"Footprints"
Episode #193
<The Same Day as #192, Evening>

Previously ...
**Brent told Claire he would help her look for Tim. While talking to Molly, he received a phone*
call.
**Claire met Andy for coffee, but they were interrupted by a phone call that seemed to stun her.*
**Alex kissed Lauren on New Year's Eve but told her they could discuss the complexities of their relationship sometime later.*

FISHER HOME

The rain pelts Claire hard as she pulls herself from the car. She can't remember when it started coming down like this -- the day is too much of a blur to try and remember. Even this, now, feels like a blur. She sees herself sliding out of the car, crossing her arms in front of her and pulling her coat tightly over her body as she hurries through the rain, up the driveway and the front steps, but it is all so hazy -- like a dream, a bizarre whirlwind of events swept together without rhyme or reason ... a dream, a nightmare, that will end when she wakes up.

But in the back of her mind, she knows she won't wake up. She has tried too hard to fall back on that in the last few hours, and the reality of this all is strangely clear to her.

She watches herself ring the doorbell, feels her finger push the button, but still feels somehow removed from it all.

The door is opened in a flash. A frantic Paula, looking weary from a day of uninformed worry, stands before Claire. "Claire!" she exclaims. "Is there any news?"

Claire purses her lips. She sees the rest of the family -- at least, Bill, Molly, and Jason -- assembled behind Paula. She moves forward, letting herself into the house and out of the rain. She had hoped that maybe, somehow, coming in here would make everything go back to the way it was, would erase this last horrible day of her life.

But it doesn't. Even this house feels different now. This house, always so safe and welcoming, feels cold to her, somehow.

"Claire?" Bill asks, his voice strong and filled with concern.

Oh, God, Bill, she thinks, feeling that mournful bleeding swell up inside her once again.

Oh, God ...

"Did you find out anything?" Paula asks. "About Tim?"

Claire swallows the hard lump blocking her throat. She takes a breath, a breath that she finds to be strained, heavy, difficult. The breath repeats itself, giving her the chance to steel herself for the words that have already changed her life, as much as she would like to leave them completely unacknowledged. And finally, with one last breath, she forces them out.

"Tim's dead."

THE FISHERMAN'S PIER

The restaurant is packed tonight with couples and families too worn out from the previous night to make any effort at cooking. The main dining area is abuzz with conversation and laughter. Lauren sits alone at a small table in the middle of it all, fiddling with the corner of her menu as she tries to make her eyes scan the selections, even though she knows the fare here quite well.

She looks up again, for what must be the millionth time in the past five minutes. Only this time, she sees what she is looking for.

"Hel-lo," she says, greeting Alex melodically.

He smiles, creasing his dimples and unknowingly giving Lauren another chance to appreciate
them. "Hey."

He sits down across the table from her and immediately picks up his menu.

"I am so exhausted from last night," she says. "We weren't even up that late, but New Year's Eve always seems to wear me out."

"It's just 'cause of all the excitement," Alex says, almost immediately cursing himself for leading the conversation in that direction.

"Yeah," she agrees. Before she can open her mouth to say anything more, their waiter arrives and takes their drink orders.

When he is gone, Lauren continues, "Did you have a good time last night?"

After a short pause, one filled with rapid thought, Alex replies, "Yeah, I did."

"Good," she grins. "I'd hate to be known as a bad date."

"You're nothing of the sort."

They lapse into a moment of quiet. Alex casts his eyes down, trying somehow to remove himself from this situation. If he could just be anywhere but here ...

But he is here. He can feel Lauren's gaze targeting him, and he can feel the pressures of what happened last night bearing down upon them.

"About last night," he begins, giving himself the mental kick in the butt that he knows he needs to do what he has to do.

"Let's just get this all straightened out," Lauren says. "At this point, I'd rather just know where we stand rather than have it go where ... I think we both know where I want it to go. Did that make any sense?"

"Yeah, it did. And you deserve to have everything cleared up." He draws a deep breath and releases it slowly, folding his hands on the table in front of him. "That's why there's ... something I need to tell you."

SARAH TAYLOR'S APARTMENT

Sarah turns away from the pot on the stove and reaches across the small kitchen for the portable phone. "Hello?" she answers, bringing it to her ear.

"Sarah," responds the familiar voice. "It's me."

"Brent? Hi ..."

"Hi," he says quickly. "I--I just needed to let you know something."

"What?" She tries hard to keep her excitement out of her voice.

"You need to go over to your parents' house."

The urgency in his tone speeds up her heartbeat. "Why? Is something wrong?"

"Just--"

"Are they okay?"

"Just get over there, Sarah. I think you're going to want to be there."

"All right ..." She removes her weight from the counter. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because," he says. A pause ensues before he finishes, "It's important."

"Okay, well ... thanks."

"No problem. Bye."

She has words ready to prolong the conversation, but they die on her lips. "Bye," she says as she clicks off the phone.

What was that all about? she wonders as she turns off the stove. She grabs her keys and heads to the bedroom to grab Victoria.

FISHER HOME

Claire is sure that she can feel the whole energy of the room, of the house, change. With just those two words, she has altered this family forever.

She focuses on Paula. The older woman's face is a mask, a stiff likeness of her normally vibrant, caring, concerned visage.

"How do you know that?" Paula finally asks.

"I've been at the police station all day," Claire explains. "They told me ... they found his blood."

"What?"

"His blood was on the pier. There was a trail of it going into the water."

"Why would he have been at the pier?!" Paula cries, almost in protest.

"That's why we couldn't come to the party," Claire says, feeling her breath go thin. "Nick

Moriani was having a meeting at the pier and we--I--thought that if I went, I'd hear something we could use against him ..." She barely makes it to the end of the explanation.

"So what happened?" Paula demands, her voice rising in pitch.

"He was shot. That's what the police think it was." Claire moves her gaze away from Paula and looks at the others. Bill's face has taken on an ashen shade, and Molly and Jason are hovering behind their parents, hardly showing any signs of life.

"I don't--where were you? Why weren't you together?" Paula gasps in between her shortening breaths.

"I went--I got held up," Claire says. The tears that have filled her eyes for so much of the day are returning now. "He was supposed to be okay ..."

Bill's voice is thin as he asks, "How did you find out about this?"

"Brent was looking all morning. I went to see him after I called here ... Then he called me a little later and said they might have something. So I had to go down there ..." She crosses her arms in front of her again. "I had to go down to the police station. They found his watch in the bay, by the pier ..."

"Where's his body?" Paula asks suddenly.

Claire closes her eyes and her head shakes slightly. "I don't know. They don't know. It must be in the water somewhere, but they haven't turned it up yet."

Paula's eyes widen. "So he's *not* dead -- he's just missing--"

"He is," Claire says. "He's dead. He must be. His blood was all over the pier, dripping into the water -- it looked like he'd rolled off of it and into the water. And his watch was in the water, too. He's in there somewhere."

Paula clasps a hand over her mouth. "Oh, my ... Tim ... no ..."

Claire cannot even look at Tim's family right now. She fixes her eyes down on the carpet and allows silence to cover them.

FISHERMAN'S PIER

"I've been meaning--I've wanted to clear this up for a long time," Alex begins. His fingers play idly with one another and he keeps his focus down, on their movements. "But I was never totally sure ... I'm not even sure that I am now, completely, but it's enough to--"

"You don't have to do this," Lauren interrupts.

He looks up at her sharply. "Do what?"

"Put yourself through this. I can tell what you're trying to do, Alex, and I can tell that you're having trouble doing it." Her face softens with compassion. "You don't have to. I get it."

Alex just stares at her, trying to get a read. He knows he must look like a deer caught in headlights, but he can't help it. And right now, he doesn't really care ... How could she know? How--

"You'd be surprised how many times I've heard this," Lauren adds.

"You--what?"

"I hear it a lot. That you just wanna be friends, that this isn't going to work as a relationship, blah blah blah. I know the drill." She drops her hands to the table and her palms slap down. "I'm sorry I put you in this position. I should have known--"

"Lauren, you didn't--"

"This is how it always turns out," she continues without pause. "And I ... I know I get too attached, but it's hard not to, you know? Every time I think that maybe that's it, that it'll be the time when it actually works and doesn't just fizzle out. And it never is."

Alex feels like he should use the space to say something, to turn the conversation around, but the unexpected shower of information has thrown him.

Lauren fills the space instead, plowing ahead like a runaway train. "I don't think I ever told you this, but it was kinda this way with Jason, too. I mean, it was completely different, but it wound up being the same thing. Courtney set me up on a date with him and I really liked him, but then I realized how in love she was with him, so I let it go. And of course they totally belong together, but it's just another example of how stuff like that always happens to me."

She sighs and momentarily closes her eyes. When she opens them, it is as if whatever just came over her has passed.

"I'm sorry," she says. It almost sounds as though she is pleading for forgiveness. "I shouldn't have thrown all of that on you. I--"

"Hold it."

Once she is quiet and paying attention, Alex says, "That wasn't what I was going to say."

Confusion hangs off the end of her tongue for a split-second before she speaks. "It wasn't?"

"No. Not at all ..." The rest of Alex's words clash in his throat and come out as nothing.

"I am such a retard," Lauren moans with a shake of her head. "It's just like me to jump to conclusions like that and make myself look like even more of an idiot than I am, right? The one time something good is actually happening, I manage to screw it up anyway ..."

"Huh?"

"You *do* wanna give this a shot, right?"

"W-what?"

"That's what you were gonna say, isn't it? That you want this? I just assumed it was gonna be bad news, but hey, I'll take this." She flashes him a smile.

"Oh, uh, yeah," Alex manages, trying to catch up with his spinning head. "Yeah."

"I'm so glad," Lauren enthuses. "I still feel like kind of a dork saying this, but ... I have had it so bad for you for so long." She tries to temper the embarrassing words with a giggle.

"Really?"

"Yeah." She reaches across the table and grasps his hands in hers. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

Alex does his best to conjure up a weak smile as the waiter arrives with their drinks.

FISHER HOME

The family has moved away from the front door and has scattered around the living

room. Paula and Molly sit at opposite ends of the sofa; Bill is seated on the edge of an armchair; Jason is leaning against the mantle. Claire has gone upstairs to see the children.

The doorbell's chime breaks the eerie silence that has consumed them. Immediately Paula is on her feet, headed for the door. She yanks it open anxiously.

"What's going on?" asks a rain-drenched Sarah as she bursts into the house. She catches sight of the somber scene in the living room. "Brent called and told me to come over here. What's going on?"

"Oh, honey," Paula says, placing a hand on Sarah's shoulder. "There's been ..." Tears choke her.

"It's Tim," Bill says.

Sarah hurries closer. "What happened?"

"He ..." Bill drops his head and shakes it. "There was an accident."

"Accident? What--"

"Tim was shot," Paula says.

Sarah's breath can be heard catching in her throat. "*What*?"

"They couldn't find him," her mother continues. "No one saw him after midnight last night. They think he was shot and fell into the bay."

"Oh my God ..." Sarah's eyes go wide, and she scans the room as if to reassure herself that the rest of the family is still here.

She surveys the room again with another slow sweep of her head. The reactions she sees from the others tell her what she thinks she has just been told: That her older brother is gone.

Paula moves to draw Sarah into a hug, but Sarah shifts away from her. She turns her back to the family.

"I know this is a shock," Paula says, "but--"

"How come no one called me?" Sarah asks with a hint of disbelief, keeping her back to

them.

"Claire just came by--"

"Brent knew!" Sarah exclaims, whipping around.

Bill stands. "Claire had asked him to look for Tim. He was the first one to find out. He told Claire and she came over here to tell us."

"And no one thought of calling me to be here once you found out?" Sarah shakes her head. "God, I don't believe this ..."

Everyone else is silent. Sarah again turns her back to them. She can't leave, not now -- especially now. But the family remains this way, together but so horribly fractured, as their newborn grief takes hold and draws their suddenly fragile minds into torturous, silent reflection.

END OF EPISODE #193

Were you expecting this to be Tim's fate? How do you think the Fishers, individually and as a whole, will be affected by their loss? Share your thoughts at the Message Forum!

Next Episode