

"Footprints" Episode #226

[Previously ...](#)

**Another surprise visit from Stan, this time to announce that he's planning to move to King's Bay, nearly sent Ryan over the edge.*

**Claire's lawyer informed her that a date had been set for the preliminary custody hearing. She worried that she would lose Samantha to Diane.*

**Alex resisted his urges and didn't cross the boundaries of friendship despite his attraction to Jason. Later, Jason was horrified to see Alex and Lauren kiss and then head upstairs together.*

MORIANI HOME

The footsteps fall lightly on the wooden floor of the hallway. They carry softly to the kitchen, whispers from the slippers that are making their way through the darkened house.

"Hunting around for a midnight snack?" Ryan asks from his place at the counter, where he is sitting on a stool nursing a martini.

"I suppose," Nick says, rolling his eyes at the sight of the martini before he opens the pantry door.

"Katherine asleep?"

"Mm-hmm." A few more silent seconds of rummaging produce no promising results and the pantry is closed again. Nick glances over at the coffeepot and, seeing that there is at least enough left for another cup, moves to the cupboard.

Ryan inhales the last of his drink. "How was your night out?"

"Fine." Nick doesn't hesitate with the answer, but Katherine's questions -- and the subsequent hammering of his heart -- are back on his mind in an instant. Not that they were ever far away to begin with, of course. He goes on pouring his coffee. "How was your night?"

"Oh, freaking wonderful." The declaration makes his voice jump up to what Nick finds too high a volume, and he wonders how many drinks Ryan has finished off tonight the way he did that martini.

"I'm sorry we left you alone--"

"You went out with your wife. No biggie." Ryan picks up the glass and examines it, as if looking for another drop. "No, I, uh, had a visitor."

Nick puts down the freshly filled cup of coffee on the counter. "Claire?"

"Oh, no. Although that would have been just dandy, too ... No, it was Stan."

The reaction is instantaneous, sharp as a knife's edge. "What was he doing here?"

"He had news. Wonderful news." Ryan pauses, affecting some kind of twisted dramatic touch to torture himself. "He's moving to King's Bay."

"You're kidding."

"Oh, no, I would not lie about such thrilling news. Apparently he's got some woman in town he wants to be near."

"God help her soul." Nick sips at the coffee thoughtfully, although Ryan can see him tensing significantly. "Did you make him leave?"

"Yeah." The answer is more of a choke than a spoken word. "I can't believe that he keeps coming around like this -- and now he thinks that I'll *want* to see him if he's here--"

"You haven't exactly given him reason to think otherwise, Ryan."

The statement sounds like an accusation, and it pricks Ryan just like one.

"You've kept up contact with him all these years," Nick says, his tone unrelenting. "If you don't want to see him ... Then why haven't you acted like it?"

CLAIRE FISHER'S APARTMENT

The real world.

Claire had almost forgotten that it existed in the last few hours. After a quiet dinner and some TV time, she put the kids to bed early and wrapped herself up on the couch in a book. It has been holding her captive ever since, drawing her into its pages and away from her world.

The escape has been a welcome one. The hours she has spent lost in the lines of print have been a gift -- one that is suddenly being retracted.

Placing the book, open and pages facing down, on the couch, she rises with a heavy sigh to go answer the door. *Who the hell would it be at this hour, anyway?*

The answer is ridiculously obvious as soon as she opens the door. Of course: Diane.

"Hi," Diane says, sounding almost apologetic.

"Hi," Claire says curtly. "What are you doing here?"

"I have a favor to ask you," Diane announces as she lets herself inside the apartment.

Claire makes no effort to keep her out, but she doesn't step aside to get out of the way, either. "You do realize how late it is, don't you?"

"Yeah ..." Diane's response is borderline sarcastic, as if to say, *Of course it's late. What's so weird about that?* "But it's important."

"Look, if you're here to make some more demands or ream me out--"

"I'm not. I promise. I just have a simple request."

WHITNEY'S HOUSE

"Are they doing what I think they're doing?" Courtney asks, sounding both concerned and a little amused.

Jason has no idea how she can even think of humor at a time like this. The party -- the black lights, the booming music, the drinks, all the people -- fades away around him as he watches Lauren and Alex heading up the stairs, hand in hand.

"What is he *doing?*" Jason mutters, trying very hard to shake off the buzz from the alcohol.

"They're working things out," Courtney says. "This is turning into a pattern for them or something."

He turns to her, absolutely appalled, knowing that it is showing in his own mouth and widened eyes. Suddenly he can see the effects of the night's drinking in her face.

He darts out of her grasp. "I need to go stop them."

"What? No, Jason, stop--" She grabs him again, roughly, by the arm. "Leave them alone!"

"I can't! They're about to--Courtney, this is a *huge* mistake."

"Leave them alone!" she cries, her voice leaping in intensity.

"No! I need to stop them." He pulls away from her again and begins forcing his way through the crowd, hardly even aware of the people he is pushing aside.

"Jason!" He hears the call, faintly from behind him, blurred by the music and the talking and the alcohol.

He doesn't even acknowledge it.

MORIANI HOME

"Because I do want to see him," Ryan says as his gaze dips to the countertop. "I just wish he would put some actual effort into it."

"Haven't you learned yet that he's not going to? He's not capable of it." Nick picks up the coffee cup and moves to the stool beside Ryan. "You have to give up on this fantasy of him being a good father, Ryan. It's never going to happen."

Ryan doesn't say anything. He picks up the martini glass and rolls its stem between his fingers.

"He did come find me," he says finally, insistently. "He wanted to know what had happened to his son."

"Maybe ..."

Ryan shakes his head and looks away, staring across the kitchen. "He does want to be a good father."

"*Wants to*, maybe. Capable of? I highly doubt it." Nick places a firm hand on Ryan's shoulder. "Ryan, you know what he did to Claire. It's a fact. It's not something you can forget about."

"Yeah, I know. I've tried."

"For too long. It's only made the situation worse." Nick inhales deeply. If Ryan were looking at him, he would see his face becoming inflamed with anger. "If I had known about what happened with Claire -- or that you kept in touch with him in secret all of those years -- I don't know what I would have done ..."

"He was drunk when that happened. He doesn't even remember it."

"That doesn't make him innocent!"

"No, of course not. But ... he has problems. He can't handle pressure."

"He can't live like a civilized human being!"

"Dad!" Ryan cuts in, suddenly forceful. "He tries. I can't just write him off. He's my father."

"So am I -- and I'm here for you." Nick allows a moment of silence for the words to sink in. "He ruined your chances with Claire, Ryan. You have given him second chance after second chance and no good has ever come of it. It's time to let go before this goes too far."

He takes Ryan's lack of a response as defiance and adds: "I'm not going to let him hurt you. And I'm not letting him interfere with our success. I don't want him in the way."

Ryan remains speechless. Nick stands, finishes the coffee, and deposits the cup in the dishwasher without another word.

He returns upstairs, leaving Ryan in the dark kitchen, listening to the house creak around him.

CLAIRE FISHER'S APARTMENT

"That was all I wanted," Diane says as she and Claire exit the bedroom. "Wasn't so hard, was it?"

"No, I guess not." Claire's voice bears a strong edge of annoyance. "I still don't know why this was necessary *right* now."

"Because I am a mother! I haven't had the opportunity to spend any time with my daughter lately. I just wanted to say goodnight to her."

Suddenly Claire's will to argue is diminished greatly. "Still," she manages, "you could have picked a more appropriate time. Samantha has been in bed for hours."

"I'm sorry!" Diane snaps. "I wanted to see my daughter, that's all. It happened to be late. She doesn't know the difference anyway. And you weren't asleep, so no harm done, right?"

"Yeah, fine," Claire says, hoping that Diane is about to let herself out.

Diane picks up on the vibe easily. "Jeez, sorry to get in your way! Wouldn't kill ya to be pleasant for a couple minutes."

It takes a deep breath for Claire to keep herself from kicking into a full-fledged argument. "Look, Diane, we can get along. When we're both with Samantha, we're fine. There's no need for us to be arguing all the time."

"You should remind yourself of that more often."

That nearly puts Claire over the edge, but she manages to restrain herself. "How have you been, anyway? How are things in Los Angeles? How's Brian doing?"

"Don't try to make small talk!" Diane fires bitterly, although Claire is sure that she sees a momentary flicker of anguish dance over the other woman's eyes. Suddenly she wants to push further, but Diane has already yanked the door open.

"Thanks for letting me see her," she says quickly before disappearing out the door and down the hallway.

Claire waits a few seconds before shutting the door. *What was that?* she wonders, going back to the couch. She picks up her book, but the feeling is ruined. Marking the page, she closes it and sets it on the coffee table.

Everything is wrong now. Diane's visit reignited the flames that Claire had managed to subdue tonight. Seeing Diane with Samantha -- seeing how she practically transformed around the little girl -- intensified her worry tenfold.

"She is a good mother," Claire says softly, suddenly wishing she had someone to whom she could vocalize her thoughts. "And she's her biological mother ..."

She heads to her own bedroom, hoping that the weariness washing over her will be enough to overpower her renewed panic.

WHITNEY'S HOUSE

Where are they?

The panicked whisper in Jason's mind has escalated to a full-blown scream. Which room did Alex and Lauren duck into? It took him enough time to break away from Courtney and get up the stairs -- hopefully it hasn't gone too far yet.

He jerks open yet another door and is greeted by the bathroom. Pulling the door closed quickly, he rushes to the next one.

Immediately relief floods his system. But the dams go up as soon as he has a chance to take a look at the situation.

This is the right room. But Alex is nowhere to be found, and Lauren is sitting on the bed, alone, her face stained with tears.

"Lauren?" Jason says quietly.

She looks up, startled, at him in the doorway. An uncertain moment passes between them before Jason shuts the door and makes his way over to the bed.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yeah," she manages, choking back a sob. "I ... I just feel like an idiot."

"Don't," he says, sitting down beside her. Now relief and horror are dueling inside him. *Is it really over ... ?*

"I guess it's better that I know," she says. "That I know for sure that nothing's gonna happen."

"You know that? How?"

"I was a fool downstairs." Her voice is ragged through the tears, and Jason slips an arm around her shoulders. "I kissed him -- again. I thought maybe something would happen tonight. But I was just being stupid. Desperate."

"But he came upstairs with you ..."

"Yeah, he told me to come with him. So of course, being the retard I am, I thought that meant it was really gonna happen."

He rubs her far shoulder softly, perhaps trying to soothe some of his own nervousness now. "But?"

"He--he set the record straight. Nothing's happening between us -- believe me, I get that message now, loud and clear."

"Hey, at least you can start to move on now, right?" he offers, hoping it's the right thing to say.

"I guess." Another heavy sob rattles her body and he pulls her closer.

"I'm really sorry this had to happen, Lauren."

"So am I ... but I guess it's better that I know. So at least it really is over."

"Yeah." He cracks an uncomfortable smile. "And besides, at least you can't blame yourself, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's not your fault that he's gay."

He feels Lauren pushing out of his embrace, turning to look him straight in the face, her body suddenly very still. And as the signs of shock slowly start to pour over her face, Jason knows that the same is happening to him. Only much, much worse.

Her eyes wide, her throat suddenly dry as the desert, Lauren manages only barely to speak. "Gay?"

END OF EPISODE #226

How about that ending? What did the conversations between Ryan and Nick, and Claire and Diane tell you? Please join us over at the [Message Forum](#) to share your thoughts!

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