

"Footprints" Episode #247

Previously ...

- Ryan promised Claire that he would take care of Stan.
- Sarah's concern at learning that Diane was unconscious surprised Claire and Paula.
- Jason and Courtney had a blowup after she confronted him with her knowledge of his encounter with Alex. They angrily parted ways.

KING'S BAY MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

Though she can't pinpoint why, there is a buzzing in the air that is slowly making Sarah crazy. Maybe it's just because of the silence, the total stillness, and the muted whites of the room -- maybe she's just imagining the buzzing. Maybe it's the machines. Either way, the antiseptic scene is really getting to her.

If not for the chilling reminder of why she's here -- Diane's motionless form lying in the bed -- she would have been out of here quite some time ago. But she can't bring herself to leave, not knowing that she's the only one who's even bothered to come check in on Diane and stand by the bedside.

From the little that she actually knows about Diane's life, it's no surprise. She knows that at least if she were in Diane's position, her family would be hovering around the room. Paula and Bill would be praying and waiting for updates. Jason would be right by their side. Even Molly would probably be here, mildly concerned.

And Matt and Victoria. Of course.

Part of her wants to go find Claire and have her bring Samantha in to be with Diane, but the sight of her mother in this state probably wouldn't be very good for the little girl anyway.

The sound of the door opening startles her and she has to stop herself from jumping back a few inches. She awaits the entry of a nurse or some other hospital employee, but instead is greeted by the sight of a very good-looking, tanned man, somewhere around her own age. He is dressed in a crisp, obviously expensive suit, though she can see the remnants of the already-melting snow on his black shoes.

"Hi," he says hesitantly, still evaluating her. "Eric Westin."

Sarah moves forward to shake his hand and finds the grip quite strong and very confident. "Sarah T--Fisher."

"Are you a friend of Diane's?" He pauses before asking the question but clearly reaches the decision that it is the only question he can ask right now, or he'll have no context in which to proceed.

"Uh, yeah." She pauses, shuffles her feet a little on the floor, and then asks, "How about you?"

"Yes, I suppose so." A brief glimmer of uncertainty passes over his eye.

Ah-ha, she thinks. This must be the guy she said she was seeing.

"How's she doing?" Eric asks, cutting off another front of awkward silence.

"I'm not sure, to be honest. I know she's unconscious, but ... I haven't really heard that much else." She takes in Diane's figure again, amazed that this was all it took to bring all that energy to a screeching halt. "My sister-in-law is one of the nurses here, actually. I'm waiting for her to come back and fill me in on anything else."

"That's certainly convenient."

"Yeah ..." Sarah sticks her hands in her back pockets. "What a weird situation."

Eric cocks his head to the side, confused. "What about it?"

"Oh, uh, my sister-in-law -- the nurse -- she's Diane's daughter's stepmother."

Eric's eyes widen with surprise. "Claire Fisher?"

"Yeah," Sarah answers cautiously. "You know her?"

"Somewhat. I, uh, I'm representing Diane in the custody case, actually. So yes, I've met Claire."

"Wow." Sarah laughs an uncomfortable but still amused chuckle. Would it be possible for any of this to get any tighter or more connected?

Somehow she doesn't doubt that it could happen, but she doesn't even want to try and imagine how.

KING'S BAY PARK

Each step of his Adidas sneakers sinks into the slushy white covering the paved walking path. Jason keeps his focus down, seeing every crunching ice crystal and every drop of unfrozen snow that plops up onto his shoes, but he might as well be wearing a blindfold.

His mind is completely elsewhere -- back in his bedroom, to be exact. He's living every moment of his blowup with Courtney all over again, pausing to reflect on the things he said, the way her face was twisted, everything. Only he can't fast-forward through to the end of it, and if he could, it would probably just loop back around to the beginning.

Part of him is giving himself a series of swift mental kicks as he recalls all the things he said to her: telling her to get the hell out of his face, calling her on the poor-little-princess act, all of that. Maybe he should have just let it go; of course she was going to be angry after she read about him and Alex. Maybe--

His musings come to an abrupt stop when he hears his name.

"Jason!"

Could it be? Did she come follow him to make things better?

No.

Briefly he has the thought of turning back in the direction he just came from and hightailing it away from Lauren before she can get to him.

But he doesn't have the strength to do it, and she has accelerated her pace down the path as she approaches him, stomping through the snow.

"Funny running into you here," she says in her usual perky tone of voice. It almost makes him cringe.

"Yeah, what are the odds that we'd both go for a walk, huh?" He tries to sound as sarcastic and antisocial as possible, in the hope that maybe she'll take the hint and leave him alone to sulk.

Obviously she does take note. "What's the matter with you?"

He kicks the toe of his shoe around in the snow. "Nothing."

"Nothing? Right, yeah. What's up, Jay?"

He hesitates and looks past her, out into the sky. It looks surprisingly blue for it just to

have finished snowing.

Yep, blue skies, indeed.

"I had another fight with Courtney," he says finally.

"Another fight? Over ..."

"Same thing." He swallows hard. It wasn't *exactly* the same thing, but ... "Well, sorta."

"Sorta?"

"Yeah." His gaze has continued to rove around, taking in the sky, the trees, the ground, whatever. But now it settles on her face. It looks so inviting, so comforting. So different from the way Courtney was looking at him just a little while ago. It makes him want to open up.

Of course, Lauren doesn't yet know what Courtney does.

"What happened?" she asks cautiously. "I thought things were getting better between you two ..." He can tell that she's not sure if she should be prying into this, and he's grateful for that.

"They were. They really did, for a little bit. She came over, we talked, we ... we set things straight."

"But something obviously went wrong."

"Yeah." He takes in a long drag of the chilled air, but it's neither crisp nor refreshing. It feels muggy, almost dirty, and it does nothing to make him feel any better. "There was a part that she still didn't know."

Lauren folds her arms. He can feel her eyes examining him, waiting for him to explain, but as he tries to get a handle on just how to do that, her impatience takes over. "What part? About the Alex thing?"

He nods. "She sat down at the computer, and I'd been IMing with Alex ... and she read part of the conversation."

"What'd it say?"

"Nothing, really!" Even as he says that, he knows it's not true. "I mean, I was just trying

to tell Alex that everything's cool. But he was still worried about it."

"I'm not following. She got mad because you're still sticking by Alex?"

His first instinct is to defend Courtney, though he can't imagine why. "No, no. She--God, I am such a freaking *idiot*."

"Why?" She reaches out a hand to pat his elbow. Even that slight touch makes him flinch. Right now, no one need be that close to him.

"Because I didn't tell her the whole truth! I should've just done it when we said we were getting everything out on the table. Then maybe she would've taken it better." Part of him is screaming that no, she wouldn't have; she would have simply blown up at him then. But that window of doubt makes it awfully hard to ignore the thought.

"Told her what, Jason?"

To his own surprise, he looks her square in the face as he speaks. Maybe he just needs to be honest about it, even now, even after the damage is done. "The night of my 21st birthday party -- when you guys tossed me and Alex in that bed together -- that was the night I found out about him."

He waits, hoping that the rest will link up in her head. He can tell by her face that it is doing just that.

"Oh my God," she says, inhaling sharply. "You and Alex ... ?"

"Nothing happened. Nothing, really. He just sorta made a move -- and I left. That was all."

Lauren seems to be contemplating a response, trying to figure out what to say. The pause is enough to let Jason's mind keep wandering.

I really blew it this time. Everything's ruined.

And despite his instinct to suppress the thought, it finishes itself anyway. *For good.*

STAN LINCOLN'S APARTMENT

Ryan's eyes dart from door to door furiously, waiting to zero in on the digits that have been driving him all afternoon. At last he finds them, a little less than halfway down the

corridor, though it seems like he's been searching forever for the right door.

He raises his fist to pound on the door -- and then pauses. What is he doing here? He knows that well enough, but still ... what is he going to do when the door opens? What is he going to say? Until now he's been counting on his rage to carry him, but now that the moment has come, he wonders if he can coast through this on emotion.

He banishes the thought and slams on the door several times.

"Open the damn door," he growls through gritted teeth. Stan had better be here, and he'd better not be pretending otherwise.

Soon enough the door does open, with enough of a whip to show that Stan was expecting some kind of fight already. When he sees Ryan, he softens a little, but it's no matter.

"What is *wrong* with you?" Ryan demands, pushing his way inside the apartment. If there's one thing he has taken from Nick, it's that private matters need never be aired in public.

Clearly Stan knows what Ryan means, but he does his best to look puzzled. Ryan finds himself wondering briefly how this man has managed so long with such poor deception skills. Then again, maybe that's why he always turns up asking for money eventually.

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about," Ryan says. The words come out in a thick jumble, fast and furious. "Why did you have to go see Claire again after I told you not to?"

"Why shouldn't I have?" Stan blasts right back. The force takes Ryan by surprise. "I couldn't get a straight answer outta you, or outta Nick, or anyone else. Obviously Claire's wrapped up in this someday!"

"I told you to leave her out of it."

"Why do you care so damn much about this chick, Ry? I thought maybe there was somethin' goin' on with you two, but obviously she ain't interested." He falls quiet but then rises right back up, as if the next thought just struck him: "Maybe you're the one who needs to back off!"

The blow hits Ryan harder than he thinks it should, and it takes him a moment to recover. "I'm not gonna hurt her! I'm just looking out for her. I left her alone for months, until you came back--"

"And why's that? What the hell is this all about, anyway? You owe me some sorta

explanation, Ry, 'cuz I'm sick and tired of bein' lied to." A gleam of something hostile flashes across Stan's eyes. For an instant, for the first time in a long while, Ryan has the sense that maybe this man truly could be a threat to him, to his own safety.

"You're my kid, right?" Stan rages on. "I figured I'd try 'n' make something of that, at least make the effort. I know I did a terrible job and I dunno what the hell else I'm s'posed to do. You were fine keepin' in touch with me all those years, and then bam, I move here and you pull a 180 on me. What's the deal?"

"The deal," Ryan huffs, "is that I have *had* it! I've had it with covering your ass, I've had it with dancing in circles. When you showed up here and got it in your head that something was wrong, you became a threat to Claire and to myself, and I'm not going to stand for that."

"The only reason I even cared about Claire was 'cuz I was tryin' to figure out what the hell was wrong with you!" Stan counters.

"This stops now," Ryan says with more conviction than he's had about anything in a long time. "Right now. I want you to stay away from Claire, and I want you to stay the hell away from me."

Stan's jaw tightens. "What is this all about, Ry? Why are you doing this?"

"Because I need it to end. I need this to be over. And if that means putting out the whole truth, then fine."

"That's all I want from you! The truth!"

"You want the truth?" Ryan barks, his head snapping forward viciously. "You wanna know why I have hated you with every fiber of my being for so damn long? Because you raped my girlfriend! You raped Claire!"

KING'S BAY MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

"I have to admit, I was surprised to see you here," Eric says after an uncomfortably long stretch of silence. Sarah has been watching him and she can see how chilled he is by the sight of Diane lying motionless in the bed. He keeps pacing a few steps in one direction, stopping to glance at Diane, and then moving back in the direction from which he came. The steps of his dress shoes keep resonating through the room, making every second seem far longer than Sarah would like it to be.

"I've been spending a lot of time with Diane lately," he continues. "But I was beginning to

get the impression that she didn't exactly have many friends. It's nice to see someone here for her."

"To be honest, I don't think she does have many." Then she adds abruptly, "Not that we're very close, actually. But I think you're right."

"The fact that you're here speaks volumes, I'd think."

Sarah shrugs, a little bit uncomfortable with the line of conversation, though she isn't sure why. "I was with my mother when Claire called to tell us about Samantha, and when I heard that Diane was unconscious--"

"I'm sure she'll appreciate that you were here, I really do." He paces a little more and then stops, resting his hands in the pockets of his pants. "It'll be good for her to know that someone was here, worrying about her ... even if she won't admit it." He cracks a little smile that Sarah has to share.

"Well, you are here, too," she says.

"Yeah, but ... We had a little falling-out this afternoon, actually. When I heard that she'd been in a wreck--I couldn't help thinking that it was my fault."

"It was snowing. These things happen."

"I know, but it's still an unsettling thought." He withdraws his hands from his pockets and folds them together as he stretches out his arms. "To be truthful, I don't know how much longer my ... arrangement with Diane is going to last."

"Why do you say that?"

He shoots a glance over at the bed, as though Diane can hear their conversation. "In a way, I have the feeling that she's very restless with this sort of thing."

"I could see that," Sarah agrees.

"Anyhow," Eric says, "I am glad that you're here for her. I know she must be sort of lonely, even if it's something she wouldn't admit."

Sarah finds herself nodding, able to identify with Eric's description of Diane far more than *she* would like to admit.

Suddenly a switch flips itself in her head.

"I have to go," she says suddenly, knowing that it must seem ridiculous but too inspired to care. "There's something I need to take care of."

"Oh -- okay," Eric says with confusion, watching as she scrambles from the room.

KING'S BAY PARK

"You can't really blame her," Lauren says finally.

Jason looks away guiltily. He knows that she's right; after the promises he and Courtney made to each other, he should have told her the truth. He should have had faith enough to be able to do that. But he didn't, and now he's made things a hundred times worse.

"I know I can't," he manages.

She exhales deeply, blowing a cloud of white winter air in his direction. "But maybe it's for the best."

That catches his attention. He turns sharply to her, his eyebrows pushing together.

"Obviously there are some big issues between you guys," she explains, seeming to take care not to step too hard on any toes. "Issues that run deeper than this stuff with Alex. So maybe, you know, it's better that it comes out now than in, like, fifteen years after you're married and stuff."

"Yeah," he says without too much hesitation, although agreeing with her is one of the hardest things he has ever had to do. The thought that he and Courtney might have wound up married if not for this is nearly overwhelming.

Lauren must be able to see what he is thinking, because in a much softer voice, she adds, "For what it's worth, I don't blame you for anything that happened."

He looks up at her again, catching her eyes directly. "Really?"

"Yeah. At first I was so mad at you, I wanted to wring your neck ..." She cracks a smile in an effort to alleviate some of the tension. He shares in it. "But I can understand what kind of position you must've been in. And now that I think about that, there were tons of times that you tried to talk me out of going after Alex without betraying his confidence. I should've been smarter and taken the hint--"

"You had no way of knowing."

"Still, it would've made things a lot easier, wouldn't it?" She smiles again, this time stiffer and more uncomfortable.

"Listen," she says, giving her watch a knowing glance before he can respond, "I need to get going. Hang in there, okay?"

He nods quietly.

"And give me a call if you wanna talk or anything," she adds, already walking away.

"Thanks," he gulps, standing where she left him. He buries his hands in his pockets and watches her go.

A few seconds later, she turns back to look at him. Probably to make sure that he hasn't fallen apart yet.

He wonders how he hasn't either. He forces himself to keep trekking along the path, kicking at the snow, breathing in the chilly air, in a world that's suddenly very different from the one he imagined himself occupying.

STAN LINCOLN'S APARTMENT

"I've tried," Ryan says, his chest heaving as his breathing tries unsuccessfully to even itself out. "God knows I've tried. I tried to forget about it, I tried to pretend it didn't happen--God, I even let her think I was the one who did it! That's how much I didn't want it to be true."

Stan looks at him with uneasy eyes. "What are you talkin' about?"

Ryan shakes his head incredulously. "How can you not remember? How can you do something like that and just totally forget about it? I wish I were that lucky."

Clearly this news has rattled Stan, but his confusion looks genuine to Ryan. If he really did remember, this would be so much easier.

"You *raped* her!" Ryan emphasizes each word as much as possible, knowing that there is no room for any dilution of the truth now.

"You know I haven't done a damn thing to hurt her. All I've done is ask her about you--"

"Not now!" Ryan interrupts. "In Chicago. That summer I lived with you. You came in

totally drunk, and ..." His gaze pleads with Stan. "How can you not remember?"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about." Stan shakes his head roughly. "I dunno what you're tryin' to do, Ry, but it's not gonna work."

"I'm not trying to do anything, believe me! I just want this to be over. I can't have it hanging there anymore."

"Stop making things up."

"I'm not making this up! I swear to God, if I could make this go away, I would. Do you think I want to know that my father is a rapist -- that he hurt the only girl I've ever loved that badly?" Ryan falls quiet for an instant, a little stunned by the admission. "Do you know how badly I wanted to change reality? I let her think it was *me*! I threw her away-- God, I risked getting myself thrown in jail--because part of me couldn't accept that I could be the son of the man who'd done that. It was almost easier to blame myself for it."

Stan is quiet, something that Ryan notes is quite a rarity. But suddenly Stan makes a move for the door.

"Stop talkin' nonsense," he spits, tearing the door open. "Get outta here."

Ryan looks at him in disbelief. "That's it? You're just gonna let it go, like that?"

"Get out."

Ryan's gaze transforms into disgust and lingers on the older man for several seconds more before he takes the step out into the hallway.

"Fine," Ryan says, the word thick with all the tension that Stan is trying to force out of the apartment. "I'd be all too happy to leave."

"Come back when you can show some respect for your father."

Ryan shrugs. "Then I guess I'm never coming back. Because I could never respect you, not after what you did, not after the way you're acting now." His eyes roll over Stan once more in disgust. "I wish you'd never found me."

He turns and walks down the hallway, exiting the floor and the building without another glance back at this man--this ghost of the past--to which he's dedicated so much of his life and energy, even in his most private moments.

"This has to be the end," he whispers to himself as he exits the building. "It has to." But even now, he knows that he is doing exactly what he's done all these years with Stan: Trying to create a resolution where there can never be one.

END OF EPISODE #247

Did Ryan do the right thing by finally telling Stan the truth? What did Sarah take off to do? Join us in the Footprints Forum to share your thoughts!

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