

"Footprints"

Episode #178

[The Same Day as #177, Evening]

[Previously ...](#)

*Nick discovered Katherine worrying about her finances. He talked her into letting him take a look at things.

*A visit from his biological father, Stan, left Ryan wondering why he continued to keep the truth about the rape from Claire.

*Lauren tried to remain optimistic about the future of her relationship with Alex.

TEASER

WINDMILLS-

Ryan's martini glass hits the bar with a sharp, heavy clink. It takes him a moment to realize what the sound was, and another to realize that he set the glass down with far too much force.

His fingers slither off of the glass's stem, a gesture that acknowledges the fact that he has had too much to drink this evening. The dull aching behind his eyes - the aching that began some hours ago - calls his fingers up to his temples. They oblige and begin massaging in an effort to dispel some of the tension.

He tries to focus on something pleasant, or at least on nothing at all. But three different conversations are simultaneously thrashing around in his head ...

"Nothing huge," Stan assures him. "I just need to borrow some cash."

"How much?"

"I dunno, a couple thousand."

"A couple thousand?" Ryan feels something similar to relief - he knows that there is no way he can wind up feeling torn here. "I wish I could help you, but-"

"But what?" A desperate look falls over Stan's face. "Ry, I need some cash - fast."

"I don't have any cash."

"Huh?" Stan surveys the interior of the house from his post in the doorway. "You and the big guy are livin' here and you got no cash?"

Ryan turns his back to Nick. "It's not that easy."

"Why not?" Nick asks, rising to his feet. "Who are you keeping this secret for, anyway? Stan? Why does he deserve it?"

"Because he's my father, okay?" Ryan says hotly. "I'm not going to jail for this, but Claire might press charges if she found out it was him. I can't let that happen."

"Why not? It's not as if you even have contact with him anymore!"

"I'm-" Claire begins.

Tim interrupts. "Claire, go get ready. I'd like to have a few words with Ryan."

Claire is about to protest but she isn't sure how. She looks again at both men and shuffles off.

Tim waits until she is gone to say anything. "Look, Ryan, we need to get a few things straight."

"Oh yeah?" Ryan steps up so that he is practically in Tim's face.

"Yeah. I'm not sure why you're not understanding this, but Claire doesn't want you around. I'm amazed you can even show your face, after what you did to her."

For a moment Ryan's aggression fades, receding into sorrow, but then it flares up again, stronger than before.

"Look, Tim," he says, spitting the name, "I think you'd better stop confusing your own feelings with Claire's."

With that, he spins around and heads off - leaving Tim to consider that last comment.

Instinctively his fingers leave his head and lunge back towards the glass. Ryan catches them and begins drumming them along the bar just to keep them busy. His eyes scan the area, almost desperate for something else on which he might focus.

He finds something, all right, but it's one of the last things he wants to see: Standing across the room, chatting with a friend, is Claire.

FITCH MANSION-

The grandfather clock calls out the hour from someplace far away. At least, it feels like someplace far away. Nick only notices the chiming as it is fading away, and by the time it registers, it is forgotten entirely.

For several hours he has been hunched over the desk in Katherine's study, flipping through papers, jotting down figures, and punching away at the buttons of a tiny calculator. The lighting - which, when he began, was being provided in spades by the sun via the large windows - has now faded to a dim gray that is shrouding the room. Some time ago Nick flipped on the small lamp that is sitting on the desk, and it is under that small shell of light that he continues to work.

"Please let this work," he mumbles to no one in particular. "If it doesn't ..."

He doesn't need to complete the thought, but it surges through his head anyway. Then I have no way of getting that money. And if I can't pay that debt-

This time he really does cut it off. He would rather not consider the possibilities.

BROOKS HOME-

"There you are!" Lauren cries out, flinging open the door.

"Sorry," Alex says, hurrying up onto the porch. "There was an accident on Adams. I wound up sitting in traffic for like half an hour."

"It's all right." She lays her hands on his muscular upper arms and draws him closer. "We've got all the time in the world," she says, planting a peck on his lips.

Alex flashes her a smile as he steps backward. "So what've you got planned for tonight?"

"I got us dinner. Chinese take-out."

"That sounds so good."

"I knew you'd like it," she grins, running her hand slowly up and down his arm. "See, look how in synch we are."

"Yeah," Alex manages after a brief - yet exceedingly uncomfortable, for him, anyway - pause.

His worry that Lauren will pick up on it diminishes immediately.

"Oh, guess what?" she squeals, taking hold of his hands.

"What?"

"I have something really, really exciting to tell you!"

"Okay ..."

"It's big news," she hints. "Something that'll change my life forever."

"What is it?" Alex asks. His body tightens with panic and the fear that whatever she says is going to make this situation much, much worse.

ACT ONE

WINDMILLS-

Ryan immediately drops his head to avoid being spotted by Claire. All those times I went places just because she'd be there, he thinks. Running into her someplace was the best thing that could happen to me. How did it get to the point where I'm hoping she doesn't see me?

He hardly has time to begin processing the question. The sharp ring of his cell phone cuts into his thoughts, jarring him from his reflective state. He scrambles to get to it, though it takes him a moment to remember that it's in the pocket of his leather jacket. He answers before the third ring is over.

"Hello?" he answers, keeping his voice to as much of a whisper as possible out of both courtesy and a desire for privacy.

"It's me," Nick announces.

"Hey. What's going on?"

"I have news." Nick's tone turns more careful. "Where are you?"

"Out having a drink. Don't worry, go ahead."

"All right. I'm at Katherine's ..."

Without realizing it Ryan creeps closer to the edge of his seat. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I happened to drop by while she was trying to get her finances in order and I convinced her to let me have a look at things."

"And ...?"

"It's all here," Nick says. He can hear the sigh of relief on the other end. "There's more than enough to cover what we need."

"Perfect. Do you think that you can actually get it?"

"Absolutely. Everything's in disarray. I'll just offer to organize it all and I'll take what I need. She'll never know the difference."

"Wonderful," Ryan says, feeling great relief. "That all?"

"For now, yes. We'll discuss it more at home."

"Okay." Ryan ends the call with the push of a button.

"What was that all about?"

The voice rattles Ryan's nerves. He turns with a start - and finds Claire mere inches behind him.

BROOKS HOME-

Lauren doesn't let Alex hang for long. "I got a job!" she announces happily.

"That's awesome!" He pulls her into a congratulatory hug. For a moment it feels genuinely good to share something like this with someone, anyone. For so much of his life Alex has been without true affection, so to share something meaningful - something genuine - like this is like a breath of fresh air after having had his head held underwater for too long.

But like that first breath after bursting out of the water, this isn't pure. There is the gasping, the sputtering, the awareness that something is within reach but it's not in hand yet. Alex knows that this isn't genuine - it can't be, not with everything between him and Lauren right now. Once again, a moment is ruined.

He eases out of the embrace, fighting a cloudy head. "Congratulations," he tells Lauren with whatever smile he can manage.

"Thanks."

"So can I have some details?"

"Oh, yeah! So it's an assistant position at this big advertising firm downtown, the one Jason's sister works at."

"So when do you start?"

"Next week." She clasps her hands together joyfully. "I am so happy right now!"

Before Alex knows it, she tosses herself onto him for another embrace. His arms slide awkwardly around her back and the thoughts that had begun to fade now come racing back.

This has to stop.

ACT TWO

FITCH MANSION-

"Who was that?"

Nick looks up from his cell phone, suppressing the start that nearly overtakes his body. "Oh, that was just Ryan. I wanted to let him know where I am."

"Ah," Katherine says, approaching the desk. Nick watches her for some sign of suspicion but none is visible.

She assumes a post behind the chair and places a hand on his shoulder. "How are you doing?"

"Not badly," he replies. "I've made a good deal of progress, actually."

"Have you found any major problems?"

"No, none. There wasn't anything particularly wrong - it was all just a bit disorganized. But I'm getting it in order."

"Wonderful." She rubs his right shoulder slowly. "Thank you for doing this. I know I put up something of a fight before, but I really did need the help."

He turns his head and looks up at her. "It's my pleasure."

"Of course. I'm sure it's just loads of fun for you to spend the entire afternoon digging through papers and crunching numbers," she says with a tiny laugh.

Nick shakes off the comment. "Never mind me," he says, standing. "I'm glad to help you out."

"I'm glad to have the help."

A warm silence falls over them. Nick's hands settle on her sides and he leans in with a tilted head. They share a passionate kiss.

"Have I told you how much I love you lately?" he asks.

"Well, yes, but it couldn't hurt to hear it some more."

"I do love you. I haven't felt this way about anyone for so long, Katherine. It's like ... it's like a breath of fresh air."

"I know exactly how you feel."

"Good," he says, affecting a thoughtful pause. "Then you can understand why I want to marry you as soon as possible."

She does not pull away from him completely but she draws back somewhat. "As soon as possible?"

"Yes - as quickly as we can get everything arranged. I see no reason to wait, Katherine."

Her slumped shoulders and tightly clasped hands make it clear that she does not see things in the same light.

"There's no point in stalling," Nick adds. "Neither of us is getting any younger." He pauses as the comment draws a slight smile from Katherine.

"Come on," he urges. "Say you'll marry me as soon as possible."

WINDMILLS-

Ryan throws back his head, sighs, and turns away from Claire.

She plants herself on the high chair next to him. "I heard you, Ryan. You said something about 'So you think you can actually get it?'. What are you up to?"

He continues staring off into space for several seconds and then abruptly turns to her. "What are you up to? Why are you being so nosy?"

"Because I know you and Daddy Dearest are up to your old tricks. What is it now, running drugs?"

"You know, for someone who doesn't ever want to be around me ..."

The statement does make Claire sit back a little bit. She lapses into silence.

"I don't know what you think you're doing," Ryan says, "but whatever it is, stop."

"Don't know the meaning of the word," Claire answers with a defiant shrug of her shoulders.

Now Ryan sits back. He stares at her with amusement; he tries to ignore that old fire for her that's creeping up again. "You really haven't changed a bit, have you? Same old spunky wannabe detective that you always were."

"At least I don't go around professing that I've changed when I really haven't."

The comment hits a nerve in Ryan. He turns away from her again.

"Come on, Ryan," she pushes. "If you want me to believe that I can trust you, you're going to have to start somewhere. And that somewhere is telling me what you and Nick are up to."

There is no response.

"Ryan-"

"Stop it!" he barks, whipping around. "Shut up and leave me the hell alone!"

BROOKS HOME-

This has to stop.

That reality stomps its foot in Alex's head over and over. The pounding only dulls when, without realizing it, he releases Lauren and steps back.

"Alex?" she asks.

Alex simply stares at her. So young, so pretty, so sweet. She doesn't deserve this. She doesn't deserve what I'm doing to her.

"Alex? What's going on?"

Still, he does not answer her. There are too many thoughts, too many words swirling around in his head for any of them to make it out of his mouth. He just continues staring, trapped in a daze.

She places a hand on his forearm. It is enough to snap him out of the staring. His eyes drift for a minute before locking with hers.

"What's going on, Alex?" she asks. "Is something wrong?"

Alex's lips quiver.

ACT THREE

FITCH MANSION-

Katherine avoids Nick's gaze. "This is a big move. Why rush into it-"

He does not even allow her to complete the question. "Rushing is the wrong word entirely. We know that we want to be together. So why not spend as much time together as we can? I don't see how it could be a bad thing."

She turns the proposal over in her mind. The scales tip one way and then the other without solidly settling anywhere.

"Maybe this is selfish," Nick says with a softer voice, "but I don't want to spend any more time alone. You make me happy. I don't see any reason to prolong the time I have to spend by myself."

He has hit the right note. The unsettling discomfort of loneliness overtakes Katherine as she considers the mansion, empty except for her and the servants. And then there is Andrew, living elsewhere and hardly even wanting to talk to her.

"All right," she says.

A smile immediately busts out on Nick's face. "Do you mean it?"

"Yes." She draws a deep breath, letting it all sink in. Suddenly the situation has become a great deal more realistic. "Yes."

He pulls her into an excited embrace.

WINDMILLS-

Ryan's hardened gaze, strengthened by months upon months of frustrations and secrets and obstacles, remains fixed upon Claire. His eyeballs seem to pulse, focusing the sudden rage so intensely upon her that she cannot help but turn away. A silent moment - a lengthy, heavy, uncertain period - passes between them before she looks back at him.

"You don't mean that," she says, struggling to maintain the grin that signifies her possession of the upper hand.

There is nothing for several seconds.

Finally Ryan says, "Yes, I do. Leave me alone, do you understand? I don't want to be around you now!"

Unwilling to lose any more of the advantage, Claire rises. Clutching her purse to her side, she simply says, "I'm going to figure out what's going on with you." And without giving him a chance to respond, she departs.

Ryan is left with the half-hope that maybe she will figure out the truth - the real truth, about what happened on that day she thinks she remembers so well from all those years ago. And then maybe ...

Give it up, he scolds himself. It's not going to happen. Just keep yourself from getting in any more trouble here.

At the restaurant's exit, Claire pauses, casting one last look out into the bar area. She watches Ryan, clearly absorbed in his thoughts.

Something is going on, she tells herself. He never would have reacted to me like that. He and Nick are up to something, I can tell. And I'm not going to stop until I figure out what it is and save someone else from getting hurt.

BROOKS HOME-

Concern fills Lauren's body as she awaits Alex's explanation. She can see it - whatever it is - poised there, on his lips, ready to jump, but it's just not taking the leap.

"Come on, Alex," she says, petting his shoulder. "If something is the matter, you can tell me. I'm here for you. I care about you. I wanna help."

Alex is silent, though his eyes continue to dart around without anything safe upon which they can focus.

"Please," she urges. "Let me help you." When he still fails to take the prompting, she adds a bit more aggressively, "I can tell something is bothering you, Alex!"

"You're right," he answers, his voice little more than a whisper.

Lauren looks at him expectantly.

"There is something," he says. "Something you need to know."

He draws a deep breath ...

END OF EPISODE #178

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