

"Footprints" Episode #231

[Previously ...](#)

**Alex accepted Jason's offer to listen to his story of self-discovery, but he needed a little time before he was ready to share.*

**Lauren told Courtney to talk to Alex and Jason to find out what happened at the party.*

**Eric's presentation of Diane's case in court made Claire fear that she would lose custody of Samantha.*

COUNTY COURTHOUSE

The courtroom is still trapped in an eerie type of deep-freeze as Claire watches her lawyer rise to begin presenting her case. Diane's side of the argument -- Eric Westin's swaggering confidence, the way he so casually depicted Claire's life as one that no child should be forced to endure -- has been branded into Claire's consciousness. Now it refuses to relent, seering into her as painfully as when he first spoke and deepening its ugly scar.

"Your Honor," Jim Thompson begins, with a calm collectedness that makes Claire grateful for his existence, "Mr. Westin has painted a picture that, I agree, would be difficult to disregard. However, I feel the need to take issue with much of what he said."

Out of the corner of her eye, Claire sees Diane shaking her head, as if pitying Claire and Jim for having to resort to such a pathetic, last-ditch attempt at retaining custody of Samantha.

Jim stands directly in front of Claire, blocking her view of the judge. "Mr. Westin made it seem as though Mrs. Fisher has consistently placed her own safety and that of her family out of choice. Can she be blamed for the behavior of her father, with whom she chose to have limited contact in the years preceding his death? His forced involvement in her life was not something that Mrs. Fisher could control.

"Moreover, the circumstances that led to Tim Fisher's death occurred because of his wife's desire to protect her family from the threat of two men whose actions continued to haunt her and play a role in her life. Mr. Fisher placed himself in danger because he did not want to see his wife in that position. If he had not done so, perhaps Claire Fisher would have been the victim of the tragic circumstances that took her husband's life."

The thought is one that Claire has considered many times, and it gives her the same chill now as it always does. Perhaps she was supposed to be the one on the pier on New Year's Eve; perhaps she was supposed to meet her end that night. If she'd been able to hide her mission from Tim for a few hours longer, then he never would have been endangered ...

"It is true, as Mr. Westin said, that Ms. Bishop's visits with Samantha have been free of any incidents that would give the court reason to believe that she should not have full custody of Samantha," Jim is saying as Claire emerges from the fog of thought. "Of course, he failed to mention how Ms. Bishop conceived Samantha after tricking Tim Fisher into sleeping with her while he was suffering from amnesia. Nor was it mentioned that, while pregnant, Ms. Bishop climbed out on a ledge at the King's Bay Metropolitan Hotel and threatened to hurl herself off of it.

"And neither has the court been reminded of the loving home life that the Fisher family offers Samantha," he continues. "She is being raised along with Tim and Claire Fisher's son, Travis, who is just a year older than her. She has loving grandparents, aunts, uncles, and a cousin. She is as much a part of the Fisher family as any other member and has been since her birth.

"I ask of you, I beg of you," Jim pleads with a sincerity that tweaks every one of Claire's already-raw nerves, "do not devastate the Fisher family any more than it has been already, and do not devastate Samantha by taking her away from the only real family she has ever known."

CHASE HOME

"Whoa!" Courtney cries out, jumping back to avoid being hit by the opening door.

"Sorry!" Don calls. He grabs the doorknob to stop the front door from opening the rest of the way. "I didn't expect you to be standing right there."

"I was just on my way out," Courtney says as Don comes into the house, a paper grocery bag in each hand.

"And I was just on my way in," he replies, nodding his chin towards the grocery bags. "Apparently that was where we ran into a problem."

Courtney laughs. "Yeah, guess so."

"So where are you headed?" he asks casually.

"Alex's. There's some stuff I need to talk to him about. I've been stalling on it for too long."

Don cocks his head with concern. "Sounds serious."

"It is." She releases a weighty sigh. "Some stuff happened at the party the other night ... I'm worried about him. And about Lauren. Something went down between them."

"Something bad?"

"I don't know. Dad, did Alex ... Did he tell you anything that time you went to talk to him?"

Don shakes his head. "No, not especially. I did most of the talking."

"All right ..." She clasps her keys tightly in the palm of her left hand, bringing her other fist up to her mouth as she deliberates. "I think I figured out why he's been so weird with Lauren."

Don's expression urges her to go on.

"I think he's gay, Dad. I mean--" She pauses, waiting for the surprise to register in his expression. It doesn't.

"That's what I was thinking," Don says. "I knew I couldn't force it out of him, but I tried to encourage him to come and talk with me if he ever wanted to."

"It makes sense," she continues. "The way he's gone so back and forth over Lauren -- the way he's been so isolated these last couple months. It all fits."

"So do you think he told Lauren? Is that what happened at the party?"

"Maybe. She was totally in shock that night, but the next morning she told me I should go talk to Alex to find out what was going on. Why else would she have said that?"

"You should go talk to him," Don says, stepping aside to give her a clear exit path.

"Yeah. Lauren is such a mess over this ... I need to figure out what's going on."

"Court," he interjects before she can take more than two steps. "I know Lauren's probably gotten hurt here, and she shouldn't have. But don't be too rough on Alex."

Lips pursed, Courtney nods. "I just want to make sure that everyone is okay."

"They will be," he says assuringly, closing the door as she steps outside.

She walks briskly to her car, hopping in and buckling up as quickly as she can. She turns

the key and hears the engine jump to life, and in a matter of moments she is on her way. But as she drives through the crisp autumn day, Don's words of assurance grow dimmer and dimmer. She finds herself grappling for some faint hope that this will all turn out nicely.

MARSHALL APARTMENT

The door flies open in front of Jason with a rush of excitement, and for a moment he sees the same energy on the other side of the door. But the sparkle fades quickly from Sally's face and, with decided disinterest, she flashes him another look and calls out, "Alex!"

Not wanting to make eye contact with Sally and be caught in an awkward moment with her, Jason watches over her shoulder for Alex to emerge from his bedroom. It takes only a few seconds, thankfully.

"Hey," Alex says as he approaches Jason. Sally has already retreated back into the living room area.

"Hey," Jason responds. "How you doing?"

"Not bad," Alex shrugs quietly.

Jason motions for him to lean in and whispers, "Hey, is something up with your mom? She seemed awfully ..."

"Rude?" Alex cuts in, in a matching whisper. "She's waiting for her new boyfriend to show up. Don't mind her."

"Ah." Jason moves back to a regular distance and his voice resumes its regular volume. "So, uh, you wanted to talk?"

"Yeah, thanks for coming over. I was just thinking -- I've been doing a lot of that lately -- I was thinking about everything, and about what you said the other day. That if I wanted to talk about stuff--"

"I meant it, dude. I'm here to listen."

"Thanks," Alex says, pausing for perhaps a moment too long in appreciation. "You wanna go over to the park? Might be better than hanging around here."

Jason casts a glance over at Sally, sitting in front of the television. "Yeah, that sounds good."

"All right, let's go." Alex grabs a fleece coat off of one of the hooks beside the door.

The young men barely make it out of the doorway when they nearly walk right into an older man. His face has a roughness that would seem out of place with his silver hair, except that it has taken on more of a dull gray tint.

"You must be here to see my mom," Alex says. He tips his head toward the apartment. "She's inside."

"Thanks," the man says, a bit gruffly.

"I'm Alex." He extends his hand for a shake.

The older man meets the gesture with his own rough hand and a tighter grip than Alex expected. "Stan. Stan Lincoln."

COUNTY COURTHOUSE

"Thank you, Mr. Thompson," says the judge, a middle-aged lady whose compassionate voice and kind smile keep sparking jolts of hope in Claire.

"We'll have a short recess now while I consider what I've just heard and come to a decision," the judge announces. Claire rises mechanically when everyone else does, and they watch the judge file out of the courtroom.

"What'd you think?" Diane says to Eric almost as soon as the judge disappears. "How'd they do?"

"He made a strong case," Eric says with a slight shrug. That fact doesn't appear to worry him much.

"I thought you sounded better. He spent a lot of time trying to fight what we said."

"Yeah. Of course, Claire is the one being challenged for custody, so she's more on the defensive than we are."

Diane leans back in her chair, soaking up what he has said, and then suddenly rockets forward again. "Do you think I'm gonna win?"

"I'm not the judge," Eric says defensively, as if washing his hands of the matter by trying

to show that there is nothing he can do about it.

A wistful look sweeps over Diane. "It'll be so nice to have my daughter back with me ... I've waited so long for this."

Before Eric can respond, her look turns devious. "And besides, you know you'll be amply rewarded, right?"

Eric accepts the promise with an uneasy grin. "I do know that much."

"Good, you're getting to know me well." Diane runs a teasing finger down his cheek.

"Don't worry," he says after a flash of strange silence. He leans forward, his elbows propped up on the table and his chin resting in his hands. "Things are going to turn out for the best today."

MARSHALL APARTMENT

If she weren't so desperate to find Alex, she wouldn't be knocking.

Courtney flew into the building with a pulsing momentum, up the stairs when the elevator was in use, and down the hall to the Marshalls' door. But now that she is standing in front of it, doubt has chosen to tease her boldly.

She can hear Alex's mother in there with some man, talking rather loudly. After what happened with Sally and Don, Courtney would prefer not to face Alex's mother, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

She raises her hand to deliver three firm knocks.

"Who is it?" comes the call from inside.

Her mouth dry, Courtney takes longer than she would have imagined possible to respond, and every instant of it is nerve-wracking. "Courtney. Courtney Chase!" she manages to yell back.

"Oh," comes Sally's startled reply. A second later the door bursts open, Sally's grinning face right up in the doorway. "Courtney, hi. You're looking for Alex?"

"Mm-hmm."

"He went to the park, I think," Sally says. "With a friend. They headed over there not too long ago."

"All right," Courtney says, thanks. The door doesn't close right away, and she spies an older man lingering over Sally's shoulder.

"I'll head on over there," she says, not quite taking her eyes off of the man. There's something strange -- unsettling -- about the way he is watching her. "Thanks," she adds quickly, raising a hand in a hurried goodbye wave.

"Nice-lookin' girl," Stan says as Sally shuts the door. "She got something going on with your son?"

"I don't think so," Sally answers. Her shoulders shrug slightly. It isn't an issue to which she has given much thought. "She's my ex-husband's daughter, actually."

"Ex-husband?"

"Complicated story. I'll explain some other time." A playful grin curls Sally's lips and wipes the seriousness from her face.

"Sounds good to me," Stan says, and the matter is forgotten as they reach for each other.

COUNTY COURTHOUSE

"I really don't like this," Claire says suddenly.

Jim puts down his pen and pauses a minute over the yellow legal pad on the table in front of him. They have been sitting in silence for quite awhile now, and although he hasn't been planning on getting other work done while he waits with a client for a ruling, he has been trying to organize some things. Now he shifts his attention back to Claire.

"It's going to be all right," he says.

"We don't know that."

Jim finds himself struggling for a response, but thankfully -- perhaps -- he hears a voice calling out for them to rise again. The judge files back into the courtroom and Jim feels his own chest tightening a bit.

Claire shoots another glance over at Diane and Eric. They both look nervous, too. That realization sends a momentary wave of hope washing over Claire.

"I've come to a decision," the judge begins. Her voice sounds to Claire as though it would be warm and comforting -- much like Paula's -- outside of the courtroom. But now it sounds uncomfortably authoritative.

"I'd like to remind you all that this is merely a preliminary hearing," she continues. "All that is being decided today is where Samantha will spend the weeks until the actual custody hearing."

"Uh-oh," Diane mutters to Eric.

The judge focuses on them. "Ms. Bishop, clearly you have made some mistakes in the past. But from the sounds of it, you also recognize that. And it is true that the time you have spent with your daughter in the last two years has been absolutely free of incident."

Diane gives Eric a sideways look. What is that supposed to mean?

"And Mrs. Fisher, I understand that you have been the victim of some very unfortunate circumstances. I'm truly sorry for the loss of your husband."

Claire begins to breathe a sigh of relief.

"However," come the next words, stopping the sigh in its tracks, "Ms. Bishop is Samantha's biological mother, and you have not adopted Samantha. Therefore, she does have a stronger claim to custody."

Diane's eyes go wide as she hangs on the next words. So close ...

"Therefore, I am awarding temporary custody to Ms. Bishop."

KING'S BAY PARK

"So I dunno, high school just sort of sucked. When I got to college, it was like, whoa," Alex says, hands buried in the pockets of his fleece jacket as the fallen leaves ruffle and crumble beneath his feet.

Jason glances over at him as they walk. "So what happened?"

Alex draws in a deep drag of the crisp autumn air. "It's a long story. There was just a lot

going on. You know, first time away from home--first time away from my mom."

"Yeah, that's one of the things I regret about the way I did college," Jason says. "I wonder how things would've been different if I'd gone away."

"It changes everything. I mean ... it just sorta opens up a new world to you."

For a moment, their conversation gives way to the distant sounds of the world around them. The leaves continue crackling underfoot, a faint wind whispers around them, and on the far side of the patch of trees, afternoon traffic whizzes by.

"So go on," Jason encourages, trying not to sound too pushy. He's here to listen for Alex's sake and he knows that the conversation needs to go at a comfortable pace.

"There was a lot going on," Alex repeats slowly. "Hey, you wanna sit down?" He nods at the swing set just a few yards up ahead.

"Sure, yeah." Jason follows him over to the familiar set of swings, where he has spent so many hours laughing and talking with Courtney in the past.

"All right," Alex says once they are settled, as though he knows that he has to share this eventually. "So that first semester of college ... It was the first time I really had friends I hung out with, and definitely the first time I partied."

"Did you get into trouble?"

"No." Alex pauses. "No, not trouble. That was when I started drinking, but I was pretty good about it. I just had fun. It was almost weird 'cuz I wasn't used to it. I wasn't used to people wanting to spend time with me or always having stuff to do."

Jason uses his foot to give himself a push and he begins rocking back and forth slowly. He looks over at Alex, who has stopped midstream and is now looking swept away by the story that he is attempting to tell. Jason can see the pain of that time in his friend's face now, darkening the dimples and the bright blue eyes. He can only wonder what happened then and wait for the rest ...

"So my roommate was this guy Seth," Alex finally continues. "We totally hit it off, right away. It was weird for me 'cuz I'd never really had guy friends before, but we hung out all the time."

Jason notices that Alex looks away now, someplace off in the distance. "This one night after we went to a party, we went back to our room, totally trashed ..."

The beginning of the tale lingers in the chilly air. Jason waits patiently, absorbed in the story.

Too absorbed to hear the ruffling coming up behind them.

"He was the one, Jay. The first one I ever really let myself realize I was falling for. And I never told anyone about him -- not until you. No one ever knew -- about me, at all -- besides Seth ... until that night with you."

Unconsciously, Jason grips the swing's chains a little bit harder.

"What we have, you and I, it's like nothing I've ever had," Alex says. "You didn't rat me out to the girls, but you tried to get me to reach that point on my own. It's been, like, two years, and you're still here for me and dealing with this stuff. You're awesome."

"Thanks," is the only response Jason can muster. He's sure that Alex knows where he stands.

Suddenly the warm moment comes to an abrupt halt. The sound of a throat clearing behind them is very audible and it snaps them from their private world. With a start, Jason focuses on Courtney's face. And in that first instant of looking at her, he knows that something is very wrong.

END OF EPISODE #231

What is wrong between Courtney and Jason? Do you want to hear more about Alex's time in college? What could the relationship between Stan and Sally mean? And what happens now that Diane has custody of Samantha?

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