

"Footprints"**Episode #185****[Christmas Day, Several Days After #184]****Previously ...**

*Paula admitted to Bill that she has been thinking a lot about the son she gave up and might be interested in locating him. Bill was firmly opposed to the idea.

*Tim urged Claire to put aside her quest to dig up dirt on the Morianis and file charges for the long-ago rape.

*Molly expressed a desire for peace of some kind, though she continued to long for Brent. Sarah told Matt that she fears for the future of her marriage to Brent.

FISHER HOME, KITCHEN

"Ten minutes or so," Paula announces, sneaking a peek inside the oven and then swiftly shutting its door.

"Good," says Claire. "I'm sure the natives are getting restless out there."

"No doubt," Paula agrees with a chuckle. She removes the oven mit from her hand and sets it on the counter. "You know, every single year I worry that this day is going to be a gigantic bust, that the meal won't come out right or that no one will have a good time, and that Christmas will be ruined. But every year it seems to fall together and work out."

"I'm so glad that we have a tradition like this, even if it's just everyone coming together for Christmas dinner," Claire says. "It's good for the kids, for one. And it's not that often that we all have the chance to be together like this."

"It seems like there's always so much going on." Paula sighs. "I haven't even been able to spend much time with you lately. I feel awful about that."

"There's no need to. It's just as much my fault -- I just have so much going on."

"Well, I just want you to know that regardless of how much time we're able to spend together, I'll always be here for you when you need me."

"I know that," Claire says. "And you have no idea how much I appreciate it. Paula, you've been like a mother to me these last few years, and I can't thank you enough."

"It's been my pleasure," Paula smiles. "I always hoped I'd be able to be friends with the people my children married. This is so much more than that ... I can't imagine our family without you anymore!" She draws Claire into a warm hug.

"So now that we have some time," Paula continues, "maybe we can do some catching up. How is everything going for you?"

"I can't complain. I've got Tim, we've got the kids, work is going well ..."

"And what about ... that Ryan man? I remember last Thanksgiving, you and Tim were arguing about him--"

"Ryan's still around," Claire sighs. "But things have changed. It's a very different situation than it was a year ago."

FISHER HOME, ENTRYWAY

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Bill turns slowly, peeling his eyes away from the window and the view of the street. He smiles at Tim. "What makes you think they're worth it?"

"You were looking pretty solemn over here," Tim says. "Wasn't exactly hard to spot."

Bill shrugs. "I suppose I'll have to work on that, huh?"

A brief moment of silence passes between them. "So what's up, Dad? Is something wrong?"

"Isn't something always?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tim asks, eyeballing his father suspiciously.

"Take your pick," Bill says. "For one thing ... Can't you see the tension between Sarah and Molly? They've been sidestepping each other all afternoon, and you can't mention one to the other without getting a dirty look in return."

"Yeah, I have noticed that. It seems pretty severe considering that not much has actually happened between them, doesn't it?"

"Maybe. But you know how Sarah is -- an offense to her is like the worst possible betrayal. She doesn't take things lightly, and she feels like Molly has made the situation worse by supporting Brent instead of her, so of course this is how she'd react."

"True," Tim agrees. "So, what else is going wrong today?"

"The usual ..."

"Is something going on with you and Mom?" The hook catches in his mind and he moves in closer to Bill, lowering his voice. "More about the adoption ... ?"

"Uh huh," Bill nods. "It's just been harder to put this behind us than I thought it would be."

"In what way?"

"Your mother ... She's kept a lot of this to herself over the last thirty-six years. Even before we really started arguing about it, there was sort of a barrier that we just didn't cross in discussing it. Now that the floodgates have been opened, it's all coming out."

"Meaning ..."

"Meaning she's getting the chance to say and think about things that she hasn't been able to for years and years. First it was just letting the four of you know what had happened. Now she's pushing even further ..."

Tim's eyes narrow. "What do you mean?"

"She wants to look for her son," Bill says. "At least, she's seriously thinking about it. I don't think it's a good idea -- keeping it a secret for so long and then telling all of you had enough potential to blow this family apart. Who knows what kinds of trouble actually looking for this kid could bring up?"

"Yeah," Tim agrees. "Maybe it would be best to just keep it all in the past--"

"I don't know about that." The men turn simultaneously at the sound of the female voice. Sarah takes another step towards them, including herself fully in the discussion. "I think it might be a good idea for Mom to look for the son she gave up."

FISHER HOME, KITCHEN

"How so?" Paula asks. "What's changed with Ryan?"

"When Ryan came to King's Bay -- I don't know if you remember what I told you about my past with him--"

"I do," Paula says with a nod, acknowledging the past so Claire won't have to mention it explicitly again.

"Well, when Ryan came here, he was trying to get me back. It didn't completely register with me back then -- I thought it would be enough if I was friendly with him and tried to forgive him so we could put the past behind us. But I should have realized that wouldn't be enough for him. Ryan and Nick -- his father -- they could never be content with things that would make everyone else happy."

"So what's happened?"

"It's ... complex. I'll try to give you the abridged version. Ryan's father is engaged to Andy Fitch's mother, Katherine. Last Valentine's Day she was shot, and Brent thinks the shooting had something to do with Nick and Ryan's involvement with the mob."

Paula tilts her head as she makes the connection. "... And Nick used to do business with your father, right?"

"Right. But the police are having trouble proving that there's a connection. So I offered to help out."

"Help the police?"

"Sort of. Brent asked me to give a statement about Nick's link to my father," Claire says. "But we've filled Andy in on the whole situation and he doesn't want his mother to marry Nick, so I'm helping him stop her."

"How?" Concern is already creasing Paula's face quite visibly.

To Paula, Claire seems to close up somehow. There is a pause before Claire answers, "By helping prove that Nick is involved with the mob."

"Claire ..."

"That sounds like what Tim said. Look, Paula, there isn't any need to worry. I can do this, and I can do it without getting myself into trouble."

Paula struggles for a response, battling the instant protests that fall on her tongue. "So how are you planning to do this?" she finally asks.

"I'm close to something. All I have to do is give the police a direction to take with their investigation, and come up with something half-concrete so Andy can talk Katherine out

of the marriage. I overheard Ryan on the phone and I'm sure there's something fishy going on. All I need to do is piece the situation together a little better--"

"By nosing around in mobsters' business? Claire, this doesn't seem like the wisest thing to be doing."

"It's fine, Paula," Claire says firmly.

"So ... how does Ryan factor into all this, exactly?"

"All of a sudden, he seems to have decided that he wants nothing to do with me. Every time I try to talk to him -- to see what kind of information I can dig up -- he tries to avoid me. So now I'm the one chasing after him, even though it's for a different reason entirely."

"I think Tim is right, Claire. This doesn't sound like a good idea."

"You forget that I grew up surrounded by people like this," Claire counters. "I know what I'm doing."

Paula's look remains doubtful, at best.

"I have to do this," Claire says. "It's the only way to see justice done."

FISHER HOME, LIVING ROOM

"Have you told Jason about your new job?" Helen asks as she and Don sweep by and join into conversation with Courtney and Jason.

"Yep," Courtney says.

"I'm still having a little trouble seeing you as a waitress," Jason grins.

"Same here," Don agrees. "The princess serving others? I don't know if I buy it."

"Very funny." Courtney rewards her father and then her boyfriend with mock punches to the arm. "But c'mon, there's no need to think about work now. It's Christmas!"

"That's right!" Jason says, throwing his arms around her. "And if I'm not mistaken, there are some Christmas CDs over there just waiting to be played. Care to DJ with me?"

"I'd love to." Courtney reaches out for his outstretched palm. His hand closes over hers and they skip off, offering Don and Helen quick "goodbye" looks.

"And this is them when they're tame," Don says with a smile.

"They've always been goofy together," Helen reminds him. "Do you remember how hard it was to get them to stop goofing around and just practice while they were on the ice when they were younger?"

"True. But at least they have fun together ... It's hard to imagine them not being together, isn't it?"

"Very. They've been best friends for so long, and now that they're a couple it's even harder to picture."

"Makes you wonder, doesn't it?" Don pats his mustache lightly. "Doesn't it just seem like they should spend the rest of their lives together?"

"I can't see Courtney with anyone else."

"Neither can I. But could it really have been this easy for each of them to find 'the one'? It's also hard for me to look at it that way."

"I see what you mean." Helen pauses as she considers the idea, one that has floated through her mind more than a few times. "But sometimes things just work out, I suppose."

Don watches his daughter and Jason across the room, laughing as they flip through CDs and sing samples of Christmas tunes. "I suppose."

FISHER HOME, ENTRYWAY

"Do you really think so?" Tim asks Sarah, casting a glance at Bill to gauge his reaction.

"Absolutely," Sarah says. "I can see why it would worry you two, but I don't think that's reason enough to rule out the idea completely."

"How do you figure?" Bill asks, his arms folded.

"I'm just starting to realize how much better it is to have things out in the open." Sarah cannot help shooting a brief look at Molly, who is standing at the entrance to the living

room playing with Samantha and Travis. "If you let things fester, they just get worse and worse. Maybe if Mom has a chance to at least pursue this, it'll be easier for her to put it behind her in the long run."

"And what if she were to find the kid?" Bill challenges her, only realizing after he has fired the question that the word "kid" is rather inappropriate.

"I don't know. Maybe you shouldn't assume that would be such a bad thing." Seeing Bill's unconvinced face and Tim's uncertainty, she shrugs. "Like I said, I don't know. I just don't think it's a good idea to forbid her from searching -- that in itself would probably cause problems, wouldn't it?"

"I don't want to forbid your mother, or try to control her," Bill says. "I just want to be a part of her decisions, and help her make the best ones possible."

"Well, just keep in mind what I said," Sarah says. She turns and walks off towards the kitchen.

Bill turns to Tim. "Did something seem at all off with Sarah?"

"Yeah," Tim agrees. "Not that she was being entirely cold, but it was something like that. Maybe she feels uncomfortable around us after everything that's happened with her and Brent -- awkward or embarrassed."

"That could be ... So what do you think of what she said?"

"I think it makes sense. I'm not saying you should encourage Mom to go out and look for her--her other son, but maybe you shouldn't try to stand in her way if that's what she really wants to do."

The opposing sides of the issue are tugging at his brain, and all Bill can say is, "Maybe."

FISHER HOME, LIVING ROOM

"Have yourself ... a merry little Christmas ..." Jason sings along with the CD playing in the background as he dances up to Molly.

"Hey, you," Molly says, rising from the ground, where she has been playing with Samantha. "I take it you're having a merry little Christmas yourself."

"I must say, it's been pretty merry. How 'bout you?"

"Not bad."

"Just 'not bad'?"

"Yeah," Molly says with a shrug of her left shoulder.

Jason waits for more but it never comes. "What's that mean?" he asks.

"I'm just ... confused."

"You mean, with--" He lowers his voice. "--with Brent?"

Molly nods. "Yeah, after everything that's happened with him and Sarah -- I don't know what to think. And I think that he blames me, even if he won't admit it."

"What makes you think that?"

"Right after they found out that Matt's the baby's father, he came over here--"

"He came straight here?"

"Yeah." Molly acknowledges the possible implications of this with her eyes but quickly pushes them aside. "He just needed to talk and vent ... And the way he was talking, it was like there was something more between us, something that he knew was an enormous part of this whole situation."

"And he blamed the situation with Sarah on that 'something'?"

"Yeah ... in a way, yeah. So now I have no idea where we stand. We used to just be friends, and that was one thing. But now if he blames me -- and if he thinks there might be something more to it -- I don't know what the situation even *is* anymore."

"I'm sorry I can't say anything more helpful, but I think you just need to let everything settle down," Jason says. "Let all the initial shock wear off and then maybe things will start to get clearer."

"That's probably the best advice anyone could give ... The waiting and not knowing are what make it so hard."

"Of course." He throws an arm over her shoulders. "But you can pull through this, Mol. You've just gotta believe that one way or another, it's gonna work out."

"You're right," she says as Jason pulls her into a hug. She rests her chin on his shoulder, holding onto him, onto the security.

But as her eyes lazily move over the room, they come in contact with Sarah. Molly feels her own gaze growing more intense as it locks with her sister's, as if to match the resentment Sarah is projecting so clearly. The security of the moment is shattered and Molly slips out of the hug so she can break the stare.

She is trying to wipe the image of Sarah's expression off of the walls of her mind when a shout from the entryway does it for her.

"Everybody, come here!"

Molly and Jason, like everyone else, hurry to the excited cries. They find Claire and Travis in front of the window. Travis's face is brightened with the spark of excitement that comes so easily to the young and so reluctantly to the more experienced.

"It's snowing!" the little boy shouts as everyone begins to gather around the window.

"Looks like it's going to be a white Christmas," Claire smiles.

The simple joy of the proclamation touches everyone present. The wonder of Christmas -- the miracle of Christ's birth, the blissful childhood holidays, the warmth of a mug of cocoa on a cold winter's day -- that seems to have been misplaced in the shuffle of life suddenly comes rushing back, stirred by the white building outside and the sparkle evident in Travis and Samantha.

Bill turns to Paula. He simply places a hand on her cheek, a gesture that says it all. "Merry Christmas," he beams.

"Merry Christmas."

END OF EPISODE #185

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