I just don't know."

Before she can say anything more, he enters the bathroom. He closes the door behind him.

Paula takes her index finger out of the book and places it back on the nightstand. She reaches up and switches the lamp off. The room goes dark, except for the crack of light peeking out from under the bathroom door.

She turns onto her side, her back to the bathroom and to Bill's side of the bed, and tries to picture a future full of lonely nights in the same bed as her husband.

## **ALEX MARSHALL & JASON FISHER'S APARTMENT**

"What do you mean?" Dylan asks, his expression hardening.

"Not that I don't like where I am now," Alex says. His cheeks burn up. "But things are so different from how I envisioned."

Dylan backs away from him, as if distance will enable to examine Alex better. He still doesn't look comfortable.

"It's working on the book so much," Alex says. "That's what's got me thinking like this."

"Like what? What's so different from what you expected?"

A hundred responses tickle Alex's lips, but none of them seem right.

Dylan stands, shifting his weight back to his own legs, but still standing over Alex. "Is it this? Being with a guy?" There's something accusatory about his tone that makes Alex squirm.

"No," Alex says, but as soon as the word is out, he knows he has lied. "Maybe, yeah. For so long I told myself that this was something that would go away or that I'd be able to work around--"

"That's ridiculous."

"I know. But when you spend so many years in a certain mindset, it's hard to switch it off completely."

"I guess," Dylan says, sounding unconvinced.

His eyes catch Alex's, and a long moment of silent staring ensues. Alex drinks in the image of this tall, handsome, blond man in front of him--on top of him, almost. Suddenly Dylan looks very unfamiliar, almost like a complete stranger.

How is that possible?

"Is it that one guy?" Dylan asks, rupturing the silence.

Alex's throat tightens. "What guy?"

"The one in your book. From college."

Alex isn't sure how to answer. Would an honest response be offensive? Would it be an

admission of some kind of disloyalty?

"He's gone," Alex says. "Long gone. It's not like I'm still hung up on him."

"But you're thinking about him because you've been spending so much time on your book."

"Yeah." Eye contact seems strangely difficult now.

"You're better off without him," Dylan says abruptly, in a tone that Alex hardly recognizes because it's so unexpected. But it's casual, nonchalant, somehow even reassuring.

Dylan lowers himself back down onto Alex's legs. His hand returns to Alex's neck.

"He obviously couldn't deal with it," he continues. "Probably still hasn't. Don't waste energy being all hung up on some closet case."

"I'm not just sitting here daydreaming--"

"I know. And I'm sure it'll turn out to make a really good story. Just don't get yourself thinking that you missed out on anything with him. He couldn't accept himself, and he probably would've done the same thing to you. You're better off without him."

On some level, Alex is sure that Dylan is right, but that logic means nothing in comparison to the surge of heat in his stomach.

The only words he can even begin to attach to the feeling are, "It was important to me."

"I know." Dylan's fingers go back to the bottom of Alex's hair, toying with the sensitive line where it meets the skin of his neck. "But it doesn't matter now. He doesn't matter."

Alex is still trying to figure out how to vocalize what he is feeling when the subject switches.

"Besides," Dylan says, "I bet that's not the only thing you thought would turn out differently. Losing your mom has to be a big part of it."

"Yeah," Alex admits, swept suddenly back into that realm, feeling a sudden wash of guilt for allowing the two issues to intermingle.

"She's watching over you. She loves you. Always did and always will. You have to believe that, and things won't seem so bad or so confusing."



Alex finds himself nodding. The feeling of Dylan's fingers on his neck turns from an annoying prickle to a soothing comfort.

"I hope so," he hears himself say.

## **SARAH FISHER'S APARTMENT**

Sarah studies Matt as he pulls his pickup into the parking lot of her apartment complex. She's gotten very good at reading him: his facial expressions, body language -- even his silences, like the one pervading the truck right now. Something seems to be troubling him.

"I really appreciated the picnic," she says, cupping her hands under the weak stream of heat seeping from the vehicle's passenger vent. "And Victoria's at her first sleepover tonight with that little Jessica from preschool, so I might just go nuts and stay up late watching movies on HBO. Or something."

"I can't believe she's made her first friend," Matt comments somewhat absently, opening his door and getting out of the car. Sarah does the same.

"Oh, she's a little social butterfly, Matt," Sarah quips, digging in her purse for the keys to her apartment. Something has started to bother her, too, which is odd considering the amount of time that she has spent with Matt in the last few years. "You're going to have to watch out, or she'll be on her first date by next year!" *It's nervousness*, she realizes, *but why?*

"I don't think they grow up that fast," he replies, stopping as they reach her door. Silence sets in again, and their eyes lock for an instant before she turns her attention to unlocking her door.

"Did you want to come up for a little while, or are you already exhausted from listening to me all day?"

"I never get tired of talking to you," he answers sheepishly. "But I should probably head home, anyway. I don't want to keep you from your movie marathon."

"Well, I'm not definitely doing that," she reminds him, feeling herself grow just a little bit frustrated. "So, you know, that's not a definite."

"Right," he says. "Well, either way, I'll probably see you tomorrow, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," she nods, looking down and fidgeting with her key before swinging the door open and replacing it in her purse. When she looks up, however, his face is inches

from hers. And growing closer.

"Goodnight, Sarah," he half-whispers. This is what he was thinking about on the way home. She's sure of it.

"Goodnight, Matt," she hears herself say.

The words are still on her breath when his warm lips press against hers. The kiss deepens, and she feels his hand reach up and slide around to the base of her neck, his thumb massaging her earlobe for a moment before tracing a path down her jaw line. He pulls back, and she opens her eyes, meeting his gaze for only an instant before pulling his mouth to hers again. She finds herself tugging at the base of his sweatshirt, her hands sliding underneath and over his warm, muscled chest.

"Sarah--"

She cuts him off with one word: "No." She's let this growing feeling inside of her build for far too long, and something has to give. No more waiting.

No more wanting.

She pushes the door closed behind her and turns to remove his sweatshirt, all in one swift motion. His kisses are becoming hungrier now, too, and once his shirt is off his hands travel under her shirt, along her waist and up her spine.

Sarah keeps kissing him as she pulls him into the bedroom.

### **END OF EPISODE #306**

*Are things as clear-cut in these three relationships as they seem?*

*Is it time for Sarah and Matt to be together?*

*Do Dylan and Alex have a chance?*

*And can Paula and Bill repair the rift that's grown between them?*

*Share your thoughts in the Footprints Forum!*

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