

"Footprints" Episode #263

[Previously ...](#)

- Jason and Alex signed for their new apartment and prepared to move in.
- Sarah made a pact with Diane that they would both face their respective problems, which for Sarah meant digging into Matt's secrecy about his family and his past.
- Brent urged Claire to consider pressing charges against Stan for the long-ago rape, while warning her not to be blind to the fact that Ryan is still a Moriani.

THE FISHERMAN'S PIER

Sarah pushes open one of the swinging doors at the entry to the restaurant's kitchen. She learned her lesson about flinging both doors open at the once several years ago, when she shoved them open with abandon, like she was making some sort of grand entrance, and wound up nailing a waiter in the face. One bloody nose clean-up later, he was on his way home, as he had been when Sarah made her show-stopping entry.

These days, she opens the single door with a lot less force, giving it a nudge with one hand, just enough to allow her space to slip into the kitchen. No harm done, she notes as she begins to roam the kitchen in search of Matt.

"Sarah -- hey!" She hears the call from several feet away and has to glance around before she finds its point of origin: Jean, one of the cooks who has been working here since the second or third year the restaurant was in business. Sarah offers a warm smile as she approaches the woman, who's always inquired about her and wished her luck, ever since she was just beginning her college career.

"Hi, Jean," she says, adjusting the strap of her purse on her shoulder. "How are things with you?"

They catch up, walking through the necessary formalities, but it's an experience that Sarah really enjoys. She knows that Jean must be aware that she and Brent have split and, thankfully, the topic of Sarah's personal life doesn't come up aside from happy chatter about Victoria. And for once, it's nice to have someone asking about her career instead of simply about her disaster of a marriage and her bitch of a sister.

When she and Jean part, Sarah can feel a certain amount of satisfaction within herself, for some reason. Maybe because it was a normal, happy conversation -- unlike the one she's about to have.

"Hey," she calls out as she crosses the kitchen.

Matt looks up from the counter, where he's chopping up some vegetables, with pleasant surprise plastered all over his face. "Hey! What are you doing here?"

"What, are you disappointed to see me?" she asks teasingly.

"Very. Ya know, I was just thinking, of all people I didn't want to pop in and surprise me ..."

"Gee, thanks."

"No problem." He resumes chopping as he asks, "So what's up?"

"I have a favor to ask you, actually," she begins, folding her arms nervously.

"Shoot."

"Could you take Victoria for a couple of days? I know you had her at your place all weekend--"

He sets down the knife and turns back to her, smiling. "It's not exactly hard work, Sarah. 'Course I'll take her. Why, you gonna be busy?"

Here goes. "I have to go out of town, actually. To New York."

"Oh, yeah? Sounds kinda fun. What are you going for, a case?"

Even though she's run through her story numerous times, especially on the car ride over, it's not nearly as easy as she'd like it to be for her to tell him the lie.

CASCADE RIDGE APARTMENTS

"So, whaddaya think?" Jason asks, beaming with pride as he throws open the door to the apartment.

"Well, you've got a nice white wall over there, from what I can see of it," comes Lauren's voice from behind him. "I can't see much more than that with your fat head in the way!"

Still unseen by both of them, Alex watches in amusement from the dining area, where he has begun sorting through one of the cardboard boxes that he dumped there earlier in the day. Jason turns around, makes a face at Lauren, and then gets out of the way so she can come inside and actually see the apartment.

She remains close to the doorway, Jason lingering just behind her, and scans what she can see of the apartment -- most of the main living area, a little glimpse of the small kitchen, and down the hallway to the bedrooms -- from that spot. Alex waits for her to spot him; it happens as her eyes move back past the kitchen, since the dining area is tucked off to the side.

He nods lightly, managing a feeble, "Hey" while continuing to busy himself with sifting through the contents of the cardboard box.

She offers a similar greeting in response, but the tension is suddenly very thick. As Jason and Lauren embark on some conversation about the apartment's layout or something like that, Alex grabs the box and walks it back to the bedroom that is now his.

Didn't Jason think it might be weird bringing her over here? he wonders as he sets down the box in the middle of the floor. *We haven't even talked in forever ... Maybe it's blown over, though. At least a little.* Somehow he doubts it, but the possibility is a soothing one to entertain.

The only furniture items in the room as of yet are a dresser and a desk, but thankfully that gives him someplace to begin unpacking. He makes quick work of the box's contents and is able to find a place for almost all of them, leaving the remaining few inside the box until later. He moves it to the corner so that there is enough space to move in other things, like the bedframe that is coming later.

He heads back out to the living room to grab another box -- but stops short at the end of the hallway. Lauren is standing in the living room by herself.

He considers ducking back into his room for a little while so that he doesn't have to face her alone, but before he can make any sort of decision, she turns around and spots him.

"Jason just ran out to the car to grab the last load," she explains awkwardly. Alex gives a nod and then feels himself caught in the heavy, muggy silence that comes to rest over them. He makes a move to get another box, then stops.

"I wish it didn't have to be like ... this," he says carefully.

It takes a moment, but she snaps back sharply, "So do I." Her harsh tone slaps Alex right in the face, flinging him back into the center of the situation's grimness.

"I never wanted you to get hurt, Lauren. Ever. I wanted to be something I wasn't, but it was never about making you look like a fool or hurting you. If anything, it was because I liked you so much--"

"That you decided to string me along. Right." Her interruption comes out as a murmur,

directed not so much at Alex as at the entire universe. He can hear the 'So that's just the way it is' tone of resignation in her words.

"No. That was why I wanted to be with you. I wanted to be *able* to be with you. I was stupid not to realize earlier that I couldn't do that, and I was stupid not to consider that you were being dragged along for the ride and were going to wind up getting thrown off whenever I hit the end of the road. But I had myself convinced that I wouldn't ever hit that end."

She is staring off at some spot on the blank wall beside Alex, no doubt deep in thought. Deep in thoughts that Alex wishes he could see, because the suspense is tightening every vein in his body. If she would just forgive him, if they could just move on ...

"I don't wanna talk about this right now," she sighs at last.

"We haven't talked about this for forever," he hears himself saying. "We have to eventually, don't we?"

Her sole response is a shrug that seems to be working as hard as it can to appear indifferent.

"Yeah, we do," Alex says. "'Cause we're both friends with Jason and Courtney. It's not like we can avoid each other forever. And besides ... we were such good friends. We had a really strong bond, you can't deny that."

"I wouldn't have thought I could! But you did, didn't you? You took that bond and tried to twist it into something that it wasn't so that you could keep hiding yourself, your real self. You were trying to hide something that you thought would be destructive, but all you accomplished was to make it ten times more destructive!"

KING'S BAY MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

The hospital cafeteria is filled with what Molly assumes must be the usual daily activity: staffers huddled in groups, chatting to pass the time as they eat; families and friends of patients staked out, trying to busy themselves while they wait for news. The air is quiet, as if there is some sign posted on one of the walls urging everyone to keep the volume low. Conversations seem to be kept to a level that Molly would call "private" -- unable to be overheard without actual effort -- and the occasional laugh or exclamation sticks out sorely, threatening to disrupt the low-key order of the cafeteria.

Claire leads the way to a small table by the far wall. Molly wonders if the move is an indication that she knows what it is that Molly wants to discuss or simply an attempt to have a social lunch without being interrupted. Either way, Molly is sure that it will make her more comfortable to talk about what's on her mind if she knows that they are not

going to be overheard.

The women sit, each setting her tray down on the table before sliding into the padded metal chairs. The scene is grim, Molly notes; despite what appear to be the hospital's best decorative efforts to make the cafeteria feel removed from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the center, there is a prevailing aura of grayness hanging over the room.

"Thanks for meeting me here," Claire says. "It's just so much easier ... I'm working through the day every day this week, so if you hadn't agreed to eat here it probably would've been forever 'til we could have gotten together."

"It's no problem," Molly answers with a shrug. "I've got to eat somehow. Getting to chat with you while I do it seems like a nice break from eating at my desk while I try to get a few extra things done."

"Just wait 'til you try the food. That might change your tone," Claire laughs. "But hey, how's the job going? You sound really happy with it."

"I am! Working at Willis was good, but I'm enjoying this so much more. Just being on the inside of the fashion industry -- even if I'm sorta on the periphery of the inside -- it's so much fun. And my boss is amazing. She's just one of those people you can't help but like."

"Good! I know you always wanted to be a part of that field. At least you're having the chance now. And who knows, it could lead to bigger things, right?"

"Maybe, yeah," Molly admits, a little shyly. "I don't want to jinx it, but there could be a break in it for me eventually, yeah." She stops herself before she does jinx it and takes a first bite of the food. It's not as bad as she had feared.

"Well, I'm glad you're enjoying it so much. What else is new?"

"Not much." The idea of delving into the Brent-and-Sarah dilemma seems infinitely less appealing than the hospital food right now, so Molly takes another bite, then fixes her gaze on Claire. "How about you? How are things?"

The answer comes cautiously. "Good ... Fine, really."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Claire folds her hands together and rests them on the edge of the table. "I'm okay, Molly. Seriously."

"The other night -- the way you just ran out of Windmills -- it worried us. Brent wanted

to get up and follow, but I talked him out of it. I thought it might be something between you and Ryan and I should leave it alone."

"I appreciate that."

"That doesn't mean I'm not worried, Claire. Seeing you out with Ryan Moriani was a shock. And then Brent said when he went to see you in the morning--"

"Ryan was there, yeah. But everything is fine. Much better than it's been, actually ... although I don't think it really could have gotten worse."

"How can things be fine? From everything I've heard about the Morianis, from Brent, from Tim, from *you*, Ryan seems like the last guy you'd want to be involved with. I thought you hated them!"

Claire busies herself with her food for a moment, then looks up. Molly is waiting patiently.

"It's complicated," Claire says slowly. "Really complicated."

"That's what Brent said. He said there was some other stuff that did change things a bit, but he said I should ask you about it if I wanted to know."

"There is other stuff. But it's heavy, Molly."

"I'm all ears. You know I'm here for you."

Molly listens intently, never interrupting, never pushing, as Claire's story commences with a sigh and then comes spilling out. It starts and stops, carrying an uneven but somehow very natural rhythm; at points, Molly is sure that she can see Claire being transported back to the events that she is describing. And when it's over, Claire simply looks at Molly hopefully, as if needing confirmation that everything she just said makes sense and helps the pieces fit together better.

Molly nods. "Wow. Claire, I--I had no idea. That must have been horrible for you. It still must be, having to live with the memories and knowing that this Stan guy is still running around out there."

"It is hard, yeah," Claire says, taking another small bite of her nearly forgotten lunch. "I'm sure it always will be."

"Then how can being with Ryan be good for you?" Molly questions. "How can you let yourself be pulled back in after knowing how much pain those people have caused you?"

THE FISHERMAN'S PIER

All she has to do is say 'yes,' or even just give a casual nod, but for some reason, Sarah can't bring herself to do either one.

"Are you going for a case?" Matt asks again, obviously thrown by her bizarre response.

"Yeah, yeah," she answers hurriedly. "It's just--it's messy. I'm not really looking forward to it."

"More of a reason to get the job done quickly and come home."

"Exactly. So you don't mind taking Victoria for a couple of days?"

"I told you, it's not like I don't wanna spend time with her! That's like asking a kid, 'Are you gonna get mad if you *have* to eat more ice cream?'"

She manages a laugh and then swallows, forcing down the hard lump that has built up in her throat as she has grown more and more tense. "She's so lucky to have a daddy who adores her so much."

"Hey, I do what I can," he grins. "So when are you takin' off?"

"Tomorrow. The sooner I can get this over with, the better." *And that's no lie*, she tells herself. She would love to be able to call off this trip and dig no further into Matt's life prior to his meeting her, but the curiosity would nag her for the rest of her life. Things like that don't just lie quietly and go away, she's learned that much. Besides, it might turn out that there isn't even anything resembling a major issue: Maybe he really does have no family left. The possibility of that peace of mind makes the trip worth it.

"You're going away? Where to?" comes the call from behind.

She turns around and smiles at the sight of her father. He accelerates his pace and draws her into a firm hug.

"I'm just going to New York for a couple of days," she says, adding hastily, "for business."

"You've got to come by and catch up when you get back," Bill says. "Mom and I would love to have the two of you come over for dinner one night."

Matt seems pleased. "That'd be fun, huh, Sarah?"

"Yeah. Well, can we not make it a whole-family affair?"

She sees the concern spring to life on Bill's face. "Why not?" He sounds afraid even to ask.

"I'm just not really in the mood to deal with Big Sister," Sarah says. "Apparently she sees no problem with dating my ex-husband. We had a little disagreement over that." She can hear how harsh her own voice sounds but it feels good. Her father and mother deserve to know what their precious Molly is doing.

"We'll just make it the two of you," Bill says calmly. "And Victoria, of course."

"In that case, we'd love to," she responds with satisfaction. If Molly's going to insist on clinging to Brent without any regard for good taste or her own sister, then Sarah's going to make sure everyone knows just what is going on. No way are she and Brent going to have an easy time of it. No way.

CASCADE RIDGE APARTMENTS

"I know," Alex admits. The same blackness that has so often enveloped him in private now begins to sweep over him again. He didn't need Lauren to remind him of that guilt and anguish.

"I did," he says sadly, dropping his head and walking over to lean against the stack of cardboard boxes. "If I'd only recognized that what was inside me, what I was--what I am--could never have been as destructive as the things it made me do ... I would've saved everyone a lot of pain. I'm never going to forgive myself for that, Lauren."

She breathes deeply, then says, "I understand why you did what you did. I believe that you weren't being malicious and that you never meant for me or anyone else to get hurt. You wanted it to work out so that we could be happy together. But that doesn't make it any easier to accept."

"Can't you try?"

"I can try, yeah, but as much as I try ... it's hard. I can't forget what happened. I can't forget all those times that I practically threw myself at you like an idiot--"

The sound of the door opening startles both of them, and Lauren goes quiet immediately. They both watch as Jason troops back inside, a plastic crate held in his arms. He peers over the crate as he announces, "That's the last of the stuff from my car."

"Oh, uh, good," Lauren says awkwardly. "You want my help unpacking?"

"Sure, yeah." Jason sets down the crate and only then seems to notice the strange

character of the air in the room. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine. C'mon, let's get some of that stuff unpacked." Lauren makes a quick move to the pile of Jason's things.

Alex grabs another box and hauls it back to his room. As he removes the items from the box and tries to figure out what to do with them until he has the room set up in a more permanent way, he wonders what might have been had Jason not returned right when he did. It felt like he might have been getting somewhere with Lauren. Now who knows when -- or if -- they'll have the chance to talk like that again?

He doesn't want this hanging any longer, that much he knows. Maybe he just needs the peace of mind of knowing that Lauren has forgiven him for the way he twisted everyone's lives around ... Even though deep down, he knows that her forgiveness won't erase everything that happened. But it's a step.

Their interrupted confrontation still weighing heavily upon him, he heads back to the living room to retrieve a suitcase so that he can begin putting away his clothes. But when he reaches the end of the hallway, he once again pauses in his tracks.

The giggling is familiar and almost giddy, a far cry from the mood that Lauren was in just a few minutes ago. She is draped over Jason's back, trying to wrestle something away from him, while Jason is hunched over in an effort to keep Lauren on his back so that he can hold whatever he is keeping for her close to his stomach.

"C'mon, give it to me!" Lauren yells out between laughs.

"No way!" Jason shouts back. He begins moving around wildly, presumably in an effort to shake her off, but she holds on tight amidst a flurry of laughter.

Alex stands back, watching them very carefully. They've both always been playful, even goofy, but there's something about their behavior right now that takes him by surprise. It's as though an extra element has suddenly been added, a new dimension that Alex had never even considered could or would exist between Jason and Lauren.

He's not really sure what to think as he turns and goes back to the bedroom, the suitcase temporarily forgotten.

KING'S BAY MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

"It makes sense to me," Claire says. Molly thinks that she detects a note of desperation, a longing for Molly to believe her and leave it at that. But Molly's not entirely convinced; she certainly doesn't understand. And she's not going to let it go so easily, not in such a

serious situation.

"How?" she asks. She sees Claire fidget, probably ready to protest, and adds, "Try me. If you can't explain it to me, then how can you be sure that it actually even makes sense to you?"

It takes a moment, but Claire seems to accept that logic, albeit a tad reluctantly. "I need him in my life, Molly."

"Why? I mean--what is it that you need? Are you sure that you're not just trying to get past the rape by proving that you can have a 'normal' relationship with Ryan?"

"I'm not," comes the stern response. "That's not it. I've accepted that it was Stan who--who attacked me, not Ryan. I realized that the other night, before ... before I asked him to spend the night."

"Then why do you want to be with him? It doesn't sound like this was a one-night thing. Do you really want him around you -- and around the kids -- all the time?"

"Yes. I do. I--" Claire pauses, holds in her breath for several seconds, and then releases it in a long, even stream. "He understands where I come from. He knows what it was like for me to grow up with my father, in that world. No one else can do that."

Now it is Molly's turn to hesitate. "Not even Tim?"

"No. Not completely, anyway. Ryan knows how deeply all those years affected me because they affected him, too. He knows me so well ... the other night, he made me realize things that I never even realized about myself. Do you know how that feels, after going so long with the feeling that I'd never connect with someone like that ever again?"

Molly nods slowly, thoughtfully. She knows the feeling all too well: It's the way she feels about Brent, the same type of desperation that she felt all that time that Brent was still tied to Sarah and it seemed there would never be any way for her to be as close to him as she wanted. The way she still feels, all too often, knowing that they have to maintain a distance that neither of them wants to observe.

"Maybe you can't understand it completely," Claire says. "I wouldn't expect you to. But there is something with Ryan that I have to explore. I have to at least give it a chance." As if sensing the next thing to pop into Molly's mind, she adds quickly, "And I am being careful. Don't think that I've forgotten that he's a Moriani -- no one would let me forget that, anyway. But I need this. I need to be able to trust someone, and I need to believe that there's a chance of being as happy as I was with Tim."

Since she doesn't know what else to say, Molly simply bows her head and reaches her

hand across the table. She places it over Claire's hand and lets it rest there gently, reassuringly, acting as the vote of confidence and understanding that she isn't sure she can voice just yet.

END OF EPISODE #263

Is Claire headed for trouble by getting so close to Ryan? Should Sarah be delving into Matt's past so secretively? Is it time for Lauren to forgive Alex, or might that never be possible? Your contributions to the discussion would be welcomed in the Footprints Forum!

[Next Episode](#)