

IT WAS ALWAYS THIS WAY

- R J Burgess -

It never used to be like this.

The room was dark and dank and cold. The fridge was empty and there was a bailiff notice pinned to its door. The electricity was due to be cut off next week. The gas was already two days gone.

Groaning under a cloud of nicotine vapour, surrounded by a squalor that once would have shocked him, Corin sat at the kitchen table and wondered how it had got this bad.

His sister Leah sat opposite him crying. She had been crying for the last two hours ever since she got here. She didn't even seem to notice how the long drapes of her hair had fallen into his ash tray. She didn't even realise how her tears were making her mascara run into the bags beneath her eyes, turning her face into some sort of freaky inverse clown.

How long had she been here for? An hour? A day? It felt like forever.

Corin bent over the table and flicked the smouldering stub of his cigarette in the general direction of the ashtray. More ash fell amongst his sister's hair. As it did, she stirred.

"I'm so sorry," she said, her words thick with snot in her mouth. "I never meant for this to happen."

"Sure you didn't," Corin replied.

"I just thought... I mean the answer you gave... It made me so angry."

"Business isn't just about money," Corin told her.

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"I know that now."

"Family neither."

"Yes." She palmed away her tears with the flat of her hand. "I wasn't thinking..."

"None of us were," Corin replied.

They were talking about the family business.

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Leah was pregnant to begin with. She told him over the phone.

Corin's sister had always been the hardest working member of the family. She'd set up the family business, King Lear Inc., from literally nothing. She'd spent years building it up into the empire it was today. Five consecutive years of near 80% growth: she was winning awards for business woman of the year all over the place.

Now she was stepping down to take some time for herself. A family, she said, while she was still young enough to have one. It was the only thing she had left to achieve in life.

Corin said he was happy for her.

When Leah told him that she was going to leave the company in the hands of her three brothers, Corin had his doubts. When she told him that she was going to be handing out questionnaires to determine exactly how the company would be divided, he had tried to challenge the idea.

"You don't want to bring money between family," he told her.

But his sister had always been stubborn and her focus was all on the baby now which was growing inside her. She said she wanted the matter resolved and quickly. She wouldn't play favouritism between

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them. This was a family business and she would make her choice in the same way that she would any job hire.

One by one she called her brothers before her to tell her why they should be the one to inherit the business.

Corin's eldest brother Godrick went first. "I helped to network the entire advertising campaign in the last quarter," he boasted, looking every bit the slick marketing specialist that he was. "I single-handedly managed the branding and promotion of our latest product line."

"Well, I managed two teams simultaneously last year during the Earl of Kent crisis," chimed in Roger, the middle brother whose background was in finance. "I managed to not only bring about swift and efficient resolutions to both issues but establish long term alternate revenue streams in the process."

But Corin had refused to go along with his brother's tactics. Job interview or not, they were a family and he wasn't about to let the prospect of a job promotion change that fact.

So he came to his interview dressed in his normal work-day clothes. And when his sister asked him her questions, his reply was as short as it was true:

"I do nothing at King Lear Inc. other than what you tell me to do."

His sister was furious with him. She said Corin's answer called into question his credentials. She said he sounded unmotivated. That he lacked initiative and accountability.

His brothers, sensing an exploitable weakness, were quick to throw in their own opinions. Corin was lazy, they claimed, borderline

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incompetent really. In fact they'd been pulling his weight for the last few years and only hadn't said anything because he was family.

The truth was, he wasn't a good fit for the company.

Corin, unable to believe his ears, was told to pack his things and leave the company the next day. His own sister fired him for incompetence and the family business was split equally between Corin's two older brothers. Leah, furious with Corin for reasons he still didn't fully understand, turned her back on him and went off to have her baby.

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"I'm so sorry!" Leah sobbed again. "So, so sorry."

"You said that already," Corin reminded her.

"I just... How was I supposed to know this was going to happen?"

"They're your family too," he reminded her. "You know how they are. How they've always been."

"I just... The baby..."

Her baby had died during child birth. A miscarriage. Leah looked down at her stomach, still bearing the surgical stitches where the doctors had cut her open to get at the baby. She ran a hand over the wound and started crying again.

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Corin had never been that good with money so it wasn't long after his firing that his creditors were hounding at his door demanding repayments.

Corin tried to find another job but he quickly found all doors closed to him. He didn't know if it was his brothers' doing, or if it was his sister in one final vengeful act as head of King Lear Inc.

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but someone had blackened Corin's name on the job market, turning any would-be employees away with tales of his incompetence.

Corin had no idea what to do. King Leah Inc. was the only place he had ever worked; he had no one else to turn to for credentials. Somehow, he had held out another two months before sheer need alone dragged him back to his brothers, unshaven and stinking of beer, to ask for a job - any job - just so he could pay the rent.

"I'm your brother," he pleaded. "You have to help me!"

But they just ignored him. "Sorry," they replied. "But this isn't a good time for us. Money is very tight at the moment, you understand." They entering into talks with multi-national corporation with whom they were planning a merger. It meant huge structural changes for the company and an all-new board of directors. "Why don't you ask Leah?"

"Sorry," his sister told him the few times she bothered taking his calls. "But this situation is completely out of my hands now. Talk to our brothers."

So Corin had gone back to his bothers again and this time begged them for help.

Again they refused to give Corin a job, but this time at least they offered him something else instead: a gun.

They gave him a gun, ten thousand pounds and a list of comprehensive instructions to be followed at the earliest opportunity. It was, they said, Corin's chance for redemption. Like a fool, Corin had agreed.

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"What should I do, what should I do?" Leah sobbed.

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The cigarette was stubbed out somewhere in the general vicinity of the ashtray and Corin was already reaching into his pocket for another.

"You're still the president of the company," Corin replied.
"Take it back from them."

"I can't!" she said. "The merger means it's all changed now. My old position doesn't even exist anymore! I signed myself down for a three-year absence and by the looks of things there'll be nothing left of King Lear Inc. by the time I get back. What have I done?"

If only she hadn't lost the child, Corin thought. Then she wouldn't care if the business went up in smoke or not. But, for good or ill, Leah's business was all she had left now and it too was dying.

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It never used to be like this.

When the phone rang and it was Leah on the other end, Corin had almost gone back on his word. Six months after casting him aside, she was calling him up and she was in tears. For two hours Corin stood in that filthy pit of a kitchen twirling the phone cord around the butt of the gun as he listened to her tale of woe.

Her partner had left her, she said, come back drunk one day and beaten her senseless. She had miscarried shortly afterwards but the police insisted there was no connection between the events and were refusing to do anything about it.

She'd tried to get back to work straight away to try and get over her grief only to find that her brothers were blocking her. It was their business now, they said, and even if they wanted to let her back they wouldn't have any idea where to fit her. "King Lear Inc.

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has changed," they told her with their sickly sweet smiles. "The whole management structure is different. This isn't really a family business anymore."

In that moment, Leah finally realised what she had done in letting Corin go.

She was sorry, she said, truly sorry. She saw now that he had been the glue of the company all along, that Corin was the one working behind the scenes to make it all work. He was the only one in the family that ever had her back.

And as she said those words, Corin twirled the gun around the phone cord and gritted his teeth over what he was about to do.

He still loved his sister but the last six months had changed him. He was washed up now. A loser who stank of beer and stale cigarettes. The months had changed his sister too. From a steely-eyed businesswoman who was on the top of her game, Leah now resembled some sort of recovering drug addict. She'd lost weight and she cried all the time. She looked on the verge of collapse.

Corin tried to tell himself that it was no real loss. Ten thousand pounds was ten thousand pounds and Corin had bills to pay. He had a list of instructions to follow.

Time to face facts: his brothers had won.

"Come over to mine," he told her, hating himself as he said the words. "We'll talk more then." And then he hung up.

He sat at the kitchen table for some time after that, opening and closing the gun over and over. He only had one bullet for it but one bullet was all he would need according to his brothers. There was

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no way even an idiot like Corin was going to miss from across a kitchen table.

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And yet here she was, blinded by the tears of her grief and it was still as though he didn't exist - Corin, the only sibling that had ever really loved her. As much as his heart grieved at that, he knew what had to be done.

Whispering a silent curse to his brothers, Corin stubbed out his latest cigarette and then reached into his pants for the gun they had given him. Leah wasn't looking. She was too focussed on her grief and her loss even as Corin draw back the hammer and primed himself to fire.

He stared at his sister for one last time; remembered everything that Leah had once been, how she had betrayed him and left him to rot, how he had been so easily won over by his scheming brothers. He even allowed himself a single tear of his own as he pointed the gun straight ahead and slowly pulled the trigger...

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There was a sound like an engine backfiring and the squalid bed-sit was suddenly painted with an all-new coating of gore.

From the midst of her crying, Leah snapped her head up in shock, saw the panorama before her and let out a horrified scream. For there sat her youngest brother Corin, a smoking gun in his bloody hands and the top of his head blown clean off.

And there was a note tucked inside his pocket:

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My dearest Leah, forgive me for I have been weak. You will find
a sum of ten thousand pounds in my wallet that our brothers gave me
to pay for your death. Use it now to win back your life. You are
strong Leah and you can get it all back, I know you can. I love you.

It was always this way.

With love,

Corin