

"Footprints" Episode #280

[Previously ...](#)

- A surprisingly normal encounter with Courtney shook up Jason, who went to see Lauren. Christmas music and cookies helped ease his mind.
- Matt brought Sarah breakfast and they discussed making their relationship a romantic one, but then she received a call from a contact, who informed her that Matt has a living brother and was a key witness in a suicide investigation years ago. Rattled, Sarah cut their conversation short to go for a drive.
- Ryan told Claire that he came over for a very specific reason on the night Stan attacked her: He had received a call from a court official informing him that his biological mother is looking for him. Claire assured him that consenting to give the woman his information was not a mistake.
- Sarah shared with her mother the news that Ryan is the son Paula gave up for adoption decades ago.
- After finally making love, Molly and Brent decided to keep their relationship secret for a while.

FISHER HOME, LIVING ROOM

Outside, the Northwest weather refuses to concede that it actually is Christmas day. A gray screen hangs in the sky, too dull to tease with promises of either snow or crisp winter sunshine. An inconsistent rain has been falling throughout the day, picking up steam for half-an-hour or so and then dying off, only to return once the pavement has almost dried and erased it from memory.

But inside the Fishers' living room, Nat King Cole's voice fills the air with dreams of roasting chestnuts and the frosty nip of winter. The Christmas tree stands proudly in one corner, as it has done for years, its ornaments accented by the glow of white lights and its underside finally clear of the presents that have been accumulating for weeks. The seldom-used fireplace is alive with the healthy flames of a cozy winter fire, and above it, the family's stockings hang in a row from the mantle.

Around the coffee table, the family's Christmas celebration has reached just about the greatest pitch that it is going to achieve. Bill, Paula, and Molly are seated on the sofa, each holding a glass of eggnog; Claire is across from them, in a dining room chair that has been brought in, with the same drink; and Jason is beside her, in an identical chair, but with a beer.

Somehow the taste for eggnog hasn't yet been able to get a hold on him. It's always been a joke that when everyone else was being appropriately festive and having eggnog, "the baby" would have a Coke. The switch to beer in recent years hasn't done much to

ward off the jokes, much to his disappointment.

"He's doing better, I think," Jason says. He's looking at Claire, since she asked the question, but he's talking to everyone. Alex's progress in dealing with his mother's death is of concern to everyone present.

"He was more than welcome to spend Christmas with us," Paula says. "I hope you told him that."

Jason looks at her with the same look he's been shooting her since he was thirteen. "Well, yeah. But he's at the Chases'."

"As long as he's having a normal Christmas with people who care about him. I can't imagine how awful these last few weeks must have been for him," Paula says.

Bill leans forward, cupping his glass in both hands. "At least he has Don and Helen. And Courtney," he adds, not inserting a pause before he says her name even though everyone present can feel the strange hiccup in the conversation that comes with her mention.

Jason feels his cheeks burning the same way they always do when Courtney comes up in conversation. It's as though, at the very mention of her name, everyone suddenly feels pity for him or wonders how things could have gone so wrong for a couple who'd been childhood best friends. *A year later, it's still like this*, he groans inwardly.

All too happily he takes the initiative to keep the topic on Alex. "It was really uncomfortable in the apartment for the first week or so. It was like we were sort of tiptoeing around the fact that his mother had been killed ... it was just weird. But he's been getting back into more of a normal routine lately."

"I spoke to him a little bit at the funeral," Claire says. "Ryan and I were really glad he invited us. It was eerie, but ... I'm glad we went."

"I still can't believe you were there," Jason says, shaking his head. "It's so weird how everything is so connected."

Across the coffee table, Paula feels her breath tightening in her chest. She hopes no one notices.

Before anyone else can jump in, the doorbell rings. Bill stands and moves to the front door, but Claire is on her feet, too, knowing that it might be her guest.

Sure enough, it is.

"Hi," Ryan says to Bill. He holds out a bottle of wine. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas." Bill shakes Ryan's hand before accepting the bottle.

"Merry Christmas," Ryan repeats as he enters the living room.

The greeting is returned by Molly, Jason, and Paula as Claire steps up to Ryan's side.

"Thank you for inviting me," he says.

"It's our pleasure. Claire's a part of the family. Anyone she wants to invite is more than welcome," Bill responds with a smile.

"Can I get you a drink? Eggnog?" Paula asks suddenly, practically leaping to her feet. She feels the sudden need to do something. Anything.

"Eggnog sounds great," Ryan says.

She escapes to the kitchen happily, breathing a sigh of relief as she goes. That's her son. Her *son*. Just a few weeks ago, she had no idea where he was, what he was like, let alone who he was. And now she's spending Christmas day with him.

He doesn't know it, of course; no one does, except for Sarah and herself. She feels an incredible impatience for Sarah to arrive. She needs to be able to say something about this to someone. It's simply too overwhelming to process by herself.

Next Christmas, everyone will know it. But not today. She's not ready yet. None of them are.

When will anyone be? she wonders as she pours the eggnog into a glass for her oldest child.

FISHER HOME, BACKYARD

Molly slides through the narrow opening of the glass door and pulls it shut hastily. Immediately she brings the phone back up to her ear.

"Hey," she says, smiling already in anticipation of his voice.

"Hey. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you, too." She feels the smile broadening, for no particular reason

other than the elated goofiness that has kept her floating through the past couple of weeks.

"How are things down there?" she asks.

"Good. Everybody's doing well. It's just Danielle, Josh, me, and Dad, which is fine."

"Yeah, we're having a quiet Christmas, too. It's just the five of us, the kids, Matt--and Ryan Moriani." The moment Paula told her earlier today that Ryan would be joining them, Molly couldn't help trying to envision Brent's reaction. Outrage, she was sure.

And she was right.

"Are you kidding me?" Brent asks, though the indignation in his voice makes it more than obvious that he knows she's quite serious. "Your parents invited him over for Christmas?"

"Yeah. They seem to be reacting pretty warmly to him, too."

"Jeez ... Does Claire really not see how much is wrong with that whole situation?"

"Apparently not." She pauses, now faced with vocalizing the thought that has been plaguing her ever since Ryan arrived -- perhaps, in the back of her mind, ever since she and Brent encountered Claire and Ryan at Windmills months ago.

"Brent--do you think that maybe, well, maybe Claire might not be wrong about him? That he really might be a better guy than we think?"

"No, I don't," comes the terse reply. It is followed by a hesitation, perhaps one contemplating whether he came off too harshly. But he doesn't say it, if he's thinking it.

"You're sure he's mixed up with everything his father is?"

"He'd be an idiot not to have some idea of it, in the least. I just--I don't see how Claire can trust him."

"Look at how she grew up. There's a lot to that relationship that I don't think any of us could understand." She glances through the glass door. The kitchen is empty, thankfully. The idea of having someone even watch her on the phone makes her nervous -- she's sure, somehow, that they'd know who she's talking to. "Like with us. No matter how hard we might try to explain it, everyone's only going to see what's on the surface."

"It's different. We were--neither of us is a dangerous criminal!"

"You don't know that Ryan is--"

"I'm damn close to knowing it." She can feel his frustration, even through the phone line and across all the miles from San Diego to King's Bay. He's been pressing on with the Moriani investigation ever since the fire at the Fitch mansion more than a year ago, and all he has to show for it are a bunch of starts and stops and a bunch of clues that don't seem to offer any access to the concrete evidence he needs.

"Anyway, I miss you," he says.

She accepts the change of topic gladly. "I miss you, too."

"I wish we could be together today. We should be."

"I know." For a moment her mind wanders back inside, to the family celebration, to the few years when Brent was present at the Fishers' celebrations, as Sarah's husband. She wonders if it will ever be possible for him to be back in a different role. "I know. But it's better this way."

"Yeah ... so Sarah's there, right?"

"She just got here a little while ago. She brought Matt, too."

"Good. I hope that means things are going well between them."

Molly knows that it's not a completely selfish wish, either. He does want Sarah to be happy. He wants her to find something more meaningful and more fulfilling than their marriage was -- the same as he does. Or has, Molly thinks hopefully.

"They seem good," Molly says. "And Victoria is a riot."

"I bet. It's been a long time since I saw her."

"She's hysterical." Molly's eyes dart inside again. Still no one in the kitchen. "I guess I should call you later, once I get home. I probably shouldn't be standing outside on the phone for too long or everyone will get suspicious." She feels stupid saying it, but there's probably more truth to it than she would like to think.

"You're probably right. Listen, have a good day. Enjoy being with your family. And think of how many more Christmases we're going to get to spend together."

"I can't wait," she says as that same airy feeling sweeps over her again. "I love you."

"I love you, too. I'll talk to you later."

"Bye."

She turns off the phone, then holds it wistfully in her palm for a moment. She does wish that he could be here right now ... and that she could go inside and not have to pretend that it was just a friend on the phone. But she does, for now. And at least she knows that she has him. If nothing, she has him. After all this time, that's what really matters.

FISHER HOME, LIVING ROOM

"Dad, do you know where Mom went?"

Bill breaks from his conversation with Matt and turns to Sarah. "I think she's in the kitchen, getting dinner ready."

"Okay, thanks. I'll let you two get back to your shop talk."

"What makes you think we're talking about the restaurant?" Matt asks, though the grin on his face gives away that they were.

"Because you're both talking about it all the time anyway! I can only imagine how it must be when you two are together!" she says with a laugh as she breaks away and heads in the direction of the kitchen.

"She's right," Bill says, swishing around what remains of the eggnog in his glass. "We probably don't need to be discussing work on Christmas."

"Probably not." Matt falls silent. Something else has been eating away at him anyway, and he thought spending Christmas with Sarah might put it to rest, but so far, that hasn't been the case. "Bill, have you--have you noticed anything different about Sarah lately?"

"What do you mean?"

"I dunno. It seems like she's been acting more distant lately. Like--I kinda get the impression that she's been avoiding me, almost."

A disbelieving laugh escapes Bill's throat, but it doesn't sound entirely confident in its rejection of the idea. "I'm sure she's not. Sarah is crazy about you."

Matt's not quite sure how to digest that. He thought so, too, but lately, any efforts he's made to spend time with her have been brushed aside, dismissed with increasingly flimsy excuses. One minute they were talking about making their relationship more serious, the

next Sarah was taking off to take care of some work. And it hasn't gotten better since then.

"I dunno what to think anymore," Matt says. "We were talking about really giving it a shot -- between the two of us, I mean -- and then it's like she decided she didn't actually want that."

"That couldn't be further from the truth, Matt. I've seen the way Sarah is around you. And the two of you have a daughter together! The pieces are all there. It might take some time for them to fall into place, but they will."

"That's what I was thinking. I was just trying to give her time to get over Brent and--I wonder if I waited too long."

"Nonsense." Bill lowers his voice conspiratorially and places a hand on Matt's shoulder. "Listen, I'm sure this probably isn't news to you, but Sarah ... she's not especially confident when it comes to any relationship, whether it's with a man or with her family or anyone else. What happened with Brent is a perfect example of that."

Matt nods in agreement. "I know. But it doesn't seem like there should be anything in the way now -- finally. I wish I had some idea what was going on."

"I think I have some idea," Bill says. "Come to think of it, Sarah has been spending a lot of time with her mother lately. I think she finally *is* over Brent, which maybe is a shock to her. So it could be that she doesn't want to foul things up with you and thinks that she needs to make sure the rest of her life is sorted out before you two can make a go of it."

"Maybe."

Bill's eyes drop and stay in the nearly empty glass as he adds, "As much as I hate to admit this, Paula and I probably had something to do with the fact that Sarah is so insecure. We're finally making inroads, I think. It certainly feels like we are. Maybe she just wants to be sure that she gets everything in order with her family first before she leaps into another relationship."

"Yeah," Matt says, turning the idea over in his head. It hadn't really crossed his mind, but it makes sense. Maybe Sarah is only backing off to make sure that the waters are safe before she takes the jump from friendship to something else.

Now if only he could shake the nagging feeling in the pit of his stomach.

FISHER HOME, LIVING ROOM

Molly tucks her cell phone back in her purse as she cruises through the dining room. She passes her father and Matt, engaged in what looks like a fairly serious conversation, and decides not to interrupt. Instead, she steps up to the chat going on between Jason, Claire, and Ryan.

"It sounds like a pretty good mix," Ryan is saying.

"It's kinda been my thing for, like, ten years now," Jason says, and immediately Molly knows that they're introducing Ryan to the yearly discussion about Jason's obsession with Christmas music.

"I think if anyone else tried to make it their thing, they might lose an eye or something," Molly pipes in with a laugh.

"Hey, I think I have decent taste, at least," Jason says. He turns to Claire and Ryan. "No complaints, right?"

Ryan shakes his head, and Claire says, "None at all."

Molly taps a finger to her chin. "Well ... there was that one time you tried to force us to listen to that John Lennon song for the entire day."

"'War is Over'? That's a *good* song, Mol!"

A chuckle ripples through the group. As it is fading, Molly catches eyes with Ryan, and suddenly an acute sense of discomfort seizes hold of her. She's sure that he hasn't forgotten that night at Windmills -- nor the numerous confrontations he's had with Brent. Is there really a criminal in her parents' house, sharing in the family's normal Christmas routine?

She's trying to sort out how this all got so tangled when Ryan takes Claire's arm.

"I'm due for another drink. How about you?" he asks.

"I could go for one, too," she says, and Molly is pretty sure that the tension isn't lost on Claire, either.

Claire and Ryan excuse themselves and head for the kitchen. Molly waits until they are out of earshot to say anything.

"Do you feel a little strange having Ryan here?" she asks, keeping her voice low.

Jason shrugs. "Not really. He seems like a nice guy."

"You do realize that this is the same guy Claire was trying to get locked away not two years ago, don't you?"

"Yeah, but ... obviously she sees him differently now. Give him a chance."

"I'm trying," Molly says, folding her arms and glancing in the direction of the kitchen. "Anyway, he's here, no point getting upset about it. How have you been? I've hardly had a chance to talk to you since we both moved out."

"I'm good," Jason says, half of another shrug shifting his shoulders. "This stuff with Alex's mom has been pretty heavy."

"I can imagine. He's really doing better, though?"

"He's definitely better, yeah. The only thing is, he's been, like, blaming himself for it--for letting her get involved with that Stan guy. We've all been trying to convince him it's not his fault, but it's kinda like talking to a brick wall."

"People react strangely to death. Grief does weird things to you," she says. "Even now, I don't think I could explain logically half the things that were going through my head after Craig died."

"I guess that makes sense. It's just frustrating, you know?"

"Yeah, of course. But at least he's got good friends there for him. That'll make a big difference in the long run."

"I hope so." He hesitates, and in a moment, Molly knows why. "He's been dating this guy, too. Courtney's new skating partner. So I think that's helping."

"I'm sure it is."

Something seems to be troubling Jason, though, and Molly is about to dig deeper when he offers some insight: "I hope so. The whole thing just seems to be happening kinda fast. I hope he's not just rushing into something for the hell of it."

Molly sighs, and now it's her turn to lift one shoulder in a shrug. "That could be. Like I said, grief does strange things to people."

The unpleasant subject hangs in the air until Molly makes a move to sweep it aside. "What about you? How are things?" The reference to Courtney goes unspoken, but it's understood by both of them.

"Better, I guess. Definitely better, actually. Right after his mom died, Court brought over dinner for Alex and we were kinda left alone for a minute together, and it was actually civil. That's a big step."

"Good. You'd be surprised how many people never get to that stage." Her mind flashes to Sarah and Brent, and she wonders if they'll ever be like that. "You haven't started seeing anyone new, though, huh?"

"Nah. It's just ... I guess there really hasn't been a chance. It's kinda weird, though, not having the whole gang like we used to. I know Courtney and Lauren still hang out, and I hang out with Alex, and he hangs out with Courtney, but -- it's different. It's not the four of us anymore."

"That happens, too. One of the less pleasant parts of growing up, I guess."

"Yeah." Another pause, then he adds quickly, "I've been hanging out with Lauren, though, which is cool. We never used to hang out, just the two of us, before all this crap happened."

"That is good," Molly said. The tail end of the comment leaves itself open; something about Jason's tone forces it to.

"Do you think something's going on there?" she asks, unable to suppress the thought. She's not sure if he's leading her to the question or not.

He's quick to shake his head. "No, I mean, it's Lauren. But it's been awesome to have someone to talk to about this whole mess. And it's pretty amazing that she reacted the complete opposite of how Courtney did. I never thought that was how it'd go down."

"That is great, though," Molly echoes distractedly. Her mind is still stuck on the way he brought Lauren up and how happy he sounds about having her support.

It's a familiar reaction to that type of questioning, she realizes. And she's not surprised in the least when Jason leads the conversation in a completely different direction just a moment later.

FISHER HOME, DINING ROOM

"All right, everyone, dinner's ready!"

Bill's call sounds from the dining room and, in a matter of seconds, everyone is scrambling around the table. Ryan stands back, allowing Claire to lead him to wherever it is they will be sitting.

He pulls out a chair between Claire and Sarah. As he places the napkin in his lap, he sits back to survey the table. The multitude of food is spread out over the table, leaving few inches of the tablecloth uncovered, and clearly arranged with care. He can't remember the last time that he saw so much food.

"This is really amazing," he whispers to Claire.

"Yeah, it is," she says with a smile. It turns quickly to a frown as she looks over at Travis, who is pretending to stab Jason with a fork.

"Cut that out," she calls across the table. It takes a few seconds for her to be sure that he even heard, but finally he puts the fork down.

Ryan suppresses a laugh and tries to avoid eye contact with Travis for fear of egging him on.

The room falls quiet, save for the hum of Christmas music coming from the living room. Ryan waits in confusion for a moment before he realizes what is going on. He follows the others' lead and bows his head.

"Lord, thank you for all the blessings of the past year," Bill begins in a solemn tone. "We've had exciting new jobs, new people to share the holidays with ..."

Ryan feels eyes moving momentarily onto him.

"... and we even have a kindergarten student."

"That's me!" Travis announces, and a chuckle ripples over the table before the quiet settles in again.

"It's been a year of new beginnings," Bill continues, "and for that we are amazingly grateful. But let us not forget those who can't be here with us tonight."

Bill's voice cracks and a pause ensues -- a painful pause, for Ryan, as his cheeks begin to burn.

Clearing his throat, Bill pushes onward. "Please grant us the good fortune of having Samantha here with us next year, and let her be having a wonderful Christmas with her mother today. And please ..."

Ryan's body tenses up, bracing for what's to come. He's known ever since he accepted Claire's invitation that he would have to face this moment, and try as he might to let it pass without impact, it won't.

"Please, God, keep Tim safe with you in Heaven, and let him know how badly we all miss him."

The "amen" comes soon after, but Ryan hardly hears it. The prayer has proven strangely affecting -- not just because of the guilt, though it's certainly there, but also because, for the first time, he can feel the family's loss. Tim's death is more than just something he has to feel guilty over or the removal of an obstacle in his quest to be with Claire. These people have lost a son, a brother, a husband and father.

So Ryan joins them in the moment of silent reflection that follows, filled with the hope that new beginnings truly are possible and that the past is not inescapable.

He is so caught up in his thoughts that he doesn't notice the strange, studying glances that Paula Fisher keeps casting his way.

END OF EPISODE #280

How will Ryan fit into the Fisher family once the truth comes out? What kind of reaction might there be? Join us in the Footprints Forum to discuss this and other stories!

[Next Episode](#)