

"Footprints"

Episode #183

[Several Days after #182]

[Previously ...](#)

**Nick once again had to convince Katherine that marrying him is the correct decision, and they decided to wed on New Year's Eve.*

**Claire filled Andy in on Nick's relationship with her late father and the mob. She promised to help Andy stop Katherine's wedding to Nick if necessary.*

**Ryan avoided contact with Claire and grew annoyed when she questioned him about his father's business.*

**Alex received affirmation from Courtney regarding his friendship with her as well as with Lauren and Jason. Courtney encouraged him not to ignore Lauren's romantic overtures.*

322

"Hey." The word comes out of Alex's mouth awkwardly, caught between a breath and the lump in his throat.

"Hey." Lauren looks at him over her shoulder from her seat at the bar.

"Thanks for coming to meet me," Alex says as he settles down onto the stool beside Lauren. "After the way I acted the other day ... I wouldn't blame you if you didn't want to talk to me at all."

"It's okay, Alex. I can tell that something's going on, and I don't want to pry, but -- I'm worried about you."

"Don't be," he says instinctively. He jerks his eyes away from hers and catches those of the bartender. After calling out a drink order, he turns his head downward.

Lauren waits for him to say more, to offer some sort of an explanation, but it never comes. Finally she speaks up. "I won't pretend to know what's going on. And I don't know if you feel like you can share it with me, even though I'd like to think we're good enough friends that you would. But ..." She trails off, trying to figure out how to ask him what she wishes she was able to ask him months ago.

"But what?"

"It's just--" She pauses, taking advantage of the bartender delivering Alex's drink so that she can stall. "I'm wondering how this affects everything ... how it affects us."

Alex stares into the drink. His fingers, shaking ever so slightly, rest on the side of the glass. He swallows hard.

"So tell me how it is," Lauren says. "Tell me exactly how you feel about me."

FITCH MANSION

"Here you are," the butler says as he stops at the entrance to the living room.

"Thank you, Walter," Andy says with a smile. He watches the butler exit, marveling at the ease with which Walter has shifted gears and now treats Andy like any other visitor to the mansion. There is the warmth of familiarity, of course, but it is no greater than what might be shown towards any frequent visitor.

Maybe he's adjusted better than we have, Andy muses as he turns his attention to the matter that has brought him here.

He turns to Katherine. "Hello, Mother."

"Andrew," she greets him with a broad smile. "How nice to see you!"

"It's nice to see you, too."

"How was your Thanksgiving?" she asks eagerly.

"It was nice. I had dinner with the Fishers." He pauses, then asks, "How was yours?"

"Quite nice. Nick and his son came over, and I had a few others join us." Her demeanor turns to one of great sadness. "I would have loved for you to have been here."

Andy doesn't say anything.

"I left you a message," Katherine adds. "Did you not get it?"

He is quiet for a moment more. "I got it," he finally says. "I just thought it would be best not to spend the holiday here."

Katherine sighs. "Why?"

"Because I knew that Nick would be here. I'd rather not be around the two of you."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like." Andy plunges his hands into his pockets and tosses his head back. "Mother, we need to talk."

"Why?"

"You're making an enormous mistake. I--I need to stop it."

"*What?*" It only takes a second for her to realize what he is referring to. "Please, Andrew, let's not have this conversation again. I've already told you--"

"Mother!" he says forcefully, gripping her shoulders with his hands. "You have to listen to me. You *cannot* marry Nick Moriani."

She jerks away from his grasp. "I am not going to listen to this again!"

"Mother--"

"No! I understand that you're still angry at me for everything that happened with Danielle, but--"

"This has nothing to do with Danielle!"

"It has everything to do with her! You're trying to get some sort of revenge on me for everything I did by keeping me from marrying Nick!"

Now wearing a disgusted grimace, she shakes her head. "Guess what? It's not going to work!"

KING'S BAY PARK

The night air is still. Good thing, too, because even a hint of a breeze might make the cold too unbearable for an evening stroll. And that stroll is exactly what Ryan needs right now. He needs to be away from that house, away from the bars, away from everything. He jams his gloved hands a little deeper into the pockets and continues down the trail, staring down at the layer of nighttime frost coating the pavement.

At the sound of voices, he instinctively looks up. Immediately he wishes he hadn't. He curses his bad luck under his breath as he slips off the trail and ducks behind a tree.

He watches as the couple, not far down the trail, pauses. Tim leans down and extends his arms, and the little boy hops in them. Tim lifts him up and holds the bundled-up child for a minute before placing him in the double-stroller. With the toddler settled in, Claire's hands settle over the handle as if she is going to resume pushing the stroller, but there is no movement.

Ryan can see Tim point out at the bay, its calm surface reflecting lights from all around its perimeter. Claire smiles broadly in response. Despite himself, Ryan sharpens his ears.

"It's a shame we don't come out here more often," Claire says. "It's gorgeous."

"Much like someone I know," Tim responds, grinning as he lifts his eyebrows.

"Oh, really? Who might that be?"

"I don't know," Tim shrugs. "I think I saw her somewhere over ... here." And he leans in, peeking over Claire's shoulders and around her for a moment before swooping in with a passionate kiss.

Ryan averts his eyes from the scene, but they drift back before Tim and Claire have separated. His stomach practically turns as he waits out the kiss.

He sees Claire sigh contentedly, gaze around, and then ask Tim, "Do you ever have that feeling like everything is just about perfect?"

"From time to time," Tim smiles, never taking his eyes off of her. He folds her into his arms and they rest against one another, looking down at Travis and Samantha in the stroller.

It seems to Ryan that this scene goes on forever, and he slips out from behind the tree and begins heading in the opposite direction, staying off of the trail to avoid being seen. He casts a look back at the happy family scene and quickly pulls himself away from it. He walks off into the dark, his feet moving as quickly as they can to get him away from this place.

322

Alex finds that he cannot tear his gaze away from the depths of his drink. His weak fingers lift the glass and he takes a sip, but he never feels it. The liquid slips past his mouth and down his throat and the sip is over before he knows it, and he must talk again.

"It's really ... God, I don't know how to start," he says. "It's not that I don't care about you, Lauren. I don't want you to get that impression, 'cause it's not true at all."

Once again Lauren senses the promise of more words, but it goes unfulfilled.

"... But you don't think you feel the way you should for us to have a relationship," she finishes for him.

The comment alarms Alex and his chest tightens. Lauren adds, "Or the way I *wish* you'd feel."

He knows that it could be over, that he could be in the clear now, but he doesn't feel relief at all. "I'm sorry," he says faintly.

"It's not your fault!" Lauren assures him with a pat on the back and a wry chuckle. "These things don't always work out. So what?"

Though she is trying to make herself sound strong, Alex isn't fooled. He finds that he is finally able to look up at her, although the pained expression on her face just makes him feel worse.

She shrugs. "We've still got our friendship ... right?"

"Yeah. Yeah, of course," he says. His arm reaches around her body and rests on her far shoulder. "It's not that I don't want to be around you, Lauren. But I'm just ... not sure how I feel. I need some space and I need to sort things out by myself and then -- who knows?"

Lauren nods, still wearing that brave face that hurts Alex so badly.

"So you're cool still being friends?" he asks.

"Absolutely. Regardless of what happens, I really care about you, and I want to be there for you no matter what's going on."

"Good. 'Cause I could definitely use a friend right now." He stands up, moved towards her by some force within himself that he doesn't quite recognize. He stretches his arms out and draws Lauren into them, holding her closer and closer as she stands up as well.

"Thank you," he whispers into her ear.

FITCH MANSION

"You have to listen to me," Andy insists. "You don't know what you're getting into -- you don't know Nick!"

"I've been seeing him for a year!" Katherine shouts. "He's been here for me through some extremely difficult times ... unlike you."

"That's not fair, Mother."

"Not fair? What isn't fair is that you are going to continue trying to punish me forever for the mistakes I made in dealing with you and Danielle! Don't I deserve some sort of second chance, Andrew? Don't I deserve a shot at happiness?"

"Of course you do," he says, lowering the volume but not the intensity of his voice. "And I need you to believe that this has nothing to do with Danielle--"

"You can't expect me to believe that!"

Andy brings his tensed hands up beside his head and then flings them down in frustration. "You have to! I am *worried* about you, Mother! You're getting involved in something that you don't understand. For goodness' sake, you've already gotten involved and you don't even realize how badly it hurt you!"

"What in the world is that supposed to mean?"

"Your shooting," Andy explains. "Did it ever occur to you that maybe Nick was by your side the entire time you were recovering because he felt guilty?"

"What? That's madness!" Katherine exclaims.

"No, it isn't! Nick has a past, Mother, a past that is still affecting him and everyone he touches. He's involved in some terrible things, and you're going to get hurt -- even more -- if you marry into that."

Andy can see the hesitation flood Katherine's body, softening her posture and her facial features, but after a moment the fire sparks anew. She demands angrily, "And what proof of this have you got?"

"Claire Fisher," he says. "She told me all about how her father used to do business with Nick. They were involved in some awful things -- Nick still is."

"Awful things? Such as what?"

"Drug trafficking, for one. Money laundering. This is the mob he's dealing with. Claire's father was heavily involved in it."

"That doesn't necessarily mean Nick has anything to do with it!" Katherine counters. She sees Andy's mouth begin to act in rebuttal and she stops it. "Do you have any proof of this besides what this woman says? Does Nick have a--a criminal record?"

It takes Andy a moment, but his shoulders slump in defeat. "No. But it isn't because there isn't anything wrong -- he's just good enough to keep from being caught."

"This is asinine!" Katherine shouts. "I'm not going to listen to this, Andrew. Please, just -- just leave."

"Mother--"

"Go," she orders. "I'd rather not see you at all than have to see you trying to destroy whatever chance of being happy I have left."

Screams of protest clog Andy's throat, but none of them make their way out. He throws up his hands and turns, his footsteps burning a path in the carpet as he exits. He stops at the double doors and looks back at Katherine.

"You're making a tremendous mistake," he says, allowing his disdainful gaze to rest on her for a moment before he storms out.

MORIANI HOME

"I didn't hear you come in," Nick says as he strides into the living room.

Ryan is standing by the bar, putting the finishing touches on a drink. "I just got back." He throws back a good portion of the drink as he makes his way over to the burgundy sofa and slumps down on it.

"You don't sound too thrilled."

"That's probably because I'm not."

"I assume this has something to do with Claire."

"Ding-ding. Ya want a prize?" Ryan tosses his head back and, as he stares at the ceiling, explains, "I saw her and Tim and their kids while I was walking through the park."

Nick seats himself beside Ryan and casts a sympathetic look at the man who, for all intents and purposes, is his son. "Did you get into another argument with them?"

"No." Ryan shakes his head. "And that's the thing. I didn't even feel like I had the strength to try to talk to her. I wasn't even sure that I wanted to."

"I'm afraid I don't follow ..."

"I don't even think that / follow sometimes! I'm fed up with her -- I'm tired of trying to convince her to forgive me. All she ever wants to discuss is your business, like she's out to find something."

"She is," Nick agrees with a disturbed grimace. "She came by here a few days ago and she was threatening me, saying she would find a way to make you and me pay."

"I don't know why she has to keep pushing that! I wish she'd just leave it in the past and move on. You'd think that would be better for her, too, right? I think it's all bothering her more because she keeps dwelling on it."

Nick nods. "That makes absolute sense. But I also think part of it is that she wants to hold onto the past."

"Why the hell would she want that?"

"Because it's unresolved. With the way things ended between you and her, the decision was essentially made for her: She couldn't be with you anymore. But had what happened -- or what she believes happened -- never taken place, then perhaps your relationship would have gotten deeper. It certainly had the potential to."

"Claire does *not* still have feelings for me." Ryan lifts the glass, tips his head, and the rest of his drink is gone in a flash. "Her place is with Tim. That became quite clear tonight."

Nick is silent for a moment as he reads Ryan. "So that's it," the older man finally concludes. "Whatever you saw between the two of them tonight -- it made you feel as though you'll never have her."

"I won't. The way she looked with Tim and those kids ... God, that's something I just can't fight. There's nothing I can do to come between them." He sighs and again stares off at the ceiling. "It makes me so angry that I talked you into coming to King's Bay, that I've wasted all these months, all so I could just play out this little fantasy that never had

any chance of coming true. All for nothing!"

He considers the statement briefly and then he is on his feet again, and on his way back over to the bar.

"You know, there may still be a way you can turn this all around," Nick says.

Ryan sets down the bottle in his hand. "What?"

"Tell her everything. About the rape, about Stan. It would certainly change her perspective."

"It's not worth it. It wouldn't work ... It wouldn't be enough."

"Ryan--"

"It wouldn't," Ryan repeats, more forcefully this time. "That would just open up a whole new can of worms that I really don't want to deal with. I just want to try and forget about this whole ridiculous situation ..."

He goes back to fixing his drink. Nick watches, knowing he must keep quiet. And he does. But the feeling of relief within his body and his mind is enormous.

Thank God, he thinks. Maybe now Claire Robbins -- and all the trouble she could cause -- will be out of our lives for good.

KING'S BAY PARK

"So she's coming up the weekend after New Year's?" Claire asks as she, Tim, and the kids continue making their way around the paved trail.

"Yep. I'm amazed she didn't put up a fight and demand the weekend right before Christmas," Tim says.

"I suppose that would be typical Diane, huh?"

"Absolutely. But she can surprise you every once in a while."

"Oh, she's full of surprises. Just not always the kind that make me want to let Samantha be around her anymore than she has to be," Claire says.

A momentary silence comes over them as they continue walking. Tim shakes his head. "I still can't believe everything she pulled to try and split us up."

"Oddly enough, I almost can. After my father and his stunts, and all this crap with Ryan--"

Tim stops in his tracks. "What crap with Ryan?"

"Nothing, nothing," she assures him, palms open to him. "Nothing new. Just how insane it is that he's been ... chasing me like this for so many months." They resume walking.

"I really wish he would take a hint."

"I think he might have," she says. When Tim shoots her a questioning look, she adds, "I ran into him at Windmills a little while ago and he totally blew me off."

"*You* approached *him* ?"

"Yeah, well -- he was on his cell phone, looking secretive. And he was drinking. I thought maybe if I could get him to open up about what was going on, I could get something Brent could use to nail him and Nick."

"Claire, it's not your place to be looking for that kind of stuff."

"I think I have every right to want to see them behind bars!" she cries. The cold night eats up the words and quiet again blankets them.

Finally Tim speaks. "You do. I agree with that. But this isn't the way to go about it. First of all, it's not your job -- and it's not safe. I think we've seen how dangerous these people can be, right?"

"Yeah, but ..."

"But nothing. Claire, there's only one thing you can really do about the Morianis."

"I'm not going to forget about it--"

"I'm not telling you to," Tim interrupts, implementing as soothing a voice as he can manage to calm her. "What you *can* do is press charges for the rape."

The walk comes to another halt. "What? Tim, no ..."

"Why not?"

"Because it--" But she knows she cannot vocalize the reason.

"Think about it," he says, placing his hands on her shoulders. "I'm behind you 100 percent if you decide to file charges, remember that. And it would definitely be a way of 'getting' them."

"I guess," she says, staring out at the water again.

"Just consider it."

She nods, too consumed by thoughts to speak.

END OF EPISODE #183

[Next Episode](#)