

"Footprints"

Episode #196

<Several Days After #195>

[Previously ...](#)

**Alex let Lauren believe that he wants to continue their relationship.*

**Jason clammed up in the aftermath of Tim's death.*

**Claire attempted to cope with her grief over losing Tim.*

**Andy informed Ryan that Tim is dead.*

BROOKS HOME

"Okay. Talk to you later." Lauren clicks off the portable phone and sets it down on the coffee table.

She leans back on the couch and sighs. Alex takes that as his sign.

"Who was that?" he asks.

"Courtney. She was wondering if we'd seen Jason."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"He was supposed to pick her up, but he hasn't shown up." She pushes back her dark blonde hair with her right hand. "I've hardly spent any time with him lately, but he's been ... quiet, you know? Not like himself at all."

"I know," Alex agrees with a nod. "But I guess people react weirdly to things like that. I mean, having his brother die -- and so suddenly ... It must be messing with his head pretty badly."

"Yeah. I hope he's okay ... I can't even imagine what it would be like to just lose my brother like that. Even though I hardly see him these days -- it would be completely different for him to just be gone. At least now I know I can pick up the phone and talk to him if I need to."

"Yeah, what's he up to? Why hasn't he been home at all?"

"He was home for a couple of days around Christmas," she says. "But he took off again before New Year's. I don't even know where he is ... L.A. right now, I think."

Alex silently waits, seeing that she is not through yet.

After what seems like a lengthy pause, she continues. "We were really close when we were little. We pretty much did everything together. We even had some of the same friends in school. Maybe it's because we were so close in age -- he's only a little bit older than you -- but it was the type of relationship that I thought we'd hang onto forever."

"Did something happen?"

"Not that I know of," she shrugs. "But things changed. When he went off to college, everything was just different all of a sudden. That was like six years ago, and it's never been the same. We don't talk anymore, we never do stuff together, even when he's home."

She falls quiet and her eyes drop to her lap. "I miss him a lot."

Unsure how to respond, Alex places an arm around her shoulders and pulls her a little bit closer.

FISHER HOME

Courtney pushes the doorbell and folds her arms in front of her. She stares out into the rain-slicked street and watches a minivan move down the street.

The door is unlocked and opened quickly, and the sound of the scramble snaps Courtney's attention back to the matter at hand.

"Courtney," Paula greets her as she pulls the door open. "Hi."

"Hi." Courtney peers over the older woman's shoulders into the house. "Is Jason here?"

"No, he's--Is something the matter?"

The words catch in Courtney's throat as she feels a stab of guilt for delivering further worry to Paula, who still looks ravaged by grief all these weeks after Tim's death. Slowly Courtney says, "No, nothing's wrong. He was just supposed to come pick me up and he ... he was a little late, so I thought I'd come by and see if he was here."

"No, he's not." Paula's face creases deeper and deeper as terrifying possibilities swirl in her head. "Do you think everything is all right? Maybe we should try his cellular--"

"I did. It was turned off."

Paula closes her eyes tightly. "Oh, no. No. I hope he hasn't gone and done anything ..."

"W-what do you mean?"

"He's just been so withdrawn since--He's hardly spoken to any of us at all, and he's been spending all day up in his room."

"I've noticed. I figured he just needed some space to sort this all out."

Paula shakes her head. "This is making me very nervous, Courtney. We need to find him. I hope there's nothing wrong--"

"I'm sure everything's fine," Courtney says, already holding the car key in her hand. "Look, I'm going to go find him. I'll let you know when I do, okay?"

"Thank you ... I just hope he's all right."

Courtney starts back down the front steps. "So do I," she hopes aloud.

CLAIRE FISHER'S APARTMENT

Claire runs her fingers over the glass window of the picture frame. She traces the line of her wedding dress slowly, and just touching the picture brings the day back to her so vividly.

She'd hardly been able to hold herself together that day. She was stunned that she and Tim were committing to each other the way they were ... amazed that she was becoming part of such a loving family ... and terrified that the whole thing would fall to pieces.

And it did, she thinks now as she caresses Tim's face through the frame. He was so soothing that day, so reassuring, making her believe that they belonged together and that was all that mattered. She hadn't been able to tell him even half of her fears -- that she wouldn't be good enough, that she wouldn't be able to be the woman a man like Tim needed.

A man like Tim. She swallows hard. He was perfect ... He was everything I needed. And it still wasn't enough to keep this from happening ...

A sharp rap on the door rattles her. She grips the photograph tightly, keeping it from flying out of her hand. Then she places it back on the side-table and stands from the couch, breathing deeply to calm herself as she waits for the rush of adrenaline to subside.

She stands before the door and takes one last moment to compose herself. She smooths her clothing and takes another breath. Instinctively she snuffles, and she reaches a finger up to wipe the beginnings of a tear from her eye.

Another knock sounds as she steals a final glance in the mirror hanging beside the door.

She reaches out, takes hold of the knob, and opens the door. And she feels the color drain from her face.

"Hi," he says awkwardly.

Claire doesn't make a move.

BROOKS HOME

"When I was a kid I always wished I had siblings," Alex says softly, cradling Lauren at his side. "I figured it would be like having built-in friends or something, you know? Like I'd always have someone to play with and hang out with and stuff."

"It kinda is. That's how Trevor and I were."

Alex shrugs his free shoulder. "I guess it's probably a good thing I was an only child, though. My mother didn't need any more kids to screw up."

Lauren is quiet for a moment. Her lips part and a soft breath passes through instead of words, but she drags them out eventually. "What was it like growing up with your mom? She seems like such a--character."

"That she is. The thing is, she always tried. She really did. It just wasn't enough. I don't wanna sound like a brat, but ... she just never really paid attention to me. It was like I was always fighting to be her number one focus."

"And you've never really known your dad, have you?"

"I've only met him a couple of times. And he's sent money about that often. Sometimes birthday cards, too. I don't know, because he wasn't there, it just didn't matter to me. Maybe it was my way of not being hurt by it, but I just never really cared that he wasn't there. I guess deep down I did, but ... I never sat around mooning over the fact that I didn't have a dad."

She leans closer into him. "You must've grown a pretty thick skin pretty quickly."

"I dunno about that."

"Sure seems like it to me sometimes. The way you keep yourself from opening up, even though I can see that something is hurting you--"

"That's not a thick skin. It's a defense mechanism."

"What do you mean?"

"I just learned early on to keep my mouth shut," he says.

She looks up at him. "Why?"

"Because ..." He exhales heavily, not sure if he can or should say any of this. He's run over it so many times in his mind, but he's never shared it with anyone.

"I just had a hard time growing up," he says finally. "Kids -- they can be cruel, right? And they were."

"To you? Why?" She smiles. "I don't see a hell of a lot to make fun of."

He brushes the comment aside. "There's plenty."

"I was just kind of a loser," he says, pushing himself onward. "I dunno, I didn't mix well with other kids. I was really shy ... I wasn't comfortable around any of them. And I don't know if they picked up on that or what, but ... I always got made fun of and stuff."

"Really? Like how?"

"Stupid stuff. But I was always the kid they made fun of when they had nothing else to talk about. You remember how that worked?"

"Good old school days," she mutters, raising her eyebrows.

"You know what I used to do at recess in middle school? I sat on the curb the whole time. Sometimes I saved my homework to do at recess just so I wouldn't have to sit there without anything to do."

"Ohhh ... Alex, that's awful."

He rolls his eyes. "Yeah, it's pretty pathetic, huh?"

"No. I mean it's awful that you had to spend your time like that." She takes his hand in hers and grips it firmly. "I'm sorry ... that must have been hard."

"Yeah, it was ... probably more than I even acknowledged. But I think maybe that's why I have trouble opening up and stuff. 'Cause I never had anyone to talk to when I was younger. I've never had any practice."

He cracks a tiny grin. To Lauren, even that simple gesture lights up his entire face. She reaches to touch his cheek.

"You've got someone to talk to now," she says softly, raising her face to his. "That's what I'm here for -- it's what I want to be here for."

Silently, Alex accepts the brushing of her lips against his. The pressure builds and he doesn't fight it. To be able to open up to someone ...

KING'S BAY PARK

The toe of Jason's Adidas sneaker scuttles around in the bark beneath him. He kicks the chips around lightly, staring down into them as he holds onto the swing's chains and rocks back and forth.

"Having fun?" The voice comes suddenly and from behind, and it startles him.

He turns instinctively. "Court! What are you--"

"I was driving around looking for you," she says. "I figured you might be here."

"Oh my God. I was supposed to pick you up, wasn't I? I'm so sorry. I just lost track of time--"

"Don't worry about it." She approaches him slowly, her hands stuffed in the pockets of her jacket.

"How'd you know where to find me?" he asks.

"I didn't, really. I checked a couple of places before I came here. But I figured that with everything that's happened lately, you might've wanted to spend some time here."

Jason is silent. Courtney sits down on the swing next to his.

"Do you wanna talk?" she asks, trying to sound as non-threatening as she can.

He shakes his head. "Nah. There's no reason."

"You've been saying that for weeks. To me, to your parents -- we can all tell how upset you are."

"Really, I'm fine."

"No, you're not." She catches herself and takes a moment to calm down. "This whole Tim thing is hurting you a lot more than you want anyone to know, I think. And that not's good for you."

A dead moment passes before he looks up at her, wearing a look of exaggerated confusion. "Huh?"

"It's not good to bottle this stuff up, Jay. I mean ... Jeez, I can't even imagine losing someone I loved like that. I have no idea what it'd be like."

"No, you don't."

She wraps her fingers around his hand. "But I bet it's better to talk about it than it is to just let it build up. And people need you, Jason, especially your mom. She's so worried about you."

"There's nothing to worry about!" he protests with a vigorous shake of the head.

"Then why have we hardly talked about Tim at all?"

"Because I'd rather not keep dredging up the fact that Tim is gone, and ..." He drops his head into his hands.

Courtney runs her hand over his back, hoping she can soothe him in some way. "I'm so sorry," she says. "I know how close you and Tim were -- I know how much you looked up to him."

"Yeah," Jason says after a lengthy pause. His voice sounds thinner now.

"Maybe by not facing it ... I don't know, maybe you're trying to pretend it's not real--"

"It's plenty real."

"I know it is. But Jay, you haven't been acting like yourself at all lately. It scares me."

He doesn't say anything.

"I love you," she says softly, running her fingers through his short, sandy hair. "And I want to be here for you. So please, don't keep running away like this. Don't bottle everything up. I'm here to help you ... We can get through this together."

Seconds pass without a response. A knot tightens in Courtney's stomach. *How am I supposed to help him? What if he won't let me?*

The thoughts are swooping through her head, but they are forgotten the moment Jason turns to look up at her. His face looks so soft, so vulnerable, his eyes staring into her and his tears stained with fresh tears.

"I love you, too," he whispers, and he cuddles closer to her.

CLAIRE FISHER'S APARTMENT

"Hi," Ryan repeats, awaiting some sort of reaction from Claire.

"What are you doing here?" she finally demands. There is an accusatory note in her voice that unnerves Ryan.

"Andy told me about Tim," he says gently.

No response. She just stares at him. It is not a cold stare, and certainly not a warm one, but it isn't blank, either.

Ryan is still trying to read it as he adds, "I wanted to come by and offer my condolences. I know it's probably a little on the late side--"

"I don't want your condolences."

Now it is Ryan's turn to be stricken silent.

"I don't want anything from you," Claire spits. "Do you really think that after--after all this, that you can just come in here and pretend we're friends? It's not going to work, Ryan."

"I'm not trying to pretend anything, Claire. I just want you to know that I'm sorry about

your loss--"

"And what, if there's anything you can do, I should just let you know? It's not going to be that easy."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't pretend like you don't know how this happened." She shakes her head bitterly. "This happened because of you and your father. You're the reason Tim is gone."

"That's not true." He balls his hands up into fists, trying to keep himself from grabbing her and trying to shake some sense into her. "My father and I--we had no control over what happened at that pier. We weren't there, we didn't tell anyone to do anything ..."

"But if you'd just been honest with me on the I-don't-know-how-many occasions when I'd asked you to tell me the truth, Tim never would have been out on that pier. He never would have been in danger."

Suddenly Ryan assumes a smug demeanor, pursing his lips and holding his chin up a little higher. "You can keep telling yourself that, Claire, but it's garbage and you know it. You're trying to pin this on my father and me so--" He shakes off the thought. "You know what? Nevermind. I'm not going to argue about this with you right now."

"Good. Because it's not exactly how I planned to spend my afternoon, either." She grips the door. "Now get out of my home."

In an instant, the smugness is gone and Ryan seems to be pleading. "Are you sure we can't talk? Maybe--"

"Get out."

He backs out of the apartment, never removing his gaze from her. "I'll talk to you later," he says.

She slams the door.

And once it is closed, she leans her back against it. She sinks to the floor as New Year's Eve replays itself in her mind and she relives the shock that Ryan thrust upon her that night.

She's hardly had time to ponder it -- it's only been a fleeting thought in the weeks since then, since she realized Tim was missing. But now it hits her, almost as hard as it did the first time, that the reality she's held onto for all these years is gone. It was nothing but a

mirage, a smokescreen, and now it's all but faded from view entirely.

Claire crumbles to the floor, tears clogging her throat as she tries to figure out some way to recognize this world she's suddenly being forced to endure.

END OF EPISODE #196

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