

## "Footprints" Episode #268

### [Previously ...](#)

- Ryan surprised Claire with tickets for a concert she'd mentioned wanting to attend. She was wary about him being around Travis, but his initial interaction with the boy went well. Ryan tried to offer her support when word came that a final date had been set for Samantha's custody hearing.
- Molly responded angrily when Paula scolded her for continuing to pursue Brent. Later, Camille asked Molly to join her at a new design firm she's beginning.
- Without telling Eric, Diane took a trip to Los Angeles to see Brian. He greeted her without much enthusiasm and refused to forgive her for what transpired between them.

### **CARROLL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

"And I'd like to thank you all for coming today. It was a pleasure to meet all of you and I'm sure the children appreciate having their parents here for this special day! We'll see you again at 2:30."

The hum of the crowd of parents and first-day kindergarteners begins almost immediately as Mrs. Chopay's lively voice falls quiet. Parents begin kneeling down to say their goodbyes or running to keep with children who are already eager to show them something new. For her part, Claire simply scoops up Travis into her arms; the little boy has been standing beside her quietly, his fingers wrapped up with hers, for the entirety of his new teacher's speech.

"You're gonna have a great time, buddy," she says reassuringly, though she can't help wondering who she's trying to convince more: him or herself.

"Kindergarten is going to be so much fun," Paula chimes in helpfully as she reaches up to give Travis's cheek a soft, grandmotherly pinch. Claire is thankful for her presence all over again. She isn't sure that she could have handled this alone.

"Do you have to leave now?" Travis asks. He looks around the room, seeing a few parents beginning to file out the door, and then hugs Claire a little tighter.

Claire nods, suddenly feeling her nostrils flare as the threat of tears begins to loom larger.

"When are you coming back?"

"At 2:30," she says, knowing from experience that the only effect of giving him an actual time will be having him ask every fifteen minutes when it will be 2:30. But other kids will

probably be doing the same -- and so will she, truth be told.

"It's just like when you went to your preschool," Paula adds. "Except now you have all these new friends to meet and play with."

Claire holds him a moment longer, savoring the warmth of his cheek against hers, and then forces herself to set him down.

"See you later, kiddo," she says as she and Paula begin the agonizing walk to the door. Travis nods dutifully and waves. Claire waves back and whispers a "love you" as they slip out of the classroom.

They take a few steps in the direction of the parking lot before Paula says, "He's going to be fine."

"I hope so." Claire shakes her head and laughs lightly. "I can't believe I have a son in kindergarten! He's not my little baby anymore. That's incredible."

"That's life, though. It keeps moving no matter how much you might want to freeze a moment in time and stay there forever."

"Tell me about it." The longing comes back suddenly, as it always does, and fills her entire body with an ache that she knows by now cannot be eased.

Paula must be able to read her mind. "Tim would be so proud watching Travis go off to kindergarten."

"I know. I just wish he could be here to see all of it ... I try to believe that he's watching over us and that he's with us the entire way, but it's hard."

They walk the rest of the way to the car in silence, their steps light against the newly repaved parking lot.

Claire pauses as she is about to unlock the car. "Watching Travis grow up like this -- taking steps like his first day of school, his first teeball game, all of that stuff -- I can't help wondering what Tim would think. Is he being raised the way he would've if Tim were still alive? We had this whole life planned out--this way of doing things--and now I feel like I'm flying by the seats of my pants trying to regroup."

"You're doing a wonderful job," Paula says, inflecting just the right amount of confidence to make Claire breathe a little easier. "Tim would be pleased, I know he would."

Claire stops to consider that for a moment, the same way that she considers it a hundred times a day without ever reaching any definite conclusion. But for now, Paula's words are

reassuring, and she tries to leave it at that.

"Do you want to go for some coffee?" she asks. "I don't know what I'm going to do with myself while I wait for 2:30 to roll around!"

"I'd love to."

The two women climb into the car amidst the same quiet that enveloped them a moment ago, each wondering how much of their speculation is actually true.

## **CHARLENE POWERS AGENCY**

The familiar sound of the digitized whistle draws Molly's attention up from the newest notes she is adding to the file on the desk in front of her. It's become something of a conditioned response that whenever she hears the whistling sound, her eyes fly to the computer screen and her hand jumps to the mouse.

She tells herself that it's because it could be an important message from someone in the office about a schedule change or something that needs to be done, although it's just as likely that she's simply addicted to the practice of checking her e-mail and welcomes the constant distraction. Regardless, she clicks the icon for her e-mail program as no doubt will do another twenty times today.

When she sees what the new message is, though, she is suddenly yanked out of the normal, lazy routine. The subject line reads, "where've you been?" ... and the sender is listed as "Brent Taylor." Anxiously she clicks on the message.

From: "Brent Taylor"  
To: "Molly Fisher"  
Subject: where've you been?  
Date: 15 Sept 2002, 10:06 am

Molly-hey-I haven't been able to get a hold of you the last few days. Is everything o.k.? Give me a call or drop me a line to let me know you're out there when you get this. - Brent

She reads the message over twice, then lingers before finally clicking the "reply" button. Even as the new box opens, she has no idea what she's going to write.

A painfully long minute of staring blankly at the box finally leads to her closing it and instead reaching for the phone. She told herself that she wasn't going to go running to Brent about this, but obviously it isn't a one-sided interest. And she doesn't want to cut herself off from him.

The number rolls off her fingers easily and she only has to wait one ring before receiving an answer: "Commander Taylor."

"Hey," she says, doing her best to sound at ease even though she knows that she is failing miserably.

"Moi! Hey, how're you doing?"

"I'm fine ... I just got your e-mail."

"Yeah, I've been trying to get in touch with you for a couple of days and I never caught you. Did you get the message I left on your cell?"

"Yeah. I just, uh, listened to it the other night and then forgot to call you back the next day." In truth, she received the message the night after Paula laid into her about Brent, and she made a conscious choice not to return the call -- as much as she wanted to do so.

Nervous uncertainty creeps into his voice as he asks, "Is everything okay?"

She has to swallow hard before answering. "Sort of."

"Meaning?"

"I've just had a lot to think about."

"Anything you wanna talk about?"

"I guess," she says, hesitating. "There's something you need to know."

Now it is his turn to pause. "Yeah?"

"I had lunch with my mom the other day. I thought it was just a catching-up sort of thing, but it turns out she had a really specific goal in mind ..." She glances around to make sure that no one is paying acute attention to her, then lowers her voice a little more. "Evidently Diane said something to Sarah about us being at Windmills together, because Sarah complained to my parents."

"Oh jeez."

"My mother was really trying to discourage me from even having contact with you, I think. So that's why I haven't made any effort to get in touch lately. I just felt like--I don't know--I should try to maintain that boundary."

"So is that what you want?" he asks with a quickness that makes her head spin. "Because if it is, I'll leave you alone. I don't want to make you uncomfortable--"

"No. Brent, that's the thing. I felt guilty, and that's why I tried to keep some distance from you. But I didn't want to. I still don't. It's only been a couple of days and you have no idea how much I've missed talking to you."

"I think I have some idea." She can hear the smirk in his voice and it puts one on her face, as well.

"I just don't know what to do," she sighs. "On one hand, I don't want to change anything. I--I want to be with you. But my mother does have a point. You just got divorced from my sister. How can there ever actually be anything between us?"

"I don't know. I wish there were an easy answer. But I want to be with you, too. That counts for a lot, doesn't it? Don't you feel like there's *supposed* to be something between us? I don't think I could lose that, Mol."

"Neither could I." The admission feels strangely liberating, as if it's completely squashed Paula's argument. But that feeling of freedom lasts only a moment. "But it's a lot more complicated than that."

"I know. But we're leaving so much space for people to get in the middle, too. Maybe we just need to make that leap and make it official. If people see that we're that serious about it, maybe they'll realize that this isn't some stupid whim. That it's the real deal."

She doesn't know how to respond to that. On one hand, it makes absolute sense: If they stop dilly-dallying and just say, "We're together," maybe Sarah and Paula and everyone else will realize how deep their feelings really are and that no amount of complication or awkwardness can bring them to a dead halt. But then again, would they just be making the situation worse by doing that? She can see Sarah growing even more bitter, Paula becoming even more upset, and the family being pulled apart because of it. Is that something she even wants to risk?

"Maybe," she says, in a tone so noncommittal that she is sure Brent won't push the issue any further right now.

## **SOUTHWEST AIRLINES, FLIGHT #229**

Endless white spreads out on the other side of the window as the plane reaches its desired height and steadies itself. Diane's stomach returns to normal, resting after the tenseness of the ascent. For as much flying as she's done, she wishes she could curb that momentary queasiness that strikes her as the plane climbs into the sky and later as it descends, but she's never been able to get much of a handle on it.

In hardly any time at all, the flight crew begins its trip down the aisle to serve drinks to the passengers. Diane leans back and closes her eyes; she doesn't really care whether she gets a drink right now. All she wants is some rest before she arrives back in King's Bay and has to hurry to the office to make sure that everything that has to be done by this evening gets done.

It would help if she could trust any of the buffoons in her department even a lick further than she could throw them, but apparently that's too much to ask. She never had that problem with Brian, though.

Her worries about the office cease as she curses herself for even thinking of him. She swore to herself that she wouldn't let his less-than-thrilled reaction to her surprise visit bother her.

But she was so sure that he would have mellowed towards her, given all the time they've spent apart. She's never known Brian to hold a grudge like this -- does she really deserve it?

She can see why he'd be so pissed, yeah, and if she had the opportunity to go back and do things directly, she just might. But they made such an incredible team. She's willing to admit that she needed him, maybe she still does. They work too well together. Is Serena Scott really worth losing that over?

Why Brian would think so baffles her. Sure, he was smitten with her at the beginning, but it was only an infatuation, anyway. It's not like there was anything serious there. They're not even together now, and Diane had nothing to do with that! Obviously it wasn't the love to end all loves or anything like that.

"Ma'am?" The saccharine voice intrudes into her thoughts, cutting through the curtain of her mind with all the grace of a chainsaw.

"What?" Diane snaps instinctively, lifting herself away from her pondering just long enough to dismiss this nitwit.

The stewardess seems to jump back a few inches, a fact that gives Diane great pleasure. "Can I get you anything to drink?"

"No, I'm fine." Once the rejection is out of her mouth, Diane is struck by the thought that she might be thirsty after all, but she'd rather just be rid of this doofus as quickly as possible.

The stewardess gives Diane a final timid glance and moves on. Diane assumes her previous position, reclined in the seat with her eyes closed, and says a silent thanks that

the flight is empty enough that there's no one seated next to her.

Damn Serena. And to think Diane had been excited when she met her! She was sure she had a hot new author on her hands -- which she probably did. But she never thought that woman would cause such major upheaval in her life.

If Serena and Brian hadn't gotten together ... if she hadn't inflated Brian's ego so badly by insisting that he should have the job Diane had ... then this whole mess never would've happened. Brian never would have cared that Diane took credit for discovering Serena; him bringing a new author to her was the same as her finding the writer on her own, at least that's what she had thought.

When Brian turned her away yesterday, Diane had the fleeting idea that she should track down Serena and get her to put in a good word with Brian. But she doesn't want that woman's help -- no way. And if she and Brian broke up anyway, what's the point?

Their encounter was brief but it was enough to show Diane that she can't do much to make Brian come around. Now she's becoming resigned to that fact. Her mind is slowing down from the hyperactive mode it flew into after she left Brian's apartment.

But that doesn't make it any easier to accept.

Once more, she wishes that there were some magic trick she could enact that would make Brian stop being angry with her. Dammit.

## **MORIANI HOME**

After his knuckles request permission to enter, Ryan waits in the hallway for the call from within.

It comes a moment later, in the form of a distracted grunt: "Come in!"

He steps into the study cautiously, a lesson learned via too many years of entering without regard for what might be going on inside and then having to bear the brunt of his father's frustration with some force wholly unrelated to Ryan.

Nick is seated at the desk, a grandiose piece of mahogany work, with several sheets of paper and a calculator looming before him. The calculator is never a good sign. Rarely, anyway. Ryan quickly wonders if he should make this wait until later.

There's no use, though. What's to say that there won't be some other crisis consuming Nick the next time Ryan tries to have this talk with him?

"Do you have a minute?" he asks, still waiting for Nick to look up at him.

"Yes," Nick answers, still lingering over the calculator. Several seconds pass before he pulls his attention away from it. "What do you need?"

"It's about the Willis board meeting ... I don't think I'm going to be able to make it that day."

"Why not?" Nick asks, his groan hardly suppressed.

"I have plans."

"Plans that need to take priority over business? Can't you reschedule?"

"No. It's--I bought concert tickets for Claire, and the show is that day."

"Now you're blowing off your responsibilities for Claire, hmm? Ryan--"

"I don't want to hear it," Ryan says roughly. He'd anticipated this sort of opposition, but he's beyond disgusted by even the thought that he's a man in his mid-thirties having a conversation with his father that makes him feel like a teenager.

"How adult of you." Nick rolls his eyes and then rises from his chair. "I can't fathom what it's going to take to convince you--or rather, remind you--what bad news Claire Robbins can be."

"Why, because you say so?"

"She let her own father die! For God's sake, she practically killed him herself! What kind of woman does that make her?"

"An intelligent one?" Ryan offers, disdain thick in his voice. "James was a monster."

Nick's eyes light up with fury. "James was no monster! He was doing what was best for his daughter and she was so brainwashed by Tim Fisher that she couldn't recognize it!"

"Keep believing that, Dad." Disgust swells inside Ryan and he turns back to the door. He's finished here. "I'm going to the concert with her. End of story."

"Fine. Do whatever you like." Ryan knows what a fight it must be for Nick to let the argument go, but he does -- but not without getting in a final jab. "But don't come crying to me when Claire stabs you in the back."

"There's no chance of that."

"Have you completely forgotten how long she spent trying to see that both of us landed in jail? If she and Brent Taylor weren't so inept ..."

Ryan doesn't even want to consider that part of the scenario right now. Ever since the night that he and Claire slept together, it's been tugging at him every second of the day, and he's tired of it. He doesn't want such an enormous obstacle standing between them. But is there any way to be rid of it?

"She's not going to send us to jail," Ryan says, as though he knows it for a fact, as he hurries out of the study.

Something has to give, he knows that. But at this point, he can't even imagine what, or how. Somehow he's sure that whichever way it goes, it's not going to be pretty.

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Inside the office, Nick plants his elbows on top of the desk. One hand goes to his mustache, toying thoughtfully with it. Something has to be done with Ryan and Claire -- and soon.

It's time to take Katherine up on her offer of assistance. Hopefully she has something planned, because Nick can't for the life of himself figure out how he might go about separating those two.

That's not true. There is one way; a weapon that he knows would be wildly effective is lying right in his hands. But he can't use it, he never can. Not unless he wants to go to jail. If Claire were to find out about Ryan's involvement in Nick's business--

It's not even a possibility. Katherine had better have a damn good plan.

## **CASSIE'S COFFEE HOUSE**

"This is just what I needed," Claire says, glancing casually around the coffeehouse as she waits for her latte to cool down a bit. "I can't believe how high-strung I feel today!"

"You're allowed. It's not every day that your oldest child starts kindergarten. It's a big step." Paula braves the first sip of her cappuccino and doesn't seem to be scalded by it.

Claire allows that thought to sink in, still gazing contemplatively around, then muses, "I guess you're right. Life really does keep moving, whether you're ready for it or not."

"It's true."

A comfortable silence rises up between them, soothed by the light acoustic music emanating from the speakers placed throughout the large room. Claire downs a deep drink of her coffee and the warmth fills her chest. She's been wanting to discuss this with Paula for some time, and now is as good a time as any.

"Speaking of moving on," she begins very tentatively, "there's something I want to talk to you about."

"Oh?"

"I've--it's been a long time since Tim died. And I've spent so much time mourning and wishing that he could be back here and everything could go back to the way it was. But I know that it can't."

Now Paula seems to recognize where this is headed, because she leans forward, her attention quite intent upon Claire as she listens for more.

"I need to get my life back on track," Claire says. "I know part of that includes dating, getting back into that whole game. So I--I'm sort of seeing someone right now."

As she expected, Paula begins to digest the news quietly, hovering over her coffee with her eyes down.

Claire feels the need to add more. "I know it's weird ... I was supposed to be with Tim forever. I never thought that I'd have to consider having feelings for someone else. I feel guilty every day for even thinking of someone else in that sort of way--"

"It's okay, Claire," Paula cuts in as a warm smile spreads over her lips. "It's not wrong of you to think of being with someone else -- or to do it, for that matter."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"Goodness, no! You've been widowed for nearly two years. It's *time* for you to find some lasting happiness. Tim would want you to."

"Do you think so?"

"I know so. Deep down, I think you do, too. Tim would never want you to be alone for the rest of your life just because he can't be with you."

Claire draws a deep breath, then smiles herself. "You're right, I guess."

"So who is that you've been seeing?" Paula asks as she lifts the cup to her mouth again. "Someone from the hospital?"

The relief that Claire feels proves to be short-lived. "That's another thing ..."

"What?"

"Do you remember how I explained to you about Ryan Moriani's father -- Stan?"

"Yes ..." The ending of the word trails off Paula's tongue uncertainly.

"Things have changed a lot between Ryan and me," Claire explains hurriedly. "We're getting over the past. There was so much misunderstanding, so much confusion ... Who knows what might've been if Stan hadn't been in the picture?"

"You're dating Ryan Moriani?"

"Yeah. Paula, it's not--"

"I suppose I can't judge," Paula interrupts, her eyes cast down again. "But I don't know what to say, Claire. You were so adamant about the Morianis being involved in such horrible things and now you're dating Ryan? It doesn't make sense."

"I was angry at Ryan for a lot of things, especially about the rape. But so much has changed. We've had so much to work through together and it's brought us much closer. I didn't even want to admit that I might still have feelings for him, but I had to admit it eventually."

Paula falls silent, the kind of heavy, question-laden silence that refuses to let either of them find a moment of comfort. She takes quick, frequent sips of her coffee, then finally lifts her focus back to her now-ex daughter-in-law.

"Is this safe?" she asks finally. "Do you know for certain that Ryan isn't involved in any sort of illegal -- or even questionable -- activities? You seemed so convinced of it before."

"I know. And I believe him when he says that he's not." But the possibility is too great, too menacing, to ignore, and suddenly she feels a glimmer of herself from months and months ago, able to voice something that has been nagging at her since the night that she slept with Ryan and was forced to admit that her feelings for him have somehow lasted all these years. "But I'm going to find out for sure. And if he is--if he's lied to me at all--then it doesn't matter how much has changed between us, because I can't accept that."

## END OF EPISODE #268

*Is Ryan's progress with Claire about to take a nosedive? Do you think you might understand what happened between Diane and Brian? Visit the Footprints Forum and share your thoughts!*

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