

"Footprints" Episode #243

[Previously ...](#)

- Brent and the police showed up to take in Nick and Ryan for questioning.
- Claire was horrified to see Stan lurking around the hospital.

KING'S BAY POLICE STATION

A wooden table sits in the middle of the otherwise bare room, flanked on either side by a pair of metal folding chairs. The only thing ostensibly missing from the scene is a weak lightbulb swinging over the table to cast an eerie light over the participants and create a scene straight out of *NYPD Blue*. But Nick has seen enough of these rooms in real life to know that's not how it works.

He is led to one of the metal chairs and seats himself. One of the officers who accompanied Brent Taylor to the house stands by as Nick takes a seat, and Nick cannot help but flash him a little sneer, as if to say, *I am perfectly capable of sitting down by myself, so get lost.*

Brent pulls up the other chair across the table from Nick and the other officer takes his leave without a sign. As much as the presence of the other guy was irritating Nick, being alone with Taylor isn't much more comforting. Truthfully, Nick is a bit nervous now, though he would never admit that to anyone, not even Ryan; he was beginning to think that this whole matter had passed and that it could be forgotten. For the police to be looking into it again can't be a good thing.

Still, he has thrown them off his trail more times than he can remember and he knows that he can do it again. He tries to bring himself to the right mental zone so that he can do his usual artful job of diverting suspicion. It's a skill he learned well and one that he has become dependent upon over the years.

"Mr. Moriani," Brent begins in the type of condescending, authoritative tone that makes Nick bristle, "as you know, I have some questions to ask you regarding the fire at the Fitch mansion this past summer."

Nick offers no response. He learned long ago that being overly cooperative and upfront could easily make him appear as though he were covering something. Besides, being a little difficult just gets the interrogator more flustered.

"Were where you when the fire began?" Brent asks after forcing aside Nick's resistance.

"When I *noticed* that the house was on fire," Nick says, "I was upstairs with my son."

"How long had you been up there?"

"For quite a while. My wife was downstairs with some visitors--well, I suppose you know that ... Isn't there some sort of conflict of interests for you in this situation, Commander?"

Nick sees Brent grimace and knows that he has hit his target.

"I just have a couple of questions for you. My being present during the fire has nothing to do with it."

"Of course not." Nick brushes his mustache lightly with his knuckles. "You wouldn't be that petty, would you, Commander? You wouldn't just go on some sort of witchhunt because you're out to blame someone for the fact that *you* were injured." He lets the jab sink in but cuts himself off at that point. He's said enough; anymore will just sound like he is working to divert suspicion.

Brent eyes him coldly. "This isn't about--" His fists clench tightly and fall to the table, stopping just short of slamming down.

Nick watches Brent gather himself and refocus on the mental list of questions that he clearly has prepared, but his concentration is off-balance now. Nick grins inwardly. Now the ball is in his court -- should be smooth sailing from here on out.

CLAIRE FISHER'S APARTMENT

The magazine slaps down atop the coffee table with all the grace of a dead fish. Claire stares at it a moment longer, wondering if she should continue leafing through it, but her sincere disinterest in anything that it might have to say finally convinces her to stand and go to the kitchen to grab another cup of coffee.

Days off never used to be like this. Free time was always something she valued so much. But now, lately, it just feels like a waste. She'd prefer to be working, doing something, getting something accomplished that needs accomplishing. Having a day off has almost become something of a burden as of late.

Despite his insistence that he wasn't tired and didn't need one, Travis has gone down for a nap. And as much as she hates to admit it, playing with Pokemon and kids' sporting equipment can get a little tiring -- maybe even a little annoying -- after enough time.

A firm rap on the door snaps her from her dilemma. Another momentary distraction ... better than nothing.

She sets the still-empty coffee cup down on the counter and strides over to the door. Another knock, this one more demanding, sounds as she quickens her pace to answer it. She undoes the lock hurriedly and then yanks the door open -- and everything freezes.

Him. Again.

"Don't shut it," Stan says the instant he becomes visible to her.

Even so, she makes a move to close him out. She pushes the door closed -- but a pair of very firm hands are now working against her efforts. Those same hands ...

She does her best to shake off the sickening thought.

"Lemme in. I need to talk to you." Stan sounds surprisingly desperate.

"No," she finds herself answering, with another unsuccessful attempt to trap him out in the hallway.

Before she knows what is happening, Stan has wormed his way inside. He closes the door behind him.

"Go," Claire says, her voice shaking despite all the warnings she is sending not to do so. "Get out."

"Just lemme--"

"No. Get out or I'm calling the police."

She sees the momentary passing of a cloud of fear over his face but apparently it is not enough to deter him. "Don't do that. I just wanna ask you some questions."

"No!" she fires back. Every iota of her panic is alive and thriving in the pained refusal.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he demands suddenly, grabbing her by the wrists and pulling her horrifying close to himself. "Why are you so hell-bent on avoiding me?"

MORIANI HOME

"Nick, dear, I'm home!" Katherine calls out as she blows through the front door. Her ears are met only by the lazy hum of an inactive house.

That's strange, since both Nick and Ryan's cars are still here. She goes upstairs, calls out their names, and still finds no one.

Where could they be? she wonders, reaching into her purse for her cellular phone. With a few punched buttons, she is listening to the ringing of Nick's phone over the line.

It rings four times and his voicemail answers. She thinks briefly of leaving a message but elects not to do so.

"Nick?" she calls out again as she enters the master bedroom. There is no sign of her husband anywhere.

Without warning, a disturbing thought strikes her. What about that man she saw him arguing with at the door not too long ago? Could this have something to do with that?

She isn't certain why the idea comes to her, but it doesn't seem too farfetched. That realization sends a cold chill through her body.

He didn't just disappear, she tells herself. She wants to say it aloud but her lips refuse to cooperate.

How can she be doubting the assurances he gave her when she confronted him with her suspicions? She trusts Nick, she truly does. There has been no cause for concern or alarm in their lives for months, not since the fire. Andrew's warnings never amounted to anything -- Nick even saved her life in that fire, and if he were as ill-intentioned as Andrew and Brent Taylor had tried to make him sound, he never would have done so.

So why am I jumping to such horrible conclusions?

Everything is fine. Life has been wonderful for months. She and Nick have had time to dine out, go to shows, spend quiet evenings together ... She hasn't had this sort of peace in a long time.

So why does it feel so precarious? She isn't accustomed to living like this, worrying about how things might be if they slip out of her grasp at all. There were days when life seemed so full: when she had a full social life, and Raymond and Andrew, and so many other things ...

And now she has Nick.

As comforting as it is to think of all the wonderful times that they have spent together recently, another chill seizes her as she stands in the middle of this bedroom that she still doesn't truly consider hers, in a house that isn't the one she loved so much.

KING'S BAY POLICE STATION

In the second before his rear hits the chair, Ryan has the feeling that he's falling sideways, that there is no way in the world he is actually going to land in the seat. He nearly cries out and reaches out an arm to brace the fall, but then he is sitting, no harm done.

Whoa, he thinks, blinking hard as he watches Brent settle in across the table from him with such ease. *I really am wasted.*

It was a stupid thing to do, he realizes that now. But he was just sitting there, having a mid-morning drink while he watched ESPN, and that cascaded into two and three and then he lost count. As sickened as he is by the fact that he got drunk in the middle of the morning, he cannot help chuckling inwardly at the memory of some of the things he said to Nick. He *was* on, he has to admit that much.

But now he has to sober up fast. Brent is sitting there, staring him down, waiting to launch into the first of what Ryan is certain will be a series of hard-nosed inquiries.

"Mr. Moriani," Brent begins, inserting a painfully long pause after the name, "were you living at the Fitch mansion at the time of the fire?"

Ryan shakes his head. The room seems to rotate a little. "No, I was still living at--where I live now."

"Had you spent a good amount of time at the mansion in the time since your father married Katherine Fitch?"

"Not tons, but I was there a lot, yeah." Ryan drops his gaze down into his lap and sees that his hand, resting on his thigh, is quivering. *Don't slip up. Just answer the questions as simply as you can.*

Brent is taking his time with the questions, and for Ryan, each interval is filled with awful buzzing, a humming in his ears that seems to last forever.

Brent's voice breaks the hum, finally. "Had you noticed anything that might have contributed to the start of the fire?"

He's fishing, Ryan thinks, not sure if his mouth is starting to move as he thinks the words. He's trying to figure out what I know and then trap me. He's--

"My father and I didn't have anything to do with this, okay?" The outburst comes before he is aware of it, before he has a chance to contain it.

At first Brent looks at him in shock, happy with neither being cut off or with the sudden declaration of innocence. But then he leans back in his chair, folds his arms, and gives Ryan space to continue.

"He had no reason to burn that place down," Ryan says. "He was *living* there! With the way you guys had been all over him before, it would've been idiotic for him to do something like that. And for what, insurance? He saved Katherine from the fire! It wouldn't have been worth all the effort to get money from burning the house down." Then, in a muttered voice, he adds, "Not like she doesn't have the money already, anyway."

It takes a long time -- maybe even a full minute -- before Brent unfolds his arms and leans forward again. Then, to Ryan's surprise, he completely ignores the forceful insertion and returns to his list of questions. Ryan answers them carefully, not revealing too much, but offering just enough information.

He doesn't notice the glimmer of a smirk that breaks on Brent's lips from time to time, try as he might to restrain it.

CLAIRE FISHER'S APARTMENT

Claire jerks her body violently away from Stan, but his hands remain locked around her wrists. She continues the flailing until he barks, "What is going on? What is this big damn secret everyone's keepin' from me?"

She freezes. Her breaths are coming hard and fast now, the walls of her chest heaving in and out. Her lips tremble as she tries to get them to say something--anything. The truth is there, lying in wait at the back of her throat, but there is no way that she can coax it out. Exposing what happened completely is something she would not be able to handle, not right now.

"It's no secret," she huffs finally, giving another pull against him. This time it works: He releases her.

His stare never breaks from hers. His steely eyes, embedded in that rough face, keep her mesmerized. All she can see in them is the past, that day of so many years ago. The image is horrible, sickening enough to make her want to turn away from it, but there is

the undeniable feeling that if she relives it just once more, if she forces it so deep inside of herself that there is nowhere else for it to go, then maybe she can be rid of it forever.

"What are you talking about?" he grumbles impatiently. She recognizes the hint of shame, the embarrassment at missing whatever it is that she makes sound so obvious.

"It's not complicated," she spits. "It was just a matter of time before he snapped, you knew that, didn't you?"

Stan seems to be comprehending this, albeit rather slowly. "Ryan?"

"Yeah. All those years of you popping in and out -- eventually he was bound to realize what an awful job you were doing, how unimportant he really was to you. How unimportant he is to you."

"Where do you get off--"

The menacing gleam in his eye gives her pause, and she jumps back a few steps. But she's on a roll now, and it feels too good to stop. After all this time, she can finally let him have it, the way she tried to let Ryan have it so long for something he never even did. If she can't say it outright, at least she can do this; at least she can make him feel a fraction of the hurt that she's carried with her for so long.

"He hates you. It's too late, Stan. Too little, too late. You blew it." The words spit out of her mouth in rapid succession, each more hostile than the last. She regrets them immediately, for that sparkle of rage in him suddenly seems ready to explode.

Instead he backs off and grabs the doorknob. Harshly he rips the door open. And he storms out without another word to her, without even another look.

The satisfaction of tearing into him subsides the moment the door slams behind him. He is gone, off to do God-knows-what now. She is merely thankful that he is not still in the apartment. She locks the door frantically, vowing not to open it again no matter what.

Her gaze swings wildly around the apartment until it is caught by the telephone. She should call the police, she knows she should; even when she thought it had been Ryan, before the vague memory of Stan grew into the growling demon of her nightmares, she had thought about it. Tim even suggested that she do it.

But she couldn't do it, not even for him. And she can't do it now, not for him nor for herself. Having to say the words to someone else -- having to face everything that would after those words -- it's too much for her even to imagine.

Her fingers itch for the phone, her feet want to step over the carpet to take her there, but she can't let them. Stan is gone now. Maybe she took care of him for good. After all, this is only about him and Ryan, it doesn't really have anything to do with her. She's just been caught in the middle ...

She makes herself move, back to the kitchen and the coffee. She buries herself back in the intricacies of her day-off routine, of doing the laundry and watching television and dealing with Travis, back into the same vacant, empty space that has become her world.

END OF EPISODE #243

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