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**THE
ORPHAN'S
FATHER**

The Orphan's Father

Not a Novel

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Minden jog fenntartva!

CHAPTER ONE

Leo Brown – he was different; just like millions of his kind, levitating on the ground. He was a glass of clear, whirling water waiting for an ink droplet to fall, to form a blue cloud of hope, one that would dissipate and change his colors. He was nothing but a red balloon that had been forgotten and left to shrink in the corner of a room full of children who were told to sleep on a sunny afternoon – a wrinkled, pale resemblance of greater times. A little, balding boy. He was forty-five: a silent, unnoticed obstacle. The father of an orphan.

Black bottomed mugs, stained by days old coffee and tea, ashes and decades old grease and rings of red wine imprinted in the tablecloth, waiting for a day that may be the right time: they, too, were Leo Brown.

The red and lime neon lights that belonged to the café across the cobblestone street from Leo's balcony danced on the puddles. The silence was only broken by the metallic sound of the rain rumbling down the tin gutter on the side of Leo's home, and occasionally by the cusswords of cheerful teenagers who threatened each other's lives for things they swore they hadn't done; and, of course, by the shrill laughter of the ones in soon-to-be-sad love.

The last waiter of the café who now stood beneath a white-leaved tree flicked his goodnight cigarette in the drain as the piles of gray snow flashed yellow when the headlights of his taxi turned in at the corner.

It was the night of a winter day when people at least thought about calling in sick to watch the rain; the night of a cold day that people spend leafing through albums of relatives they don't recognize anymore, and through photographs of moments that once were meaningful.

The coming of Christmas has long been among the most temperless, fluid times that could happen to life in Segrado: just a town that had been painted from the sky, in soft grey and brown. The craftsmen were shivering behind their pride, the hand made jewels, the mugs and the candles, the steaming breads and the mulled wine that were waiting to be admired by those who couldn't afford them, and by those who couldn't but bought them anyway.

It was the time of the year when Leo became an outcast, waiting in his apartment until life would refuse to be locked up in people's homes and would break free, until life would return to where it belongs.

One thing Leo liked to remember happened about ten years ago. It was a school morning and Sarah was only eleven, running late for school. To him, she had looked just the same as she did ever since. Nothing has changed, but the strength and the drive, the shine in her eyes, they stayed divine and friendly.

"Did you know hummingbirds are the children of mosquitos and eagles?" he asked. "Life, in some ways, is mysterious, isn't it, sweetheart?" he said.

She only rolled her eyes at him – she was too old for a joke like that. Leo was a proud father.

It was only five years later when she became old enough to work nights at the Woods, when things had changed. All Leo knew about her was that she was doing fine – she didn't look bad. She was lively and busy; she was all over the place.

"Don't wait up, Dad!" she'd say.

"Wasn't going to," he would have said, if he'd had the chance.

Now, Leo parented two sparrows on his balcony – often, they had breakfast together, when they flew. They would listen to his sermons, looking at the fake poppies in the corner that Leo occasionally forgot not to water – it didn't matter, after all.

Soaking in a bathroom with the accepting and lonesome company that a cloud of smoke and bourbon could provide was among the few occasions that Leo found elevated enough to get lost in the past – smoking in the bathtub was one of the luxuries he could afford since Sarah, or anybody else for that matter, had disappeared from his life. Sometimes he enjoyed these little luxuries – other times, he wished he could find better ways to escape from being the antagonist in the silent film he lived in, that he could at least change up the ways of wasting his time.

But between the bubbles, submerged in the water and the smells of cigarette and liquor, life was even fairly good, sometimes. With his eyes closed, he looked at his own face – the face that belonged to his older self, the man he feared he would once become. He examined the eyes of this stranger, every wrinkle he’s had in the corners of his eyes, his mouth, and the ones between his eyebrows. He looked at his surroundings, smiled at his wife and at his daughter, Sarah, playing on the floor – she was still a little girl, and Leo, at least in most of his dreams, could keep Amy alive.

Then, he would take a look at himself in the mirror, to see himself smile – a mirror stained with dry freckles of toothpaste that only reflected smudged resemblances of bottles and glasses, hanging lopsidedly on the wall, painted yellow by the smoke of Leo’s cigarettes.

Often, it was only a fake, pretended smile; other times, it was a wise, humble one. His favorite kind was the one where he had time to have a word with himself; when he saw this smile, he saw crow’s feet carved deep in his thick, smoke-worn skin. He always smiled back at himself. Those times, he would wink at the tarnished face that looked back at him from the smudged, toothpaste freckled rectangle hanging on the yellow wall of his bathroom, lopsidedly.

Examining the smile of his older self was how Leo decided about his future – cold-headedness and reasons were too real to be true, or in any way, useful.

He had had joyful conversations and there had been long monologues he couldn’t wait to end, and he even blushed and felt ashamed when the scolding was deep. He was his father giving advice he hadn’t asked for, and sometimes he was a young boy, asking if it wasn’t too selfish to buy ice cream from the change he got back from the money his dad give him for a mother’s day bouquet. Sometimes the man in the mirror was too busy, and sometimes he knew the little boy he looked back at needed to find out the answer on his own. There were times when he found peace in these conversations, and sometimes patience was the last advice he wanted to take.

Once a little tear droplet made its way down his cheek, from happiness or sorrow, to swell and then to burst in the corner of his mouth, he laid back in the warm water, relieved: once again, there was proof he could feel.

True, it was a cold, rainy winter night. It was even a silent one. The dance of the neon lights and the rain, the curious sound of the gutter and the smell of the neon puddles, the lazy sound of the streets and every detail, they were all true – but this wasn’t the night for Leo Brown. For him, it was a night when his bubbles of solitude waited to be touched by somebody else’s to burst with. A night to blow a new one, a bigger one, together.

He took a sip of his bourbon, lit another cigarette and kept his eyes closed for a while, and let his bubbles and his thoughts take over his mind and his tired, rusty body.

That night, he didn’t see the approving smile of his future self. He didn’t see anything, only a bright light piercing his paining, blinded eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

The rain on the windows began to knock less obtrusively. The rain drops were now polite, cultured and shy, as if they were wondering what the most courteous way would be to ask for Leo's admission only for a little while; only until it would get a little warmer outside.

On the streets, cars bashed through the puddles, splashing the fresh scents of a dark morning over the street. The first dogs appeared, pulling their heavy eyed owners on their leashes, on their duty to sniff around and growl at the nearest, suspicious, and very possibly, perilous puddles.

Finally, the Christmas lights that were twisted around the trees had come to life, and a few minutes later, the street lights turned off.

It wasn't time yet to expect anything: it was Leo's favorite, his soothing, comforting hour of the day. It was too early for the birds to show up or to even think about them, and too early for the keys to rattle in the café's lock under his balcony; it was too late for the drunken teenagers to fight and for the dogs to investigate the crooked images in the frozen puddles.

He stood outside on his balcony, waiting for the cold to help his bourbon help him: to wake him, to give him a rough idea about an entertaining way to waste his day; an inspiration, something to carefully paint on his to-do list mostly led for decorative purposes. As an exception to the rule, when his routine medication – the bottle of bourbon that hid behind his kitchen curtain – failed to straighten his lines, he even did something: in order to start with a fresh and clean, almost tempting list, some things had to be done, occasionally.

He lit another cigarette and took a walk around his apartment to realize that, in a way and yet again, he had turned into a mother: after he emptied the ashtray and put away the dishes, he collected a few earrings that belonged to a face with a name he never thought should be memorized; he picked up a half-read box of cereals and a dried-out eyeliner from the top of the dusty, old piano that hadn't been played on for decades.

He picked a brown plaid shirt from the back of the chair in his living room, a shirt that may have only been worn a few couple of times since he last felt like doing the laundry – better said, the last time it was truly inevitable to do so.

He turned over his mattress to hide the stains from view.

He was already on the street when the sound of his slamming door finally caught up with him.

As he walked across the street, the booths were still empty. The craftsmen were maybe a coffee and an early fight over money away from loading their cars before they arrived and let the sounds of their potteries and jewelry bring Leo back to life.

The morning only arrived in a shape of truths – it was only a factual praise of the morning. Only the pigeons were awake, and an old man in a tweed jacket and a ragged brown hat who sat on the bench, throwing bread crumbs on the frost glazed ground. He was almost invisible, except for the birds, bouncing their heads at every step they made as they marched towards him, to greet their old friend. He seemed to have not aged ever since the first day Leo discovered him, years ago. Not that he ever paid attention, but he was sure that the same man had been sitting on the same green bench every morning with a bottomless bag of crumbs falling on the ground, one after the other.

The old man didn't seem to bond with the birds, he didn't even appear as someone who even liked them. For him, it must have only been a routine, a phenomenon that would remain unnoticed until the day it would cease to continue, and maybe missed by some for a week or two.

"What has changed, Leo?" Amy's voice arrived from the beak of a white pigeon that just picked up a crumb from the ground. She

shook her head and let the bread fall in her throat. She threw a glance at the old man, unsure if he would notice anything unusual; anything besides his own reflection in the frozen puddle that stretched beneath his feet. He just threw another handful of crumbs on the ground, taking no notice of anything that happened around him.

"I have," Leo said after a long, lung stretching sigh as Amy came closer to him. She picked up another crumb from the ground and looked at Leo.

"I have," he repeated, and walked past the pack of birds. They all fought for their share, except Amy. When she approached the pile on the ground, life froze for a moment as they let her through.

Leo, bored by this scene, continued his way to the river. Amy, having picked up the last pieces of her share, ran after him. A little while later, they were marching together - Amy, silently waiting for Leo to continue and Leo, silently hoping she would finally disappear.

At the river, there were only a few couples kissing each other goodbye before it was time for them to show up at school. "Adults," Leo wondered, "why don't we see the point anymore?"

"Dad, what are you doing here?" he heard another voice coming from the stairs next to him. He couldn't decide if it was a woman yet or just a girl, and there was no one to ask: Amy, after she trotted around and made a few circles, had flown away a while ago. She rested on a branch of a willow tree not very far from them, overlooking the playground where Sarah used to play when she was little, next to the river.

"Sarah, sweetheart," he returned from his short trip to his land of never-answered questions, "it's so nice to hear you." He glanced back to where he left his question, but he knew there was no answer to expect.

"It's...", he continued, "I'm not sure." It took a few moments for Leo to clear his mind. "See that tree over there?" he asked, pointing at a big blue willow. "I know I climbed up there a million times. It just feels like I've never been here."

"No, Dad, I mean... The streets, the people, the place where we live; I know this place, but it's," she tried to find the words that could describe the strange feeling she had, "it looks so different now. Why is everybody," she said, as she discovered why nothing felt right, "Why is everybody so sad?"

"It's... home. This is home, yes," he said with a little more confidence than he'd had a minute ago. "This is just what you think it is. Isn't it beautiful?" he said in the voice of a sad schoolboy thinking about a sixth-grade girl as he is walking home, not noticing the traffic lights. "I'm not quite sure, but I think I went to school over there, somewhere," he said, pointing at the river. "You cross that bridge, look, the one with the flowers on the pillars, behind the dome, then you follow the road under the balconies to the sculpture of... I forgot the chap's name. Anyway. That should be it. That is where I went to school. And there," his voice gained back the faith that the sixth grader may like the little boy, "your mother and I, we used to go there all the time. Especially when it rained. It's a place with lots and lots of swimming pools and whirling pools and water slides where people play chess and eat frybread with garlic and the kids drop their ice cream on the ground and cover their faces in slimey cotton candy to challenge their mothers' patience. You'd love it," he smiled and looked at Sarah. "We had fun. Loads of fun. Well, I did, for sure." Leo made sure to elongate "I" in a higher pitch. "I don't know about your mom, but I think, even though she refused to admit, she did, too. I'm sure she did. Amy..." he smiled again, "she used to be scared of the water slides and she used to scream and panic when her swimming suit slipped off a little when she splashed in the water," he said. His playful smile melted and found itself in restless remembrance. "Call me pathetic, but it still feels like summer when I think about holding her afloat in that pool under the waterfall that pours down from the terrace up there with the parasols and the screaming little girls who the boys used to gun down with their water pistols."

He was lost in the past again.

"Early in the morning," he started over with more enthusiasm, but he cut off himself and for minutes, it seemed that he'd never find his way back to his train of thoughts. "Sarah," he smiled like a shifty teenager, "you were made in that general area. Let's just put it that way," he snickered mischievously.

"Yeah, I don't really need to know about the details, Dad. Gross," she said with a disgusted look and a half suppressed frown that made them both laugh.

"And this was the very steps where your mom and I sat when she first rejected the Sangria," Leo continued regardless. He looked at the willow tree to see if Amy was still sitting there, but she was already gone. "Before she died and became a bird," he mumbled to himself. Even Leo thought it was strange. He very much wished it was true, but he never believed in it enough to say anything back to her. Maybe she flew back to the old man who sat on the bench, he thought.

"But...", Sarah changed her voice once the laughter had died and the rumbling of the river made the silence uncomfortable, "but why is everybody so sad? Are you sad, too? I don't want you to be sad."

"They're not sad, they just... we... we've lost hope. You shouldn't hope, you know? Hey, young lady, don't you raise that eyebrow at me!" he sneered as a warm pool of heartache pressed on his chest and left him with a sorrowful, crooked half-smile.