

"Footprints" Episode #249

[Previously ...](#)

- Lauren took Jason out for ice cream in hopes of cheering him up. Meanwhile, Courtney ran into Lauren's long-absent brother, Trevor, but he asked her not to mention his presence in King's Bay to his sister yet.
- Eric and Sarah waited for Diane to awaken from her unconscious state following her car accident.
- Sarah and Matt shared a family dinner with Victoria, but their closeness was interrupted by Sarah's venom towards Molly and Matt's refusal to accept it. She wanted to leave, but he forced her to go lie down instead.

MATT GRAY'S APARTMENT

White walls.

That's the first thing Sarah sees as she awakens. Her eyelids peel back with painstaking slowness, every millimeter a challenge.

The room is much dimmer than it was before -- it must be much later -- but she can still see the white of the walls. They're shrouded in gray, broken only by odd reflections of lights from the street below, but the stark blankness of Matt's bedroom walls still catches Sarah's attention.

Matt. She was such a jerk to him before ... She had no right to rip into him like that.

She groans as their argument comes drifting back, first in vague patches and then in bold flashes. She probably did have too much of that wine, or she'd have caught herself before things escalated so much.

Or maybe not. Loose lips or not, she knows where he stands on the Molly issue. But he knows where she stands, too. Her feelings aren't going to change overnight.

She lies back against the pillow, remembering it all again. She's surprised she was even able to fall asleep before, considering how angry she was. But now, in the darkened room, with the numbing feel of sleep still lingering in her body, she's awfully tempted to sink back into it.

Victoria. The thought of her daughter strikes her hard right before she's about to be overtaken again, and she kicks herself mentally for taking so long to be concerned about her little girl.

Dammit -- she has to go out and check on her. She's sure that she's fine, that she and Matt are having fun or that she's settled into sleep already, but that doesn't make the desire to go check on her any less intense.

She wrestles with the fog of sleep for another long, difficult minute, but finally she pushes her feet onto the floor and follows them carefully to the closed door. She hesitates before opening it. Matt's going to be out there.

Suck it up, she tells herself. She grips the doorknob and begins to turn it slowly. The door cracks open an inch, then another, letting a sharp stream of light from the hallway into the room. Sarah blinks hard against the light.

She is about to pull the door open the rest of the way when something catches her eye and she freezes. She's not even sure why she does it at first, because there's nothing inherently shocking about it, but there's a somberness about the scene that gives her pause.

She's glad it does, too, because it's not something on which she wishes to intrude. Matt is kneeling in the hallway in front of an open closet, his attention fixed very hard on some small objects that he removes a box and examines one-by-one.

Sarah has to focus harder, still fighting the brutal brightness of the lights, to see what he's looking at.

Photographs.

KING'S BAY MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

Claire can feel that she's being watched even before there's any indication that she is. There are no words spoken, no noises made, not even a reflection caught in the window, to tell her that she's no longer the only waking being in the room. But she knows that it's true.

"Glad to see you're awake," she says, turning to face the bed and momentarily forgetting the routine task she was in the midst of completing. "You gave everyone a pretty good scare."

Diane scowls back at her. She looks drained, the color absent from her cheeks and her hair splayed out in a disorganized mess that's just daring someone to try and get it in order. She draws a slow, deep breath, her gaze never moving from Claire, and then says, "Yeah, I'm sure tons of people were worried to death about me."

Same old Diane. Not even a coma could kick the chip off her shoulder. Claire considers

voicing the observation aloud but forces herself to bite her tongue. "You've been unconscious for a few days. Generally that's kind of a troubling sign."

"I see all that tuition money didn't go to waste. Thanks for the info, nurse."

"Look, Diane, I wasn't hoping you would *die*." *No matter how much you infuriate me*, Claire's mind adds.

"Gee, Motehr Theresa's alive and well after all." Diane leans back, looking very satisfied with her jab. She appears to be taking in the room, getting her bearings, remembering what landed her here--

And then it hits her. Claire can see it. The car accident comes back to Diane in what must be a frightening rush, and she blurts out, "Where's Samantha? How is she?"

"She's fine," Claire says, the answer all too ready on her lips. "She got out of the crash with a couple of scrapes, nothing major. She's with Paula right now."

"Good." Diane seems to be berating herself internally for the crash. Claire knows she'd never be permitted to see Diane criticizing herself in the least bit.

"I can bring her by later to see you," Claire finds herself offering. Part of her still wants nothing more than to cling to Samantha with every fiber of her being, to keep her away from Diane at all costs. But she knows she has to do this.

"Thanks," Diane responds. She doesn't look uncomfortable, but on closer inspection Claire can tell that she's working hard not to show how difficult it is to be grateful to Claire.

Claire is about to make a move for the door when Diane speaks up again.

"Listen," she says, "I know this whole thing doesn't look very good, but don't you think for a minute that you're gonna use it to manipulate some judge into taking my daughter away from me. It's never gonna happen."

THE FISHERMAN'S PIER

"So what are you trying to do, get me to eat myself into atrophying my brain or something?"

"Yeah, you got me," Lauren says with a laugh and a shake of her head. "That's how I cheer everyone up ... It's also why I wind up with so few friends. Consider yourself warned."

"Call me an idiot, but I'll take my chances," Jason says as he slips into the booth.

Lauren slides in across the table from him. "Not scared of me?"

"Just really hungry -- don't be ridiculous." He shoots her another grin and then picks up the menu. It shouldn't even be necessary, because he's been eating here ever since his father opened the place over a decade ago, and any significant changes to the menu tend to get buzzed around the house before they're made, anyway. Never hurts to examine all the options, though.

Lauren is scanning the menu herself when she becomes aware of an approaching presence. She lowers her menu to the table, but its edge remains grasped in her fingers as Jennie, the annoyingly perky waitress, floats over to their table.

"Well, hello there!" Jennie greets, obviously recognizing both of them. Then, as if realizing who she's seeing together, she does a double-take. "Can I get the two of you something to drink to get started?"

Jason gestures for Lauren to go first.

"I'll have a strawberry lemonade," Lauren says.

"Sprite," Jason says quickly. Lauren can tell that he's trying to get rid of Jennie quickly, but the waitress doesn't seem to understand the plan.

"Hey," Jennie says, leaning in a little bit, "I heard about you and Courtney. That's too bad ... But if you're not otherwise occupied--" She flashes a strange look over at Lauren. "--then maybe you wanna hang out sometime?"

Lauren watches with amusement as a response -- one of total dumbfoundedness, as it turns off -- forms itself on Jason's face. Still, he manages to play it fairly cool.

"I'll get back to you on that," he says, not really even looking at Jennie. "I think I need some time to get my head together, you know?"

"Yeah, of course. Take all the time you need." Jennie glances over at Lauren again. "Just don't go jumping into anything before you're ready."

"I won't," Jason says firmly enough to send Jennie away, promising to return in a minute to take their orders.

"Sorry about that," Lauren says, now setting her menu down completely. "That was probably the last thing you needed right now."

He shrugs. "I've gotta learn to deal with it. People are gonna hear that Court and I broke up ... I just have to figure out how to get to the point where it doesn't bug me so much to think about it."

MATT GRAY'S APARTMENT

As much as she wants to, Sarah can't make out any details of the photographs. Matt's too far down the hallway.

She watches, silent and still, for several more minutes, as Matt goes through one photo after another. He pulls each one out of what looks like a shoebox, from the portion of it that she can see, and examines each one -- sometimes for a few seconds, sometimes for a virtual eternity.

One thing is for certain: They're definitely having some sort of effect upon him. His features are hardened, his jaw held tightly together, his hands strong but stony as he picks up each photo and then replaces it in the box.

Sarah keeps waiting for something to happen that will give her some sort of hint as to what the photos are or why they're affecting him so much. But none comes, and more than anything, she feels as though she's intruding on a terribly private moment. The feeling only mounts until her fingers clasp the doorknob so that she can ease the door shut without detection and give him the privacy that he thinks he has.

And then, as if on cue, Matt places a photo back in the box, but instead of taking another out, he puts the lid back on the box. Suddenly he is lost in the closet, and when he emerges, the box is no longer in sight. He stands, closes the closet door, and takes a few aimless steps towards the living area.

Sarah is too entranced by all of this to shut the door, no matter what she is telling herself. He looks like a wreck. She's gotten used to seeing him put up a wall, but now it's as though he's tried so hard to do it that the wall has crumbled and fallen entirely. He hasn't been crying, but he appears to be on the verge of it.

She wants to exit the bedroom, go to him, and try to be of some help, but she has no idea where to start. Should she pretend she just woke up? Should she admit that she saw him poring over those photographs?

He doesn't allow her the chance to make a decision. Instead he snatches his jacket off the back of the couch and -- casting a final glance into the living room, probably to check on Victoria, who must be asleep -- tosses on his jacket and leaves the apartment.

Sarah lingers in the bedroom a moment longer. Now what is he doing? She has to figure

out what's going on.

First, though, she has to check on Victoria. Now that Matt's gone, she opens the bedroom door the rest of the way and strides down the hallway towards the living room. Sure enough, there is Victoria in her playpen, resting with her blue and yellow blanket twisted up in her arms.

Sarah's gaze moves immediately to the closet. She can't ... can she? There is something private in there, something that obviously affected Matt a tremendous amount.

All he's ever done is help her through her own troubles, even when it made things ten times more complicated for him. He's tried so hard to understand her perspective, to talk her through things -- and then she goes and treats him like dirt, like she did during dinner tonight.

She makes an initial move for the closet, then stops.

What if he comes back?

She hesitates, then makes a beeline for the front door. She checks that the lock is done up -- which it is, of course, since Matt wouldn't leave her and Victoria alone in an unlocked apartment.

"I just wanna see what's bothering him so much," she says aloud, though it's barely more than a whisper. Maybe this will help her to break down that wall he's always putting up, to figure out something of the man Matt Gray was before he popped into her life three years ago in upstate New York.

That's all the impetus she needs. In a flash the closet door is open and she's on her knees, digging her way to the back of the closet.

It doesn't take her long to find the lone shoebox among a bunch of other cardboard boxes back there. Matt did take care to stash it in the back, though. *What could be so important about this that he doesn't even want to run the risk that someone will know it exists?*

She is about to set down and begin exploring its contents when something catches her eye. A photograph -- a lone photograph, a Polaroid, sitting on the floor of the closet just inches away from her knee.

He must have dropped this one, she realizes as she picks it up, setting the shoebox on top of one of the other boxes.

The photo is of two boys -- one looks to be about five years old, the other somewhere

around eight or nine -- dressed up like cowboys. They're smiling, each brandishing a plastic pistol in one hand and holding the other arm around the other boy's back.

Family photos? her mind asks as she continues to scan the picture. *What--*

She drops the picture when she hears the sound. Keys in the lock.

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Claire stares helplessly at Diane, whose power has just increased exponentially with the mere mention of the custody fight. "Let's not talk about that right now," Claire manages.

"Still not feeling too confident, huh?" Diane challenges. "Good."

Claire is about to leave, but fleeing the scene seems like an even worse option than staying to deal with it. "Hey, you had a call before."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," Claire says, getting her things in order so that she can get out of there. "I don't even know who it was from ... a man. I thought it might be your lawyer, but he was around here, so--"

Diane sits up in the bed a little bit. "What'd he want?"

"Just wanted to check on your condition." Anticipating the next question, Claire adds, "He didn't leave a name or number or anything."

"Oh."

"I'm gonna get out of your hair and go find a doctor," Claire says. "I'm sure someone will be interested to know that you're awake."

"Maybe they'll all be as excited as you." Diane's head sinks back into the pillow, but quickly she groans and adjusts it behind her. She is still complaining and fiddling as Claire exits the room.

She pauses outside and watches through the window as Diane gives up on the pillow and flops back down on her back. *She certainly has a lot of life in her, I'll give her that much,* she thinks as she watches.

But there's something else that's very obvious: That phone call -- whoever it was from -- it means more to Diane than she's letting on. She must know who it was from, or at least

have an idea.

If Claire cared more, she might stick around and try to figure it out. But she needs to go find a doctor. He or she can have the pleasure of getting inside Diane Bishop's head.

MATT GRAY'S APARTMENT

In a scramble, Sarah places the photo back on the closet floor and knocks the shoebox back behind the other boxes -- whether it lands where it was before or not, she has no idea, but at least it's out of sight.

She scurries out of the closet as quickly as she can and has just managed to close the door when the front door opens. She and Matt make eye contact immediately.

"There you are," she says, doing her best to look disoriented. "I was wondering where you'd gone. I just got up and you were nowhere to be found."

"Went to check the mail," he says, raising a hand full of envelopes and flyers. "It's miserable outside."

"Raining?"

"Yeah. I'm getting really tired of it." He turns his attention back to the mail and flips through it as he walks it into the kitchen.

"Listen," Sarah calls after him, already giving chase, "I--I want to apologize for before. I was really out of line."

Matt looks up at her, leaving the mail on the counter. He is waiting for more, not yet even committing to the conversation.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I know how you feel about this Molly and Brent situation. I let my emotions get the best of me."

"They're emotions -- that's how they are." Matt takes a step closer to her and leans against the end of the kitchen counter. "You're allowed to say whatever you wanna say, Sarah."

"Yeah, but I know how frustrating it gets for you."

There is a long hesitation before his response comes. "It gets frustrating because I *care* about you. A lot. And seeing you get so lost in your hate of Molly -- when I know there's so much more to you than that -- it's painful."

His hand reaches up and rests lightly on her cheek. His fingers are rough, but there's a strength to them that sends a weakening tingle through Sarah. "I know you can get past that stuff," he continues. "You're an amazing woman, and I hate to see you so focused on hurting someone else because you got hurt. Let it go. Prove them wrong."

She nods, for an instant letting herself melt into his touch. But then she jerks back, sighing.

"I should get going. Victoria's already out cold, and I don't want to have to wake her up later to get her home--"

"She could just stay here."

"I'll take her. You have to be up early in the morning anyway, right?"

She is already gathering her things as Matt delivers his answer. And before much else can register -- before she has time to think about the way his hand felt on her skin, or about how, for even just a moment, she wanted so badly to give herself over to him -- she and Victoria are out the door, bidding him goodbye and thank you and promising to call soon.

THE FISHERMAN'S PIER

"All right," Jason says, crumpling up his napkin and putting it on the empty plate in front of him. "Enough about me. I think we're gonna talk this thing to death."

"I'm sure we could suck a lot more out of it," Lauren says in-between bites of her seafood fettucine. "I'm big on the wallowing."

"I'd noticed ... Speaking of which, have you got any good wallowing material going on lately? What's new with you?"

She shrugs. "I dunno. Nothing very dramatic. It's really kinda a bore."

"Gee, that's really a shame."

"Yeah, you kinda get to miss drama when you don't have any." She grabs another strand of pasta. "Hey, my parents are going away. I get the house to myself. That's kinda cool."

"Where are they going?"

"On some cruise. They're gonna be gone for, like, months."

"Whoa."

"Yeah. I think it actually might get a little lonely." She takes a bite, chews and swallows it, and then sets down her fork. "They *never* went away when I was, like, in high school and wanted to have parties. Now I'm not gonna do anything cool when they're gone."

"You *could* have a huge party ..."

She shoots him a sardonic smile. "Yeah, I think what we all need right now is a big party. That always clears things up, right?"

"C'mon, our track record isn't *that* bad." He pauses just long enough to twist his face up. "Actually, yes, yes it is. No parties. Bad idea."

"It used to be fun to get to stay home alone. My brother and I used to go nuts. We would just stay up all night, cook all sorts of weird things, watch like a million movies ... I wish he'd come home."

"Is he still at school?"

"Yeah, he's taking his own sweet time finishing up. He started before me -- it shouldn't be *that* hard."

"Maybe he just really, really loves it."

"That must be it." She sighs heavily, glances at her watch, and surveys the table. "All right, you done here? I need to get going."

"Yeah, I should probably make something of my day," he says as they both stand.

"Listen ... thanks for hanging out with me. I know it must be a weird position for you to be in, but you are doing an awesome job of cheering me up, even if I all I wanna do is mope about Court. I really appreciate it."

"It's my pleasure, really," she says, lifting a hand.

"I'm a pain in the ass and I know it. Thanks for putting up with me." He opens up his arms and pulls her in. She folds right into him, even though he can feel a second of hesitation before she lets herself go in completely.

It feels good to be this close to someone -- it's closer than he's been with anyone since that day with Courtney, the day everything blew up. Especially knowing that Lauren knows everything that happened and is still willing to be here for him, support him, and not treat him like some demented villain.

"Thanks," he says again, releasing her. A sudden awkwardness buzzes in the air, but he reaches for his wallet. "I'll get this one. Thanks for the ice cream, too."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, yeah. Get going. I've already hogged up enough of your time."

"It's been fun," she says, already starting to walk off. "I'll talk to you later."

"Yeah, later," he calls out as he digs the right combination of bills out of his wallet. He sets them on the table, tops them with the bill, and then weighs it all down with a glass.

And all of a sudden he realizes that he wishes Lauren were still here, that for the first time since he and Courtney split up, he was actually enjoying what he was doing instead of comparing it to his time with her. It's a strange feeling -- freeing, in a way, but also pretty frightening.

"Thanks," he says again, under his breath, even though Lauren is long-gone now.

END OF EPISODE #249

Could sparks fly between Lauren and Jason? What will happen once Lauren learns that Trevor is back in town? And what did those photographs in Matt's closet mean? Please join us over in the Footprints Forum to share your thoughts!

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