

"Footprints" Episode #296

Previously ...

- Lauren finally tracked down Courtney at work and pleaded for her understanding, even after Courtney confessed that she'd seen Lauren and Jason kissing. Courtney told Lauren to do whatever she wants with Jason, but she was supposed to be a better friend than that.
- In the aftermath of her admission that she conducted a search for her missing son, Paula wondered about Bill's whereabouts -- and the future of their marriage.
- After receiving advice from Bill about not keeping secrets from Sarah, Matt showed up at Sarah's apartment looking very uncomfortable.

SARAH FISHER'S APARTMENT

Sarah Fisher closes the bedroom door behind her and gives the knob an extra push, just to be safe. Something about the way Matt is acting tonight -- the abruptness of his visit; the weary, tortured element overpowering his usually rugged appearance -- tells her that something is very wrong. They don't need Victoria overhearing anything.

As soon as they enter the bedroom, Matt Gray goes to the far side, placing as much distance between himself and Sarah as possible. She notices the gap immediately; it's not the way that they usually are. Even during arguments or uncertain moments, they tend to stay very close physically, as if it's some sort of reassurance to each that the other is there and genuinely cares. But not tonight.

That distance catches Sarah off-guard, but it immediately puts into focus for her something that has been gnawing at the back of her mind for weeks and weeks.

"There's something I need to tell you first," she says. The words hardly seem to be her own.

The announcement produces a look of genuine surprise, maybe even confusion, from Matt. "What?"

Her explanation continues to tumble out -- maybe of its own accord, maybe because of some force that has suddenly possessed her. She certainly hadn't planned to do this.

"Something's not right, Matt. Things between us, they've changed. I kept thinking that it was just temporary, or just another step to getting--wherever I thought we were going. I thought it might be in my head. But I can tell that you feel it, too. It's serious, and I know why it's happening."

"That's what I came to talk about," he says. He looks pained, as if saying even that much has drained something out of him.

But she needs to do this now, before she loses whatever lunatic impulse has taken hold of her. "Let me finish. It might make what's bothering you make a lot more sense."

He accepts that with a grim nod.

She moves closer to the bed, right up next to its side. Matt stands directly across from her. The burgundy comforter stretches out between them, looking more like a canyon than a bridge to Sarah right now.

"I just want you to know that I did this because of Victoria," she says. "And because of us. I wanted us to have a real chance, and I thought that if there were things left buried, they could come back and rip us apart later on. I wanted to go into a relationship feeling like we were both ready to move forward."

Matt is silent.

"So I started doing some ... investigating. Just checking into things, trying to put together pieces that I couldn't put together on my own." She can tell that he has some idea where this must be going: His mouth is drawn into a tight line, and his eyes are focused hard on her.

"I saw one of your pictures," she says.

"What picture?"

"One of you and--I don't know, I guess. It's one of two little boys, I'm guessing one of them is you ... and one must be your brother."

Matt's jaw tightens. "Where'd you see that?"

"At your apartment."

"Where in my apartment?"

She was hoping she'd be able to leave it at that and not get into this part of things. She chokes out, "In the closet. That night last summer when I had too much to drink and you made me lie down -- I was coming out of the bedroom, and I saw you kneeling in the closet--"

"You had no business going in there."

"I couldn't help it!" she exclaims without thinking. Then, more quietly: "I know."

"So you just go snooping through people's things? Sarah, if I'd wanted you to know about that--"

--you would've told me. Right." She can't help but let a little anger toward him slip out.
"I asked about your past. I asked about your family. And you *lied to my face.*"

His chest heaves with rapid, ineffectual breaths. "I didn't think any of that mattered. I wanted us to move forward, not get stuck in the past."

She smacks her palms down hard on the comforter. "By not telling me important things about where you came from? About who you are? That's not fair, Matt, not after how honest I've had to be with you. And it sure as hell makes me wonder if you even trust me at all."

"Of course I trust you!"

She shoots him an unconvinced look.

"You know what? I don't have to listen to this." He comes whipping around the foot of the bed, on a mission straight for the door. "I came here tonight to talk to you, and all I get is this thrown in my face--"

She grabs him by the arm as he attempts to blow by her. He's strong enough that the hold only lasts a moment, but the action is still enough to stop him in his tracks.

She looks him straight in the eyes. "You're not leaving."

JASON FISHER & ALEX MARSHALL'S APARTMENT

"Look what I brought!" Lauren announces, holding up the paper cup as Jason lets her into the apartment.

He recognizes the Dairy Queen cup immediately. "Mint Oreo?"

"Is there any other kind?" she smiles, handing him the Blizzard and a spoon.

"Well, yeah, but they all suck." He closes the front door. "But thank you. I've been wanting one of these."

"Yeah, what's it been, three days since you had one?"

"It's been awhile. Couple of weeks, at least. I've gotta watch my figure and all."

"Course you do," Lauren says, setting her purse on the coffee table before she plops down on the couch with her own Blizzard.

Jason pops off the lid of his cup and dips the spoon into it, drawing out the thick green ice cream filled with bits of crunched-up cookie. "So what's going on?"

Lauren eats her ice cream quietly, looking very uncomfortable with whatever memory Jason just evoked.

"I finally got to talk to Courtney," she says at last.

Jason just makes a face. That couldn't have been good. He wouldn't expect it to have been, anyway, but the grimace on Lauren's face -- which must be about Courtney, because it's certainly not about the Blizzard -- only confirms that it has to have been bad.

Lauren leans back into the couch's thick cushions. "I had to go track her down at work, because she wouldn't answer any of my calls. And she still barely spoke to me."

"Maybe I should've talked to her first."

"Noooo. She was barely civil to me. I think she would've ripped your head off." Lauren stirs her ice cream around in the cup, then stops and looks directly at Jason. "She saw us in the backyard."

He doesn't flinch, much to Lauren's surprise. "I know. She must've told Dylan, who told Alex, who told me this afternoon."

"I don't know what we're supposed to do," Lauren says. "I tried to explain that that was the only time it happened, but she didn't really care. She told me that she thought I was a better friend than that."

"She's the one who broke up with me!" Jason exclaims. He realizes that Courtney's not there to hear the argument, but it still needs to be said.

"We both know that. I mean, I guess I can see where she's coming from ... that she got hurt by what happened with you guys, and now she feels like I'm seriously taking your side or whatever."

"This doesn't have anything to do with that whole thing! It's totally separate." Jason sets his Blizzard on the coffee table but keeps the spoon in his hand. "She has no right to be

telling you what you can and can't do."

Lauren nods.

"So what now?" Jason asks.

"I don't know," Lauren says. "Part of me feels like I owe it to her, for some reason, not to let anything else happen. But then another part of me ..."

"Wants it to happen, right?"

She nods again, unable to take her eyes off the soft edges of his face. "Yeah."

He sits down beside her and reaches a hand up to her face. The feel of his skin against hers sends a wave through her, and, for the moment, the decision is the clearest one she's ever had to make. But that wave abates, and she's left with the very real possibility of driving the nails into the coffin of one of her closest friendships.

"I wanna be with you," Jason says, letting his fingers trail back into her dark blonde hair. "And I know it's not that simple, as much as we'd like it to be. But I hate the idea of missing out on something that could be so good because of someone else ..."

"So do I," she hears herself admitting.

"Maybe she'll come around, or it won't seem like such a big deal to her after the initial shock wears off."

"Maybe." Despite whatever her mind is saying, Lauren reaches down and takes hold of Jason's hand. She locks her fingers in with his, relishing the continued touch.

"So we'll just take it slow," he says, his head close to hers.

She looks up, knowing what's going to happen when she does. His lips close in on hers, pressing softly against them, and again she experiences a split-second of complete decisiveness.

But it's not that easy. She knows it, and she can tell that he does, too, by the look in his eyes when their lips part.

CHASE HOME

The crash of the front door clatters through the house. Helen Chase knows what that

means. She removes her glasses, places them on the desk beside the computer, and heads out of the study.

She comes down the stairs just in time to see Courtney drop her skating bag on the foyer floor with all the grace of a plummeting anvil. Courtney stomps down the hallway, and Helen hurries to catch up with her.

"What's the matter?" Helen asks as she steps into the kitchen.

"Nothing," Courtney grumbles.

"That's why you're slamming doors and throwing things?"

Courtney rifles through the refrigerator, but finally shakes her head and slams that door shut, too. Helen folds her arms and waits. She knows this routine well.

Abruptly, Courtney turns to her mother. "Lauren completely stabbed me in the back."

"How? What happened?"

"She's ... She's got something going on with Jason."

The news actually takes Helen by surprise. She was expecting this to be a tantrum about skating, someone at the rink, or even Jason himself. But Lauren?

"What do you mean? Are they dating?" she asks cautiously.

"I don't know. Maybe. I--I saw them kissing at Lauren's house one night, when I went back to grab my purse and they didn't realize I was there. And then Dylan and I went to Bill's restaurant for lunch, and we saw them eating together."

"Have you talked to them about it?"

"Yeah. I went up to them at the restaurant and told them how much I don't appreciate the whole thing. Then Lauren came to see me at work tonight, and she was trying to play it off like nothing was actually going on."

"What *is* actually going on?" Helen asks. "Do you know that?"

"Yeah. I mean, I think so. I know they've been spending a ton of time together." Courtney sighs heavily and moves over to the pantry. She opens it and analyzes its contents.

Helen waits for Courtney to add to her explanation, but when nothing further comes, Helen does a little prompting. It's a chance to bring Courtney down to earth a bit.

"So, is there something actually going on between them, or are we just talking about a kiss and some time spent together?"

"Lauren says they only kissed that once," Courtney says, though it sounds as if the admission is being dragged out of her, and she coats it with as much disbelief as she can.

"You don't believe her?"

"It's not that ... It's just, I think something really *is* going on. Whether it's physical or not, it's something."

"And what's so bad about them genuinely liking each other?"

Until this point, Courtney has been fairly calm -- not counting her enraged entrance -- but now her eyes flare and she leans forward, as if coming closer to check whether her mother is really okay.

"What's wrong with it? What *isn't* wrong with it?" Courtney shouts. "She's supposed to be my best friend. And Jason--he should definitely be off-limits. She knows what a mess that was for me. She has no right going after him."

Helen stays quiet for a moment, not wanting to turn this into a shouting match. When she speaks, she keeps her voice quiet: "Honey, you were the one who let Jason go, not the other way around."

Courtney sighs again, an annoyed noise that flicks against the back of her throat to tell her mother that she *just doesn't get it*.

"Mom, this is about Lauren and me. This isn't about him."

Helen cocks her head to the side. "Are you sure about that?"

Courtney's eyes go even wider. She draws in a sharp breath through her nose and lets it out loudly through her mouth. Then she smacks the pantry door -- which bangs to a close -- and, with a final, exasperated look at Helen, marches out of the room.

FISHER HOME

Usually, the Fishers' house is a very comfortable place for Claire: there is always something going on, someone in the kitchen or upstairs doing something. There's a

livelihood to the house that gives her a feeling of security. But tonight, it feels empty -- and, aside from her and Travis, it is, but it's more than that. There's a frigidity about the house that she can't quite pinpoint.

She sits on the living room sofa, her attention drifting away from, back to, and again away from the movie that Travis is watching. They've watched it together before, and she normally finds it cute, even entertaining. But she's restless right now.

She nearly stands to go to the kitchen and prepare something for dinner, but she stops herself. Paula left pork chops out to defrost, and when Claire arrived home earlier, she figured Paula would be home soon enough and had some plan for dinner. But it's getting late now. Her attempts at calling Paula's cell have only been met with a voicemail recording, and her message has thus far gone unanswered.

Just as she's wondering if she should officially dub what's been brewing inside her as "worry," she hears a key in the front door. Travis barely glances away from the TV, but Claire waits for the door to open.

Sure enough, Paula steps inside the house. She takes only one step before making eye contact with Claire.

"Hi," Claire says, immediately aware of something strange in the older woman's demeanor.

"Hi," Paula says. Then, overly cheery: "How are you two doing?"

"We're fine. Just watching 'Monsters, Inc.' again." Claire studies Paula for a moment longer. "Is everything all right? I've been trying to get a hold of you--"

"I know. I'm sorry. I had my phone turned off. I decided to go for a walk through the park."

Claire isn't sure how to respond. Is that an invitation to inquire further or a notice to drop it? She settles on, "Oh. I was starting to worry."

"I should have left a note," Paula says. She removes her shoes and places them beside the door. "Have you eaten yet?"

"No. I saw that you'd taken something out, but I wasn't sure what you were going to do with it ..."

"I'll go throw something together, and then I'm going to go lie down."

Paula walks toward the kitchen but pauses at the sound of Claire's objection.

"I can do it," Claire says. "I was just waiting until you got home. Aren't you going to eat?"

"Not right now. I'm not feeling too well."

Claire moves closer to her, careful to do a backward glance to be sure that Travis isn't listening.

"Are you sure everything's all right?" Claire asks.

She gets a sigh in response. "I'm fine. I just need to lie down for awhile."

"When is Bill gonna be home?" Claire adds a bit of force to the question. Something's going on.

"I'm not sure," Paula says. "It's supposed to be a busy night at the restaurant, I think." Her mouth fumbles over the simple answer.

Claire narrows her gaze, and it takes only a few seconds before Paula crumbles underneath it.

"Everything's not okay," she admits, dropping her head in shame. "Claire ..." She glances past Claire, at Travis, who is still fixed upon the television. "There's something very serious going on."

"What is it? Is there anything I can do?"

Paula shakes her head. "No. I'm afraid not. It's something that I need to speak to the whole family about, but ... I'm not ready yet. And neither is Bill."

Claire is about to question her further when Paula changes the subject.

"Are you sure you can handle dinner?" she asks.

"Yeah," Claire says. "Don't worry about it."

"All right. Then I'm going to go lie down for a little while."

Claire decides not to push the issue any harder right now. Paula goes right to the stairs; it looks to Claire as if she's dragging herself up them, as if she has no driving force even to get upstairs.

Even though she has no idea what's going on, Claire finds herself consumed with worry.

If even Paula can't hold her family together ...

SARAH FISHER'S APARTMENT

Sarah's gaze remains locked on Matt's, refusing to let his go anywhere else.

"I did this for us," she says, so frustrated that she's nearly shouting. "I wanted us to have a chance, Matt. A real chance. And after--after everything I've been through, I wasn't about to have more secrets waiting to break us apart."

"They wouldn't have broken us apart! That's why I wanted to forget it all. None of that matters--"

"That's bullshit, and you know it!" She grabs his wrist at the hint of motion that indicates he might try to bolt.

He stares right at her, his jaw tight, his eyes wild. "I do know that! That's why I came here!"

She's not expecting that, and it gives Matt the opportunity to explain further. She can tell that he's forcing himself to eke out every word.

"Someone said something to me," he says, "that got me thinking. All this time I've been worried that if I said anything, it'd ruin any chance we had, but I realized that *not* saying anything was worse. I didn't want there to be any secrets between us."

Sarah closes her eyes, half in relief and half in astonishment. For him to be doing this, after all this time ...

"You were really going to tell me everything?" she asks.

He pauses and swallows hard. "Yeah."

Awkwardness blankets the room. It's Matt's turn. Sarah knows that, and she's sure that he does, as well, but that obviously isn't making it any easier for him to speak.

Finally she takes the initiative. "Well?"

"What?" He looks straight at her, confused, harsh. "I thought you already went digging for all this stuff."

"Yeah, but ... there are still a lot of gaps."

"You know about my brother?"

"Jake?" She has to say the name, just to make this real. "Yeah. I talked to Andrea, and she said you had mentioned having a brother."

"When did you do that?" he asks, as if it matters.

"Last summer." She goes quiet -- the calm before the storm. "I know about Nicole, too."

The color drains from Matt's face. His features stiffen.

"What happened between the two of you?" Sarah asks.

She gets a blank stare in response.

"Did you have an affair with her, Matt?"

A long silence, then: "It was a lot more complicated than that."

"Because she was married to Jake? Believe me, I understand." Now it's her turn to pause. Though she doesn't mean to, it's necessary to prepare herself for the next question. "Is that why she killed herself?"

Matt starts nodding, then starts shaking his head. Sarah thinks she sees tears glistening in his eyes, building and building but not falling.

"Was there more to it?" she asks, suddenly not sure that she wants to know.

She has to wait a long time for an answer. Matt's eyes finally hit the breaking point, and tears start tumbling down his cheeks.

He looks up at her, his face still clenched tightly.

"She got pregnant."

END OF EPISODE #296

What more is there to Matt's story? Who should be mad at whom? What will Lauren, Jason, and Courtney do next? Join in the discussion in the Footprints Forum!

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