

"Footprints" Episode #301

[Previously ...](#)

- Everyone assembled at the courthouse for Samantha's custody hearing.
- Sarah wished both Diane and Claire good luck, and then warned an already-worried Ryan about the possibility of Diane bringing up his attempt to bribe her.
- Claire's lawyer, Jim Thompson, built a case revolving around Diane's past misdeeds and the strength of the Fisher family.
- For Diane's case, Eric Westin attacked the sordid details of the Fishers' lives -- culminating in an examination of Paula, during which he forced her to reveal that Ryan is the son she gave up years ago!

" ... wish she would have told me."

"She hasn't really had a good chance."

"She should've made one. I would have listened."

"Dad, you know it hasn't been that simple."

The voices float in and out of the blackness that surrounds Paula Fisher. At first, she's sure that they must be part of a dream; they sound distant, as if she's eavesdropping on a conversation from outside the room, perhaps even from down the hallway. But the voices gain in volume and clarity, and both of them become more familiar as the words and sounds grow more distinct.

Her head feels light, like a balloon struggling not to float away in the wind. The urge to float away, to close her eyes and retreat into the darkness, is nearly overwhelming, but the voices persist.

"She's opening her eyes," the female voice says, and that confirms for Paula that the voice belongs to Sarah.

The harsh light assaults her eyes as the lids part slowly, heavily, bogged down by the weight of everything that happened earlier. The memories come flying back at her in vivid, horrifying detail: Eric Westin's smirk; the revelation to the entire courtroom of Ryan being her son; the shocked faces all around ... and then what?

"Paula," the other voice says. Bill's face comes into view. He's just a few inches above her.

She strains to move her neck. She turns it to the left -- Sarah is close to her -- and then back to the right -- Bill is focused intently upon her, studying her every feature, it seems. The details of the courthouse hallway become more apparent in the background as her eyes adjust to the lighting.

"Mom," Sarah says, and Paula feels a warm hand closing around her own. "How do you feel?"

"I--" Paula starts to speak but stops quickly, realizing that she has to think about it. The grogginess is heavy. Even now, a return to the quiet nothingness of that black world seems appealing. But nothing hurts, and her head is becoming clearer with each passing second.

"I feel fine," she says. She draws a deep breath and savors the surprising freshness of the cool air. "What's going on?"

"You fainted," Bill says from her other side.

The hearing. What about the hearing? Did Claire-- "What happened to Samantha?" she asks, struggling to sit up.

Bill places a hand on her shoulder, coaxing her to lie back down. Reluctantly she consents.

"The judge called a recess," he explains. "Everyone wanted to make sure you were all right."

"I'm fine," she repeats. She tries to sit up again, and Bill gently tries to hold her down, but she pushes his hand away and pulls herself to a sitting position. She's on the floor in the middle of the hallway, she realizes as she attempts to collect her bearings.

"Take it easy," Bill says.

She's about to argue that she is perfectly capable of sitting up when she sees them: Ryan and Claire. Oh, God ...

They stand near each other, and yet they might as well be miles apart. Ryan leans with his back against the wall, arms folded, dark eyes watching her with the utmost intensity. Five or so feet away, Claire stands nervously, shifting her gaze all over the hallway. She makes eye contact with Paula, but it's only for the briefest instant.

"I'm so sorry this had to happen," Paula gasps, to all of them but no one in particular. What *can* she say? She never wanted it to come out this way -- who would? It's bad enough that they have to face a situation like this, but for everyone to find out in such a horrible way ...

"It's true, then?" Bill asks.

She turns her head back toward her husband and finds him staring at her with an intensity that convinces Paula he must be questioning the reality of his world.

Their faces just inches apart, knowing that Ryan and Claire are so close by, Paula realizes that *this is the moment*, different as it is from anything she's imagined it might be.

"Yes," she says, feeling Sarah's hand squeeze hers tightly. "Ryan is my son."

KING'S BAY DISTRICT COURTHOUSE, COURTROOM #A27

Diane Bishop crosses her arms in front of her chest and leans back in the wooden chair.

"For a guy who had doubts about bringing that whopper into the case," she says, "you sure got into dragging that out of Paula Fisher."

Eric Westin's left shoulder rises casually. His deeply tanned features hardly show any emotion as he says, "It's my job, Diane. You wanted to proceed with that approach to the case, so I made it work."

She's unable to resist the opportunity to rib him a little. "You certainly seemed to relish it."

"It's always interesting to introduce something so surprising into a case. Besides, I can appreciate a good challenge."

She detects a tick of annoyance in his voice, but before she has a chance to question it, the doors at the back of the room come flying open.

Claire hurries into the room -- tailed closely by Ryan. He catches up to her with just a few quick steps.

"Claire," he says, reaching his hand out to her shoulder.

She shrugs the hand off and keeps moving. Ryan stops in his tracks as Claire plants herself down beside Jim Thompson at the table a mere ten feet or so from where Diane and Eric are seated.

Ryan watches helplessly for a moment before surging forward. Claire stares ahead at the front of the room, her countenance stone-cold as she no doubt feels Ryan's presence mere inches behind her.

"We need to talk," he says, keeping his voice low, though not low enough to prevent Diane from hearing.

"Not now," Claire says. The words seem to get caught in her throat and only emerge with a bit of trouble. "It's not the right time."

Ryan lingers behind her for a few more seconds before resigning himself to the front pew.

What a mess, Diane thinks, still watching as they slide into a frozen silence. If not for the fact that this train wreck of a family is threatening -- trying with all they have, even -- to take her daughter away from her, she might feel bad for them right now. This can't be easy to deal with, and surely none of them saw it coming.

But today, in this courtroom, there's neither time nor space for sympathy. She and Eric can't afford to fold out of pity.

The eerie quiet dissipates as Judge Curlin re-enters the courtroom. She assumes her place back at the head of the room and, after a few formalities, Eric is on his feet again.

"Your Honor, I understand that the Fishers must be anxious to conclude this hearing," he says, holding his hands behind the back of his exquisitely tailored charcoal gray jacket. "Ms. Bishop and I only have a few more things to cover, so we'll try to keep this as brief as possible."

The judge tilts her head, and the bouffant of red sways accordingly. "I appreciate that, Mr. Westin, but please take whatever time is necessary."

Eric nods, but before he has a chance to proceed, the judge speaks again.

"Before we go on, though, I do have a few questions," she says.

Diane looks up at Eric, who is waiting with the most patient and cordial of expressions, though Diane is sure that he is groaning inwardly.

But Judge Curlin's first question is a perfect segue into the next thing they'd planned to bring up, anyway.

"I agree that the connection between Ryan Moriani and the Fisher family is shocking," the judge says, "but I'm curious as to its overt relevance to this case. I'm not sure that I understand why this situation, however complex it might be, would be an impediment to Claire Fisher's ability to raise Samantha."

"I'm glad you asked, Your Honor," Eric says, stepping out from behind the table. "My

client recently had an encounter with Mr. Moriani that caused her to question the strength of his character ..."

Diane turns to glance at the other side of the room. Ryan sits, pale as a ghost, watching Eric's display as if it were a funeral.

Thank you for the ammunition, she thinks as she continues to watch Ryan, as Eric's confident presentation rolls along.

KING'S BAY DISTRICT COURTHOUSE, MAIN CORRIDOR

Paula's admission hangs in the air like the smoke of a freshly exploded bomb. It stings Bill's eyes, clogs his breathing passages, and clouds his brain so badly that he has to dig deep for words to express even one of the thousand thoughts veering through his mind.

But before he can, Claire dashes back inside the courtroom, with Ryan following a few steps behind.

Paula shoots upward, ready to spring to her feet, but he and Sarah once again hold her down.

"Let them go for now. They have a lot to deal with," Sarah says.

Paula appears fully prepared to protest and go chasing after them anyway, but as seconds pass, she resigns herself to remaining still. In the quiet that follows, both she and Sarah look to Bill, as if declaring the start of a question-and-answer session.

"Are you sure?" he asks carefully. "I mean, how can you ..."

Paula nods somberly. "Yes. He is."

He freezes again, but the questions come spilling out involuntarily: "How long have you known? How can--how did you find out?"

"There's a process -- an investigative process," Paula explains.

"It works through the courts," Sarah chimes in. "They appoint someone to conduct the investigation confidentially, and that person prepares the findings for the person who requested the information."

At first, the input from their daughter doesn't affect Bill; she's an investigator, and it makes perfect sense for her to be versed in the process. But there's something about the way she jumps in that registers with him. He looks at her more closely.

"You knew, too?" he asks, though it's more of an accusation than a question.

Now it's Sarah's turn to freeze.

Paula grabs Bill's wrist and explains, her voice reduced nearly to pleading, "I needed her help. I didn't know how to begin looking. I confided in Sarah that I wanted to, and she helped me figure out what needed to be done."

This new insult numbs Bill back into silence. He studies his wife and daughter very carefully, wondering how many times he's spoken to them without having any idea of the knowledge they were keeping from him, how many times he's caught them together in hushed conversation and not thought anything of it.

"Please don't hold this against Sarah," Paula urges him. "I asked for her help. Would you rather that I'd involved a stranger?"

"I just wanted to help Mom find out the truth," Sarah says. She looks to Bill to be very close to tears now.

Still, he can't shake the feeling of being an outsider among his own family.

"I wish you'd have told me from the start," he says, looking sharply at Paula.

Her eyes widen. "You never would have allowed me to do it!"

Realizing that he doesn't have much of a counter-argument, he adjusts the line of conversation.

"This is why I didn't want you to pry into this," he says, hands out in front of him, half-curved into fists. "You wanted to know all about your son, but really, you had no idea what you were going to find or what we would all have to deal with."

He pauses, sighs, and then adds, "And now we have something on our hands that's much bigger and much more painful than any of us anticipated."

KING'S BAY DISTRICT COURTHOUSE, COURTROOM #A27

Claire can't bring herself to make eye contact with any of them. Not Ryan, despite the fact that his gaze is boring into her from his seat in back of the room; not Jim Thompson, who hasn't uttered so much as a word to her since they returned to the courtroom; and certainly not Diane, whose full, pink lips are surely curled in a smug, satisfied smirk. She hasn't felt this powerless since the night she lost Tim.

Tim. There isn't another person in the world she'd rather have by her side right now. Everything Claire has done to overcome the pain of losing him seems futile now, like it's all been an elaborate exercise in going nowhere but down. She feels herself almost gasping for breath, suffocating. Ryan's attempt at bribery, his real identity -- these freshly revealed secrets loom in the forefront of her mind, ready to shatter the thin pane of glass that's keeping her from absolute hysteria. However, she can't allow herself to fall apart. Not right now.

Jim wordlessly taps her on the arm, and she thinks she sees him feign a lopsided, reassuring smile. But she doesn't bother to meet his gaze. Her deep brown eyes, probably reflecting every bit of shock and deflated hope that Claire's been desperately trying to keep under control, are fixed on the front of the room. Judge Curlin has just reentered the room and taken her seat.

In a matter of moments, it's all said and done. "Both in spite of and because of everything I've heard today," the judge begins in a tone that sounds to Claire so sterile and removed, "I see no reason to reverse the decision made at the preliminary hearing of this case. Ms. Bishop will retain full custody of Samantha, while Mrs. Fisher will be allowed limited visitation ..."

Claire feels her breath catch in her throat.

"... One weekend a month." A pause. "This court is adjourned."

Before she even realizes what she's doing, Claire finds herself standing and bolting from the courtroom. She distinctly notes Ryan rising from his seat, as well, his hand outstretched. She doesn't take it.

And in another heartbeat, she is out of the room.

KING'S BAY DISTRICT COURTHOUSE, MAIN CORRIDOR

The conversation continues to run in circles around Sarah. She's been listening to her parents playing this game of verbal tennis for a long time, as they continue to rush to the brink of actual arguing and then step back for a breather, only to get back into it seconds later. Sarah has jumped in only a handful of times; as much as she actually is involved, this feels like it is Bill and Paula's issue, and she knows that she's probably most helpful as a mediator right now.

"We will deal with this," Paula insists. "It is not the end of the world."

Bill looks disapprovingly at her. "No, it's not, but it's a lot of pain that could have been

avoided--"

"Would that have changed the truth, Bill? Would you really rather not know?"

Before Bill has the opportunity to slam back his response, the courtroom doors open wildly. Claire comes rocketing out.

"Claire," Paula says, but Claire hesitates for only a fraction of a second -- to share a look of utter despair with all three of them -- before taking off down the corridor.

"Claire!" Bill calls out. It's no use, though; she disappears around the corner without another glance backward.

When Sarah looks back to the courtroom doors, Ryan stands outside them, looking thoroughly dazed.

"I think she needs to be alone for awhile," he says to the Fishers.

Sarah nods, all the while examining him. Though she's known the truth for months, seeing this man in front of her, fully acknowledged as her brother, feels mind-numbingly surreal.

Ryan must see in their faces the question that Sarah herself is dying to ask, because the next thing he says is, "The judge decided to keep the arrangement pretty much the same as it is now. Claire gets to see Samantha one weekend a month."

"Claire must be devastated," Paula says. Sarah takes her mother's hand and feels it quivering.

"We should get back to the house," Bill says, rising quickly to his feet. "We should be there when Claire gets home."

He holds out a hand to help Paula stand, but pauses once she takes it. "Do you feel all right?" he asks with a tenderness that Sarah finds both surprising and reassuring.

"I'm fine," comes Paula's hasty answer.

Bill helps her to her feet, but before any of them move, their collective gaze locks upon Ryan.

"I have something I need to go do," he says, "but I'll be over to your house later, if that's all right."

"Of course it's all right," Paula says. Sarah marvels at hearing her mother use that tone of voice, usually reserved for Jason, Tim, Molly, and her, with someone who seems like such a stranger.

Ryan hurries off. Sarah begins to escort Bill and Paula out, but they don't get very far before the courtroom doors open again.

Sarah stops dead in her tracks when she makes eye contact with Diane.

"Go ahead," she says quietly to her parents. "I'll come by in a little while."

Paula and Bill agree quickly and make a fast exit. But they might as well vanish immediately, because all of Sarah's attention immediately shifts to Diane.

"How's your mom?" Diane asks.

The question surprises Sarah, but only for a split-second. "She's fine, physically," she says. Then she abandons all pretense of a civilized conversation. "Do you realize what you just did?"

"I'm not an idiot, Sarah. I realized that might be painful for your family. But my daughter is the most important thing in the world to me, and I did what I had to do to hang onto her. You have to understand that."

"Of course I understand that," Sarah says. Her voice sounds strange even to her own ears -- huskier, truly furious -- and it suddenly dawns on her that Diane is the one person she didn't expect to be attacking with such force. "But it doesn't excuse what you did. Samantha is a part of our family, too. Do you not have any respect for that fact?"

Diane's smoky eyes widen as the volume of her voice rises: "This isn't about respect--"

"No, it's not -- because nothing is with you, is it?" Sarah spins around, planting her back toward Diane, and buries her hands in her own hair. "How did you find that out, anyway? It's supposed to be a sealed record."

"I had someone do some investigating."

"Those papers have been lying around my apartment, Diane. If you even went through my things--"

Diane holds up a hand to cut Sarah off. "I'm not gonna fight with you about this now. Go deal with your family, do whatever you've gotta do. We can talk about this later."

Sarah wants to keep fighting -- hell, they've barely even *begun* to get into this -- but it's

clear that Diane won't allow that to happen.

"You can bet we're gonna talk about this later," Sarah says. With a final, cold stare, she adds, "I can't believe I trusted you."

She's sure that gets to Diane, at least a little bit. It has to. As she storms down the corridor and out of the building, the blood in her veins having gone past the boiling point, Sarah hopes to herself that some of this bothers Diane more than she's letting on.

She wants Diane to get hurt, she realizes, the same way that her family has been hurt.

END OF EPISODE #301

Is this the end of Sarah and Diane's friendship? How will the Fishers receive Ryan at their home? Is this going to be the final straw for Claire's sanity? Join us in the Footprints Forum to see what others think and to share your own thoughts!

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