

Committed

Published by N. Primak at Smashwords

Copyright 2011 N. Primak

Cover Image Copyright 2011 N. Primak

~

Smashwords Edition, License Notes

Thank you for downloading this free ebook. You are welcome to share it with your friends. This book may be reproduced, copied and distributed for non-commercial purposes, provided the book remains in its complete original form. If you enjoyed this book, please return to Smashwords.com to discover other works by this author. Thank you for your support.

~

Dedication

This story is dedicated to Hope Goodrich, who provided editing, as well Terrance Henry, who provided creative inspiration for the title.

~

Robert didn't realize just how much he loved Layla until she was dead. Layla, the girl who had been his closest friend since childhood. He had been too scared to risk anything with her, and now it was too late. His fear of losing her had come to reality. Just like that.

As Robert sat in his empty room, holding a photo album full of childhood memories, he felt himself losing it again. He was staring at a photograph of a little boy and girl embracing and smiling into the camera.

Robert's veins were pulsing as the photo shook in his hands. He wasn't able to contain the violence inside him, and threw the photo album against the wall with all the force he had. It made a slapping noise and fell unceremoniously to the ground.

There was a soft knock on the door. Robert didn't move. A louder knock. He stood up and picked up the photo album from the floor.

Finally there was a completely unrestricted knock. Robert tripped on the printer he had left on the ground, leading to a loud crash. The knocker could be heard attempting to enter, but the door was locked from the inside and did not budge.

"Robert? Are you okay?" A concerned and feminine high-pitched voice was muffled by the door between them.

"Not really!" Robert shouted at the voice with a face full of dirty clothes.

"Oh no. You have to let me in so I can help you!"

"I can't move," Robert groaned.

"Well, I can't help you if you don't let me in."

Robert attempted to prop himself up with his arms, but his hand slipped on his spilled rock collection.

"Ow."

"Robert?"

There was a long pause as Robert ejected a rock out of his nose. "Yeah?"

“Can I use your bathroom?”

He glared at the door. “Yeah.”

While she was gone Robert was finally able to crawl through the rubbish and prop himself up on some misplaced cushions so that his arm could reach the door handle.

Tia was standing on the other side when he opened the door. She was thin, blonde-haired, and had big muddy green eyes with thick, mascara covered lashes.

“Oh! Robert, your face!”

Robert touched his face and to his horror felt that it was covered in little bumps.

“Wait. There's a rock stuck in one of the bumps.” She picked it off with her finger.

Robert glanced first at the tiny rock in her hand, and then at Tia. “I fell on my rock collection earlier. You scared the shit out of me. What the hell are you even doing here?”

She wrung her hands. “You haven't been at school for a week. I was getting worried. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Well, as you can see, I'm perfectly fine. You can go now.” Robert picked himself up from the rubble and looked at her. She was still standing stubbornly in front of him.

“No, Robert. I'm not leaving until I know you're okay.”

“I told you I'm fine.” He gritted his teeth, remembering that he had not been out of the room all day and probably looked awful.

“You don't look fine.” She stared at him suspiciously, looking him over.

Robert could tell by her expression that she wasn't going to leave him alone. It was true; Robert had not slept since Layla died. “Why does it matter to you?”

Tia stood up at his words, eyes flashing. “What does it matter to me?” She grabbed Robert's hand before he could step away from her. “I'm your friend. Sure, I haven't known you that long, but I've tried to be there for you. I know you well enough to know that losing Layla is about the worst thing that could ever have happened to you. I thought that I could help.”

“I didn't ask for your help. I want to be alone.” He narrowed his eyes. He didn't like it when people said Layla's name.

“I should have saved her from him. He ruined her.”

“Robert, you can't be talking about Leon.”

“Don't say his name. I can't stand hearing that bastard's name.” Robert gritted his teeth.

“It's not Leon's fault!”

“Yes it is, Tia.” Robert smashed his fist against the wall and Tia became pale. “How can you not see that? He might as well have killed her himself.”

“No, Robert; you're wrong! Layla was obsessed with Leon. Leon tried to be nice but she latched on to him like a leech. He just didn't feel the same way about her.”

“When someone loves you, you have to take responsibility. If he didn't like her in the first place, he should have never started dating her.”

“It's not that simple, Robert.” She paused, obviously trying to think of a better reason. “You were in love with Layla, but she didn't take any responsibility. She just kept treating you the same way even though it was obvious that she was hurting you. But you would rather be angry with Leon than be angry with her.”

“And you would rather defend a murderer.”

The tears were glistening on Tia's eyelashes as Robert stood there fuming. “I see how it is.” Her voice was barely above a whisper, although she did not break Robert's eye contact. “You don't want to see what's right in front of your own eyes.”

Robert tried to look away, but the intensity of her gaze held him prisoner. “All you want is to be angry with everyone. I am really sorry that all of this happened, but that doesn't give you license to go on a rampage. Layla's death was a tragedy, not a murder.”

“I can't believe you're siding with Leon. I don't understand what makes you think you can trust

him.” A morbid smile dawned upon his features. “I get it. You have a crush on him, don't you?” He looked at Tia with a newfound hatred. “You were just waiting until he broke it off with Layla, weren't you?”

The intensity in Tia's eyes was replaced with large-pupil fear as Robert began to clench his fists anew. “No, Robert. That's not it.”

Robert took a step toward her, examining her expression closely. “Really? How come I don't believe you?”

“Because you're not thinking straight.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.” There was a pause as Robert considered options of getting rid of her. Before he realized it, Tia had stepped closer to him again and grabbed his hand, holding it tightly. It was shaking.

“Robert, you have to let your sadness out. I'm here for you, right now. Talk to me. Your anger is only going to make everything worse.”

Robert inhaled deeply, trying to find his patience. It didn't help. She was treating him like a ten year old, and holding his hand no less. “Who do you think you are, Tia? My therapist?”

“No. I'm someone you can talk to about this.” She looked around his room as she spoke, taking in the mess. “You obviously haven't been talking to anyone else.”

“I'm a guy, Tia. We don't sit around and tell each other our deepest secrets. I'm not going to divulge my entire life story to you.”

“I know that but-”

“How many times do I have to say it, Tia?” Robert ripped his arm away from her and took several steps back. Again the madman of rage inside him was breaking through. “I don't want to talk to anyone! Don't you get it? You showing up in my room like this is only pissing me off more!”

To his surprise, Tia still stood firm. She even seemed to have gotten her emotions under control. “How long do you plan on being like this, Robert? You're completely out of control. Maybe you can talk to me like this and I will still forgive you, but if you start acting like this at school you'll become a social outcast in no time.”

“I don't care about that.”

Tia sighed. Robert crossed his fingers, hoping she would give up soon. “What do you care about, then?”

“I don't know. Could you stop with the damn therapy already?” Tia's question was so simple, but Robert really didn't know how to answer it. He couldn't even remember what he had wanted before Layla died, let alone after.

“There's nothing wrong with getting therapy, you know. Anyone in your position would need it.”

“Oh, are you going to recommend me a therapist now?”

“No, because I know you wouldn't even hear me out.” Robert noticed her tone had gotten colder. He was finally wearing her down.

“Good.”

That was when Tia lost her patience, and began to speak her mind. “You're not dealing with Layla's death at all. You really think you can just keep your grief at bay by being a douche bag and blaming Leon?”

Robert couldn't believe the words that had come out of her mouth. It took all his willpower to keep from punching her in the face. He couldn't look at her. “Damn, I'm sorry. Remind me again who barged into whose room and started playing psychologist?”

“You can't even say Layla's name, can you?” She slumped against the nearest wall as if she no longer had energy to speak to him. “You're right; it was stupid of me to come here. I thought we were friends, and I was wrong.”

When Tia left, Robert almost felt bad. He picked up the photo album from the floor, and flipped through it again. His feelings hadn't changed. Robert still loved Layla and still hated Leon.

*** **

There they were, playing footsy underneath the cafeteria table, holding hands and smiling at one another. As if they were innocent. As if they weren't sitting at the same table where Layla had once sat. Robert knew that Leon had already recovered from her death, but he did not think Leon would have the balls to hold Tia's hand in the exact same spot where he had once held Layla's. The worst part was that Robert had actually trusted Tia.

Not anymore.

He could imagine Layla writhing in her grave at the injustice of it all. Leon's cruelty was unforgivable. How could Leon just sit there and smile as though he had nothing to do with Layla's suicide?

Robert remembered all the times he had watched Leon and Layla from a distance.

The one that stood out most in his memory was when Layla had packed Leon a lunch, but he chose to eat the cafeteria food instead. Robert remembered seeing Layla after school that day, crying and feeding what she had prepared to the birds.

Layla had always been compassionate, and every time Leon flunked a test or got into a fistfight she was there, cradling his head in her arms as though he were a baby.

When Robert would hang out with her on the few occasions where she could spare the time, she would tell him about all of Leon's problems and how he was so patient and strong for dealing with them every day. Robert quickly got sick of hearing these stories, but he could never blame Layla for her innocent adoration.

Since childhood, Layla had always been one to care for others. Even back in elementary school;(?) Robert remembered once twisting his ankle on the playground and being crippled for a week. Layla would sit on the bench with him and they would talk about all the fun times they would have once his ankle healed.

Unfortunately, those fun times never came because that was when Layla met her first boyfriend.

His name was Michael, and he was a hulking douche bag on the football team. Robert was astonished when he first saw them together. He had tried to convince Layla that Michael was a terrible guy for her, but Layla had been convinced that Robert was jealous. She had admired Michael's strength and told Robert repeated stories about how kind he was to his teammates. Only his teammates.

That entire year Layla barely paid any attention to Robert. The only time he could ever talk to her was after school at the football games, where she would always be in the front row cheering Michael on. It made Robert nauseous.

When Michael dumped her, Layla didn't come to school for a week. Robert remembered it well, because every day he would cross his fingers, hoping to hear Layla's voice when the teacher called her name during attendance.

Finally, Robert had gathered the courage to go to her house. He had never expected Layla to answer the door.

Robert had refused to leave until he was convinced that Layla would come to school the next day. Layla cried in his lap and told him all the cruel things Michael said to her before he dumped her, and how she didn't understand what she did wrong. No matter how many times Robert reassured her, Layla still believed that she was to blame.

Then there was Leon. Robert remembered how Layla first fell in love with him. It was at the hockey game where Leon made three goals. After the game Layla wouldn't stop talking about how smoothly Leon skated across the rink, and how he had almost single handedly given the school a victory.

Robert should have known back then that it was bad news, but it was too late by the time she started following Leon around school and complimenting him every chance she got. Everyone knew that Leon had no interest in her, since he complained to almost everyone about her nasty habit of following him.

Robert hated every moment of Layla's infatuation and tried to remind her of the incident with Michael, but it was no use. He had been pushed to the sidelines again.

If he hadn't let himself get pushed away, if he had been more forceful and tried to expose the horrors of Leon's personality, Robert knew he could have saved her. Instead, Robert let her dive headfirst into another obsession: Leon.

As Robert stared at the man from across the cafeteria, he hated him even more. He remembered how there wasn't even a hint of redemption on the bastard's face after it happened. Just for that Robert wanted to feel Leon's warm blood on his hands.

He wanted Leon to apologize in front of Layla's grave, because everything was his fault. Robert could not imagine a future without Layla. Just the image of Layla's face, rotting and cold in her coffin, was enough to give him nightmares for a millennium.

Layla had died because of Leon. Yet just across the room Leon was treating Tia so tenderly, like a baby chickadee. Robert thought that Tia would at least understand his anger with Leon, but instead she just took advantage of Layla's death to be Leon's new girlfriend. It was sickening.

Robert knew he was the only one who could avenge Layla's death. The only one who saw Leon for who he really was. Robert would prove to God and to anyone else who was watching that he would be loyal to Layla till the very end.

If she had only seen what he was willing to do for her, she would never have chosen Leon. Robert believed that to the deepest pits of his soul.

If he didn't have Layla's name carved on his heart Robert may have even fallen into the lull of high school life once more. Watching students laugh, walking across the cafeteria with their friends, one would have never even guessed that a classmate had died less than a month ago. Robert tried to pick up his fork, but his hand was shaking with rage. Everyone was so eager to forget, but ignorance couldn't change things back.

One day, when someone close to them died, they would realize how difficult it was.

There was no way Robert would be lulled back into the apathy that was high school life. The presence of Leon alone would guarantee that. The memory of Layla would always weigh him down. He would never be able to rest easy knowing that Leon, the man who had ruined Layla, was living happily with Robert's ex-friend.

He glared at Leon and Tia out of the corner of his eye. They were just leaving the cafeteria, probably to find a quiet spot where they could make out.

Robert didn't notice when they suddenly changed course and started walking back towards him.

"Robert."

He couldn't hear Tia over the crunching sound of the stale carrot in his mouth. Tia and Leon exchanged glances. Then Leon tapped him on the shoulder.

"We need to talk, Robert."

The expression on Robert's face when he saw them resembled that of someone who had just awoken from a coma. Leon's face was feet from his own, his broad jaw clenched as though he would rather eat nails than speak to Robert. The young man had spiky bleach blonde hair and disinterested eyes.

Tia was holding his hand and looking determined. She must have put him up to it.

Robert tried to talk but instead choked on the carrot and began to cough. "I have nothing to-," he gasped out, still coughing, "say to you."

"Really? Your parents seem to think otherwise. So does Tia. Everyone keeps telling me that you think it's my fault Layla is dead."

Robert tried to get up, but Leon put his muscular arm out, blocking Robert's path. Some of the students nearby were starting to look their way.

"Were you planning to run away?" Leon laughed. "Are you scared of me, Robert?"

Robert tried to look into his enemy's eyes, but got caught up staring in disgust at Leon's thick neck. Robert could hardly bear Leon's presence so close to him. He bit his lip and stayed silent.

“Hello? Robert?” Leon waved his other hand in Robert's face and turned to Tia. “Has he gone mute or something?”

Tia shook her head in response and looked fearfully at Robert as though he were a time bomb.

“Fine, Robert. You know, I'll make this easier for you. You don't even have to say anything. I just wanted to tell you that you're wrong about me. Layla's death wasn't my fault, and I don't appreciate you blaming me for it. I need you to promise me you'll stop doing that.”

Robert tried to focus on Leon's face and what he was saying, but all he could think about was Layla. He remembered how soft her cheeks were. Robert only got to touch them once, when they were six. Layla had been crying after her cat died. It only took a brief stroke against her skin to wipe away the tears, but he never forgot that sensation. From that day forward he had vowed to himself that he would not let Layla cry. It was too sad to see Layla cry.

Staring into the face of Leon was like staring into the face of his own failure. How many times had Leon made Layla cry? He didn't remember the last time she had smiled while she was dating him. There was a never-ending string of incidents.

Leon had not moved an inch, but Robert knew that he could make no promises to him. Not with the memories running through his head. Robert shook his head frantically and closed his eyes, but the image of Layla was burned into his retinas. He thought that he could touch her thick black hair.

Robert heard Leon's voice as if it was through a megaphone. “You really feel so strongly about it, huh? Why are you such an asshole, Robert?” When Robert didn't respond, Leon's voice grew steadily louder and his words started coming out faster. “Do you really feel the need to make this harder for everyone? Holding onto her memory and blaming me for everything that happened isn't going to bring her back. I know what's really eating you up inside. You feel guilty because you couldn't save her. You can't live with yourself.”

There was a silence where Robert tried to control his rising temper. “That's not true.” The mirage of Layla was beginning to dissipate. Her bark brown eyes were replaced with piercing blue and her long dark hair became light and short. Then her neck started to bulge and her jaw grew until Robert realized his eyes were wide open again. He hated everything he saw.

“Oh, really? Then what is true? That I'm a bad guy? That I was beating Layla and insulting her until she committed suicide? Don't you think her parents would have had me in jail by now if that were the case? Don't you think someone else would be on your side if there was even a smallest chance you were right?” Leon crossed his arms and stared down at him.

“That's because nobody knew Layla the way I did!” Robert shouted back, unable to restrain himself. He stared at the tile floor, hoping that maybe Leon would walk away. Every word coming out of his mouth made Robert want to punch him in the face. But he knew that once he made that move, there would be no going back.

“Do you really think so? You think you knew her better than her parents did?”

Robert opened his mouth to respond, but Leon continued talking. “Because even they admitted that Layla was always troubled. She was in and out of therapy every week. Every little thing would send her into a depression.”

More excuses. Robert didn't want to hear them. “Don't you dare speak about Layla that way.”

“I don't know how you could have forgotten if you were so close to her.” Leon paused, as Tia was pulling on his sleeve.

“Leon, stop. You're going to make him angry. He's not ready to listen yet.” She whispered into his ear, although Leon was standing so close to him now that Robert could hear everything she said.

“No, Tia.” Leon pulled away from her. “He's never going to be ready, and someone has to tell him. Robert, just admit to yourself that you're doing all of this because you feel guilty about Layla.”

Robert concentrated on Leon, willing everyone else out of existence. It was the only way he could properly focus. Finally, it was just the two of them in a black room together. It was the only way he could tell Leon everything that he thought of him. What everyone secretly knew but only Robert was

brave enough to say. “You just can't stand that someone knows the truth. I heard all the horrible things you said to Layla. I saw all the times you made her cry. She would have never committed suicide if it weren't for you. You're a murderer”

“Say that one more time and I will just have to beat the sense into you.” Leon's voice was threatening and low.

Robert blood was pulsing so loud in his ears that he could barely hear himself think. Yet he felt ready. “You're a murderer.”

As Robert said these words he pulled out the small pocketknife hidden in his back pocket. When Leon's fist lunged into his face he thrust the blade forward, anticipating for Leon to lean into it. What he didn't anticipate was that Tia would protect him. She fell straight into Robert's lap and on top of the blade. The young woman gasped and sank to the floor, clutching the hilt.

Then there were screams. Leon's came first, full of rage. He shoved Robert off his chair and began beating and kicking him.

“You're the murderer, Robert. You better fucking pray that Tia makes it, or I'll make sure you serve a life sentence in prison! I'll never forgive you for this!”

Robert could barely feel Leon's attacks. If anything, his punches were pleasantly warm. The screams of his fellow classmates echoed like distant bells in his ears. Everything seemed suddenly meaningless, as though he had been fighting a losing battle from the beginning. As though everything had fallen into place exactly the way it was supposed to, and he should just accept it. Robert welcomed the indifferent darkness with a smile. He hoped that he would never wake up.

~

Other Works by this Author

For the Love of the Gamer: A Short Story : <http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/64258>

For Mother: A Short Story Collection of Two : <http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/65969>

When I Woke Up I Knew I was Dead: A Short Story: <http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/74677>

Connect with the Author Online

Personal Website: <http://about.me/nprimak>

Smashwords Author Profile: <http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/primak>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/#!/nadyachronicles>

#####