

"Footprints"

Episode #236

Previously ...

*Stan visited Claire hoping to get some insight into Ryan's behavior, but the very sight of him sent Claire into a panic.

*Matt and Molly ran into each other outside the restaurant and were surprised to see Brent and Sarah down on the docks together.

*With a kiss, Sarah tried to draw Brent into reminiscing about their good times. He agreed that they had high points but insisted that it had to end. Sarah threw a fit, and Matt and Molly came to calm her. Angered, Sarah pushed Molly into the bay.

MORIANI HOME

The winter chill is no match for Claire's boiling blood. Her wool coat hangs from her body, unbuttoned, as she stalks up the driveway. Seeing the dark house looming before her, however, rattles her. This has all happened so quickly that she almost didn't consider that she'd actually have to be here, doing this, facing it all again.

Stan's appearance at the apartment sent her retreating into Travis's room to play a game with him, in the hope that acting normally would make it all go away. No such luck. Within minutes she'd been back on her feet, calling Paula to make sure that she could look after Travis for a while.

And now she's here. The house stands before her, unsettling as always. Yet something is drawing her to it. Something is driving her to ascend the front stairs and knock on the door.

Lesser of two evils, she guesses with a huff. Maybe not. But this is necessary anyway.

She trudges up the steps, purse clutched tightly to her side, and curls her fingers around the heavy doorknocker. A puff of the cold night catches in her throat.

"Why am I doing this?" she whispers.

Because you have to face this. You have to do something about it before it tears you apart completely.

Her hand raises the knocker and, after the slightest pause, lowers it back down to the door. *Slam slam slam*. Three hard knocks and her chest tightens as she waits for the sound of footsteps on the other side.

The door yanks open suddenly, with no footsteps or no locks being undone to give her

warning. And there, right in front of her, is Ryan. He looks paler than normal, and hardly even affected by the sight of her.

"What in the hell is going on?" she demands. Even attempting to be subtle in starting out would probably make her lose her nerve, she is sure of it. This isn't something she particularly *wants* to be discussing.

"What are you up to now?" she continues before he can get a word in. The dumbstruck look on his face is enough to fuel her fire. "How could you send *him* after me? That was low, even for you!"

"Claire! Calm down! What the hell are you talking about?"

"Stan!" she shouts, even though the name threatens to make her sick. "Why was he at my apartment? What are you up to?"

"I'm not up to--he was at your apartment?!" Ryan is suddenly as frantic as she is. "What? When?"

His confusion is too genuine to be fabricated, and it leaves her completely without a reaction.

"He was at your apartment?" Ryan asks again.

"Yeah." She swallows hard, then mumbles, "Then why was he there? What's going on?"

PIER 22

"What is wrong with you?" Matt barks as he practically drags Sarah down the pier, away from the scene of the crime. "That water is freezing!"

"She deserved it," Sarah spits, rolling her eyes as she folds her arms in front of her chest.

Matt flashes her a look of utter disbelief. "No, she didn't! She didn't do anything, Sarah! Brent asked you to sign the divorce papers, right? That is not Molly's fault."

He can see the fight brewing in her face, rumbling just below the surface, but for some reason it doesn't make it out -- at least, not like that. Instead she lets out a gasping sob.

Matt's words come with great difficulty. Turning on a dime like this is not easy, especially for him, especially when she could turn back at any second. "Sarah ... I'm sorry. I know

this has gotta be hard to deal with ..."

"It's impossible!" she cries. "This is how it's always been. I thought when I married Brent, maybe things would change, maybe I'd get to live my own life and be my own person and have things my way. But Molly's still winning, she's still better than me--"

"She is not better than you."

"Then why is he choosing her? Why wasn't I good enough?"

"You are good enough! It just wasn't right!" Tentatively he folds her into his arms. She doesn't resist, though she doesn't make any effort to go to him, either.

"It just wasn't meant to be, that's all," he says. His rocky voice sounds so serious and very strange in the chilled air. It's been so long since he had a conversation like this with anyone.

"This isn't going to happen." She pulls her arms in tighter, creating even more of a buffer between her body and Matt's.

"It is happening."

"No. It won't happen. I'm not going to let them get away with this. I'm gonna stand up for myself ..." The tears are distorting her words and the sound of it is breaking Matt's heart.

"Don't do this," he pleads quietly. Unconsciously he pulls her in a bit more firmly. "You can be so much more than this bitter ex who refuses to let anyone else be happy. You can be happy regardless of what happens with them. You are so much better than that."

He feels her wiggling out of his embrace and for a moment fears that he has said the wrong thing and lost her entirely. But the look on her face when she pauses to look up at him tells him that he has her undivided attention. Finally.

"Please, Sarah. Rise above that. Be the woman I know you're capable of being."

PIER 22

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Don't worry about it." Molly wraps Brent's jacket around her and

pulls the front closed. Even though she knows it should be the last thing on her mind right now, she is a little bit concerned about getting it wet.

"We should get you home so you can change," Brent says. "It's freezing out here."

His concern is apparent, and it touches Molly more than she'd have thought it would. These moments have been too rare lately -- although maybe that's for the best.

"Hang on a minute," she says. "I don't want to walk past Sarah, at least not yet. Let's give her some time to cool down."

"Good idea." He casts a glance up the pier, where Matt has taken Sarah. He shakes his head with disgust, but there is a hint of sadness in his expression that makes Molly wonder whether the condemnation is intended for Sarah or for himself -- or for her.

"I cannot believe this happened," Molly says carefully.

"Yeah, me neither. I-I'm sorry. I had to give her the papers, I just didn't know she was going to get so out of control. I shouldn't have let you come any closer--"

"It's not your fault."

"This whole damn thing is my fault." The disgust is coming through loud and clear now. "How could I even have let myself marry her when--when I knew it wasn't going to work. I knew, even then ..."

He turns away from Molly. "I am such a jerk. Why did I think I could toy with her life like this? That's all I've been doing, really -- trying to make everyone else's feelings fit my whims. I haven't been considering anyone but myself."

"That's not true."

"No, it is. I've been really selfish. I hurt Sarah so badly. And you ... I've jerked you around for so long. It's not fair to anyone."

"Brent, stop." She lays a hand on his shoulder but he doesn't turn back to face her. She lets the hand linger. "Don't talk yourself into this. You are *not* selfish. You have been there for me time after time after time, and you never had to be. You were an incredible brother to Danielle when she was going through all that stuff with Andy. And you have been more than patient with Sarah through all of this. You are a good guy."

He shakes his head, unwilling to accept that so easily. "No, I'm not. Look at what a mess I've made. I'm none of the things you say I am."

"Yes, you are!"

"No! Don't just try to make me feel better! We're past that!"

"I'm not just trying to make you feel better!" Her hand snaps him back around as she blurts out, "You are all of the things I said you are! *That is why I love you!*"

MORIANI HOME

"He's been in town, I knew that," Ryan says, fumbling for a grip on this latest news. "But I didn't think--I mean ... Did he do anything? What did he want?"

Claire offers a distrusting look. "He said that he wanted to know why you'd been so distant with him. He thought I might know something."

She sees Ryan's hands curling into fists, but he pulls them up to his face and leans it against them. "Jeez. I didn't think he knew you were here. I really didn't think he'd go after you."

"I thought you sent him," she fires. Accusing Ryan of setting this up seems less frightening than any other possibility right now.

"No! Claire, I would never do that."

His eyebrow rises, expressing her disbelief.

"I swear, I would not stoop to that!" he insists. "God, how long has it been since I even bothered you? I get the hint, okay? As much as I don't want to get it, I do."

"You really didn't know about this," she says quietly after a lengthy pause.

"No!" He sighs, utter frustration wanting so badly to be relieved. "I don't know why he would go after you. I don't even know how he found you ..."

"Well, he did," she snaps, though she feels the bleeding of regret begin almost immediately. "How could he? I mean, does he really not--not remember?"

"I don't think he does. I was there -- if he remembered it, he would have been worried about me remembering. I really think he just blacked out afterward and doesn't remember."

"How is that possible?" By all indications, she is lost, struggling to understand how this can be happening, even though for some reason, she has absolutely no doubt that it really is.

"I'm sorry," Ryan offers. "I--I didn't mean for this to happen. If I'd known he was going to go after you, I would have just talked to him, I would've done whatever he wanted."

"It's not your fault." She can hardly believe that she is saying it.

"I'll take care of this. I'll get rid of him, I promise. Claire, I don't want you to get hurt, I don't want you to have to deal with this all over again. I care about you too much to let that happen."

She accepts his declaration with silence.

"I'll take care of it," he says again.

She stares at him, disturbingly unemotional. "Good."

He closes his eyes for a second. "I wish he would just go away--"

"So do I." Turning, she makes her way back down the stairs and to the car. She gets in and starts it up without another glance at him.

"You better not hurt her, you bastard," Ryan whispers as he watches the car pull away.

PIER 22

Sarah clamps her eyes shut and shakes her head. "I can't."

"Whattaya mean, you can't?" Matt seizes hold of her hands. Their coldness is a shock to his system, yet he clutches them even tighter.

"That woman," Sarah gulps, "the one you think is in me -- she's not. This is all I am. It's all I've ever been, it's all I'll ever be."

"That's not true--"

"It is true! Only now I realize it. I'm never going to be able to climb out of Molly's shadow ..." Her gaze has wandered off, out towards the water. Matt follows it with his

own eyes.

"Stop talking like that," he says firmly. There is an unexpected note of desperation in his voice that makes him realize just how badly he wants her to believe what he is saying.

"I can't!"

"Yeah, you can! Jeez, Sarah, do you think I'm making this up? C'mon, gimme some credit here! That woman is in there. I've seen her, I know her. Otherwise I wouldn't ..." He cuts himself off with a heavy sigh.

Sarah flinches, as though she is going to look back at him but won't allow herself.
"Otherwise what?"

"Forget it." He tears his eyes away from her and fixes them back on the water, shimmering with the light of the shadowy moon.

"No, tell me."

"Sarah ..." He chokes back the lump that has mounted in his throat. "It's not the right time for this."

Neither of them says anything for a moment, but then suddenly Sarah blurts out, "You know what I've learned?"

"What?"

"There's never a right time for anything. You can wait and wait and put things off, but that perfect moment is never really gonna be there. It'll only happen when you create it."

He risks a sideways glance at her and sees her doing the same. For the briefest instant, their eyes catch. Matt is more than tempted to keep looking at her -- maybe forever -- but he can't, not if he's going to say what he wants to say.

"If that woman wasn't in you," he says, "if she wasn't you, then--then I wouldn't care so much about any of this stuff. It wouldn'ta hurt so damn bad watching you fall apart over Brent, not if ... not if I didn't care about you as much as I do."

Sarah turns slowly to him, as if this were exactly what she expected to hear, but Matt is certain that he sees a twinkle of amazement that he actually said it.

"Matt," she says softly, "I ... do you really mean that?"

He draws her hands, still held in his own, to his chest. "Yeah. Absolutely. You are--you're amazing. All this anger you've got bottled up, I wish you could let it go. I wish you could ... move on."

She looks up at him uncertainly. He feels her tightened hands relaxing against his chest, beginning to melt into him like they have before. The stars buzz against the night sky with life, with hope--

"I need to go," Sarah says suddenly, jerking away from Matt. He reaches out for her again, but her feet are taking her out into the parking lot and his own refuse to move. Watching her go, wishing he could chase after her, he stands there alone.

Still alone.

PIER 22

Face to face. Nowhere else to go.

Molly's frenzied admission has rendered the moment between her and Brent so raw, so real, that no matter how hard either of them might try to escape it, they can't. Not that they necessarily want to.

Brent's lips part, but Molly has to jump in before there is any room for confusion or misunderstanding. There has been too much of those things, too much dancing around the truth. The thought of having to do it all again feels like a sentence to a lifetime of imprisonment.

"I love you," she says slowly, lips trembling from the cold and maybe because of him, too. "I am *in* love with you. And I don't know where that leaves us, but I needed you to know it. I can't keep playing this double role of being your best friend and then aching so badly for you inside."

Whatever Brent was going to say a moment ago has faded. He stares at her speechlessly.

A shiver courses through her body. "I'm sorry, Brent. This is probably the last thing you needed to hear right now--"

"No." He pauses just long enough to be sure that he has her undivided attention. "No. That night when Sarah started ripping into you and I said I was the one with feelings for you ... I lied."

"What?"

"I lied," he chokes. "I had to. Because I couldn't say the whole truth in front of her or she would have completely lost it. What you just said -- saying you love me -- it's exactly what I wanted to hear." He pauses and is certain that Molly can feel the same incredible pull toward him that he feels toward her. "Because I love you, too."

"My God," she whispers in amazement. All those times that she tried to figure out if he felt the same way, trying to read between the lines of every little gesture and every word ... She was right. He has felt the exact same way that she has.

He drinks in the sight of her. Her dark hair, still wet from her plunge into the water, sticks to her face and her shoulders in a way that he can only describe as unbelievably sexy. He watches a droplet of water roll down her face and over her lips, and suddenly he knows that he has to taste her again.

Shaking, his fingers reach to tip up her chin. She gives in all too happily, waiting with baited breath for the moment she has anticipated for so long. Brent lowers his head to hers, making the quickest instant of eye contact as he moves in and closes his eyes. A spark flies between them that pulls him nearer.

The taste of her lips against his is incredible, unbelievable. His mouth sinks into hers and he feels the longing to get lost in her forever burning inside of him.

"Molly," he says softly as they part, unable to think of anything else to say and wanting so badly to feel her on his lips again already.

"We shouldn't do this."

"Probably not. But everything I said -- I meant it, you've gotta believe that. I love you, Mol."

"I know. And I love you, too." She closes her eyes, clearly having to force herself to do this. "But right now, I need to go. We need to be apart for a little while."

He gestures at the whole of her wet form. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine."

"All right. Hang onto the jacket for now."

She pulls out her keys, having to drag herself away. "We'll talk later ..."

"Yeah ... Goodnight."

"Goodnight," she gulps as she turns and walks back down the pier.

He watches as she disappears into the parking lot. The urge to follow her and never let go is almost irresistible. The moment that they just shared is the creature that has haunted his mind for so long, but it was so much more than he could have imagined. He knows it is something he will hold onto forever.

And he knows that, no matter what, tonight has made it clear that he and Molly have to be together.

END OF EPISODE #236

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