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Black Flowers

Written by Steve Mosby

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BLACK FLOWERS

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It does not happen like this.

If there's one thing that Detective Sergeant Michael Sullivan has learned during twelve years in the police force, it's that little girls do not simply appear. In his experience, the world does not work that way; all he has ever seen, and all he continues to see, is the opposite, the slow disintegration of things that are good and right.

People vanish – especially children. Sometimes they disappear in gradual increments, the decent, hopeful parts of them casually chipped away. Other times, those parts are poked out, suddenly and violently. And occasionally people simply vanish entirely. But however it occurs, those people do not come back, especially the children. Or at least not in any way you would want them to.

No, the world as Michael Sullivan knows it – it only takes.

It is early afternoon, September 1977. Faverton is a sprawl of a holiday town on the east coast. The old village on the hilltop spreads down cobbled streets all the way to the sea front, with its penny arcades and cafés. The road here is embedded with brown, metal tramlines. A slatted wooden promenade stretches along the front, dotted with curled, green benches, wire-mesh bins and beige ice-cream vans. Families stroll slowly along, sometimes approaching the waist-high stone wall and looking out over the beach. The sand is packed flat and hard, broken by

occasional fluffed-up patches where a child has dug. In the distance, the grey sea crumples and folds beneath a white sky bevelled with gulls.

It is an ordinary day with no hint of magic to it. And yet, in spite of Sullivan's experience, it happens like this.

There is an empty stretch of promenade. A tram trundles past. It is so old, and the metal carriage so frail, that you would expect the antennae above, where they track the overhead electrical cables, to crackle and spark, but in fact the only noise is the continuous weary crunch of the metal discs the vehicle grinds through town on. It is mostly empty, and reminiscent of a butler going about daily tasks in a household where all the children have left. The driver, behind the smeared front window, is holding the controls with stiff, unmoving arms, while a conductor waits at the open back corner of the tram, a ticket machine strapped to his chest like a tiny accordion.

The tram does not stop. Nobody gets on or off. But when it has passed, the stretch of promenade is no longer empty.

A little girl is standing there.

She has long, dirty-blonde hair, pulled into rough bunches that rest to either side on her tiny shoulders. She is wearing a blue-and-white checked dress and delicate shoes: both look like something a doll would wear. Her eyes are ringed with darkness and sadness. In front of her, she clasps a small handbag. It is pale brown, leather, and far too large for her – an adult's bag – but she clutches it tightly, as though she has somehow had it for a very long time and it is intensely important to her.

The little girl stands there.

Waiting.

And that is how it happens. She appears on the promenade as though from nowhere: as if the world shifted in its sleep, then woke with an idea so important, which needed to be told so desperately, that the idea became real. And now that idea is standing there, waiting to be discovered.

Waiting for someone to claim it.

*

Sullivan squats down in front of the little girl. His starched trouser leg forms a sharp contour up from his knee and over his thigh. Her small eyes follow him down. Their faces are now at the same height, and he smiles at her, trying to be reassuring.

'Hello there. What's your name?'

The little girl does not respond. The expression on her face is like a shield. She is far too serious for a girl her age and Sullivan knows immediately that something isn't right here.

He looks away for a moment. The woman who noticed the little girl and alerted him is standing, slightly hesitantly, to one side. She is middle-aged, holding her own handbag in much the same way as the girl. Sullivan nods his thanks to her – It's okay; I'll take care of this – and then turns his attention back to the child as the woman walks away.

He doesn't know, at this point, that he'll need to talk to the woman again and attempt to establish the exact circumstances of the girl's appearance here. Although he recognises something is wrong, the idea hasn't quite settled and become real. He's still thinking: she's lost her parents. That's all.

'My name's Mike,' he says. 'What's yours?'

Again, the girl does not reply. But after a moment of staring back at him, she breaks his gaze and looks away, off to one side. And she does say something, but he can't make out what. It's as though she's talking to a ghost, or asking advice from an imaginary friend.

Can I talk to him? Is it safe?

'What was that?' he says.

She keeps looking away. Listening now.

Christ, Sullivan thinks – because he's just realised something else: it really does look like her. Anna Hanson, the little girl who was murdered last year. They are both a similar age, about six years old, and Anna had the same straggly blonde hair. The recognition, coupled with the oddness of the girl's behaviour, makes Sullivan shiver slightly. He has the odd sensation that

this could actually be her, returned to her grieving, terrified parents.

Of course, it can't be, not least because Anna Hanson has already been returned. Her body washed up on the beach: tiny, grey and empty. The similarity is genuine, though, and he feels a sudden and urgent need to look after this little girl and keep her safe.

She looks back at him. In all his twelve years of experience, he has never seen such despair.

'It's okay,' he says. 'I'm a policeman. Have you lost your mummy and daddy?'

'My daddy.'

Her voice is impossibly delicate.

'Well, I'm sure we can find him quickly—'

But he stops. From the flash of terror that appears on the little girl's face, it's obvious that this is not what she wants to hear. Her small body begins trembling slightly.

Instinctively, without considering how she'll react, Sullivan reaches out and rests a gentle hand on her shoulder, feeling the rough fabric of the dress against his palm. The little girl almost flinches, but doesn't. The fear is overridden by an innate, desperate need to be comforted. It is as though she hasn't been touched with kindness or reassurance for quite some time, if ever, and it requires bravery – a leap of faith – for her to believe such a thing is even possible any more.

'It'll be okay, honey,' Sullivan says.

Again, he glances around. There are a few people watching the scene, but most are simply going about their business, either oblivious or confident that nothing is wrong. After all, a policeman is in control of the situation. It is his job to look after people, and he will. That is the assumption.

Sullivan is about to turn back to the little girl and try to do exactly that, when he sees the man and instead he goes still.

Clark Poole.

The old man is walking awkwardly along the pavement

across the street, on the far side of the tramlines. He is slightly hunched, and his cheap coat is stiff with grease over the slight hump of his spine, as though age is gradually forming his whole back into a boil that's soft and wet at the centre. His head is bald and pale, but thin white hair clings to the side, while his face, out of sight now, is wide and unkind. Poole walks with a bound wicker cane that Sullivan suspects, but can't prove for sure, the old man doesn't really need.

Tap tap.

At first, Sullivan doesn't think Poole has seen him. But the old man pauses outside the café, then turns to stare back at him. Poole smiles and gives Sullivan a nod – as he so often does; as he so enjoys doing – before turning back and continuing on his way. Tap, tap. People move for him, more from instinct than manners, and Sullivan fights down the familiar urge to dash across and grab hold of him. If he started shaking the old man, he knows he would never be able to stop.

So he forces himself to watch the old man amble away. Was Poole involved in this somehow? It seems unlikely. After all, he didn't return little girls, did he? He took them away, carefully and precisely, so that it was possible to know but impossible to prove. Regardless, Sullivan knows where the old man lives. He searched the flat after Anna went missing. But there have been times since when he has parked up a little way down the street, in the early hours of the morning, and spent time wondering what he might be capable of doing to the old man.

Sullivan turns back to the little girl.

He notices the handbag again. It is far too grown-up for her. It looks dirty now, as though it has been left outside somewhere, but he has the sense that it might once have been expensive.

'Can I have a look in there, please?'

She hesitates.

'I'll be careful,' he says. 'I promise. You can have it back again afterwards.'

Still unsure. But she does pass it to him.

‘Thank you.’

The zip is stiff: as he suspected, crumbs of dirt block the teeth. When he finally opens it and looks inside, he is expecting to find a small purse, handkerchiefs – keys, perhaps – but the handbag is almost entirely empty.

Except for . . . a flower.

Sullivan reaches carefully in and lifts it free. The stem is fractured and half broken; the petals, which at some point have been pressed, are grey-black.

His fingers tingle.

And there is that feeling again, only now far stronger than before. Something is wrong here. Sullivan looks at the girl’s dirty hair, the odd dress. For the first time, he notices there is the slightest hint of a bruise on her cheek.

The little girl says, ‘Jane.’

‘Is that your name?’

She shakes her head, then motions almost imperceptibly at the flower.

‘That’s Jane. She doesn’t talk to me any more.’

Sullivan stares at her. He does not understand what she means, of course – not yet – but the answer is strange enough to send a chill shivering across his back. The next tram is rattling down the street; he can hear it growing louder. And in front of him, the little girl’s fragile resolve finally disappears entirely and she begins to cry.

She says, ‘Please help me.’

Part One

Chapter One

My father was a writer. I wanted to be one too, so I would have been thinking about him that day anyway, even without what happened later. But for most of the morning, I'd been thinking about goblins and changelings.

Well – and students too, obviously.

It was nearly lunchtime now. I walked round my desk and raised one of the slats in the blinds. Outside, an angle of midday sunlight cut across the flagstones below my office. A stream of new students was flowing past. They looked almost impossibly young. The boys all seemed to be dressed for the beach, wearing shorts and T-shirts. The girls wore floaty summer dresses, enormous sunglasses and flip-flops that slapped at the stone. It was Freshers Week 2010, so the whole campus was one big party. For most of the morning, I'd been able to hear music thudding from the Union building, more of a constant heartbeat than an actual song.

I allowed the slat to click down, then returned to my desk. In comparison to the bright, carnival atmosphere out there, my office was small, drab and grey. The air in here smelled of dusty box files and the rusted metallic radiator that underlined the window. I'd wedged the door open. Ros – my boss – was down at the sports hall handling module admissions, and the common room was deserted. Aside from the thump of the music, and an occasional muffled bang echoing down the corridor, the

only real sound in here was the electrical hum of my old monitor.

Right now, I had two files open. The first was the student records database I'd been stringing out for weeks now, pretending it was far more difficult to construct than it actually was, while the second was the short story I'd been working on all morning instead.

I scanned through it again now.

By my standards, it had turned out pretty weird. At the beginning, a young guy finds out his girlfriend is pregnant. It's an accident: they just got carried away in the moment, then grinned about it afterwards. 'That was stupid, wasn't it?' they say. 'It won't happen to us.' But it does happen to them.

The girlfriend decides she can't have a termination and the guy accepts that, even though it's not what he wants. He tries to be good, but as time goes on he resents her decision more and more – and then he starts to notice hooded gangs huddled on street corners. They're watching him, following him. He gradually imagines the existence of a shadowy crime lord – a kind of Goblin King figure – who is reaching out to him. Like the goblins of fairy tales, these urban equivalents will be more than happy to steal his child away: all the man has to do is wish for it to happen. Eventually, selfishly, he does.

For two days afterwards, nothing happens – enough time for him to doubt it was real – and then the pregnancy mysteriously disappears.

The story ends years later, with the main character encountering one of the hooded minions on a street corner and recognising enough in the boy's face to know it's his son.

Pretty weird, Neil.

It was, but I sort of liked it. And anyway, I was procrastinating too much. Weird or not, successful or not, it was as done as it ever would be. So I saved the Word file, and opened a quick email to my father.

Hi Dad
Hope you're okay – I know it's been a couple of weeks, so I'm guessing everything's going all right? Meant to be in touch. Failed miserably.

Got some news, but in the meantime I wanted you to have a look at this. I don't know whether it's any good or not, but maybe you can have a read if you get the chance? I'll give you a bell properly soon and we can chat.

Love always,
Neil

I took a deep breath and pressed send.

Oddly, I felt nervous. My father had published twenty novels over the years and was always honest about the technical side of my writing – that was why I sent him things in the first place. It wasn't that; I wasn't quite sure *what* it was. Just that, as I watched the email indicator circling, I wished I could take it back.

Then it changed to a tick.

That was that. My story had gone out into the world.

Forget about it.

When I checked my watch, it was close to twelve. So I minimised the email program, locked up the office and headed out.

Ally was working at Education now, but today she had a conference on at the Union Hall building. It was on the far side of campus, so I had to follow the throng of students right through the thudding heart of everything.

The combination of sunshine and the time of year made it feel like the first day of a festival. Outside the Union, the grass was bright and sunlit, and everyone seemed to be sitting around with plastic glasses of foamy beer. The tarmac around the steps was a multicoloured carpet of discarded flyers; speakers were balanced on the upstairs window ledge, pumping out music. A

skinny boy in sunglasses and a pork-pie hat was standing up there with his foot on the ledge, shouting what sounded like static and occasional words through a megaphone, haranguing passers-by.

Despite not being a part of the carnival, I knew there were a million worse places to work. Not only was it relaxed enough for me to wear jeans and trainers to the office, there were also lots of times like today when I could sneak some writing in. Technically speaking, I was even being paid for it. But there's nothing like working at a university to remind you how old you're getting, even when, at twenty-five, you actually aren't. It got worse every September, with the arrival of a new and even more fresh-faced cohort. You feel like a bunch of old flowers, maybe not quite past your sell-by date yet, but already beginning to wilt in the corner, and nobody's choice.

All I'd ever wanted to do was write. My father made only the vaguest of livings from it – his books skipped across too many genres, the publication dates a few too many years apart – and, growing up, I was dimly aware of our relative poverty in comparison to other kids' families. That didn't really matter. I was brought up to love books and stories: we always had plenty of the former, and, with my father around, an infinite number of the latter. There was never anything else I'd wanted to do except be a little bit like him.

But I wasn't.

Since coming to work here, I'd submitted four books to publishers, and all of them had been knocked back with the solid wooden *tock* of a well-hit baseball. Fine. But as much as you tell yourself you need to learn your craft and serve an apprenticeship, all those bleary early mornings and late nights . . . they start to get to you. You have to take it seriously, so it's basically like working two jobs. And for me, trying to fit real life around that was getting hard. Maybe it was starting to get impossible. Maybe I was going to have to start facing facts.

Ally was supportive, of course, but it still felt like there were

too many plates to keep spinning and that pretty soon I was going to have to let something fall. It wouldn't be my relationship with her. I loved her far too much to let that go. So maybe it was writing that would have to get shelved. It was a depressing thought.

But I would do that for her. I really would.

She was already outside the Union Hall, waiting for me on the steps. It was easy to spot her amongst the students – she had dyed-red hair, for a start. But she'd also made an effort for the conference and was wearing a smart black dress and heels. Away from work, she wore baggy jeans, trainers and T-shirts, and normally looked somewhere between a punk and a Bash Street kid; you'd half expect to look down and see her holding a skateboard. A casual observer right now might nod and say she scrubbed up well, but a smart one would realise she was beautiful in anything. Either might wonder what the hell she was doing with me.

'Hey there, you,' I said.

'Ah. *Finally*. Keeping me waiting, Dawson?'

'Keeping you on your toes, more like.'

She went up on them now to give me a kiss, putting her hands on my shoulders. At first glance, Ally looked small and fragile. She was actually slim and muscled, the kind of girl that might surprise you at arm-wrestling, and would certainly try. The first time we'd ended up in bed together, a year ago now, both of us as drunk and surprised as the other, I'd barely have been able to escape if I'd wanted to.

'Come on,' she said. 'I'm starving.'

'Can't have that.'

We went to The Oyster Bar in the Union. It was called that because the bar was down in the centre, glistening with mirrors, then surrounded by rising, circular ridges of white seats and tables. We found a space, and, while we waited for the food to arrive, chatted about our mornings over the mingle of conversation around us.

As time went on, though, it was obvious that she was distracted: not entirely interested in the small talk. She was asking questions but didn't seem to be listening to the answers, and answering mine without saying much. But then, it's difficult to do small talk when the shadow of big talk is looming over you both.

'Okay,' I said eventually. 'What are you thinking?'

'Nothing.'

'You're thinking something.'

'All right then, I am. Maybe I'm building up to it.'

'About the baby?' I guessed.

But our food arrived, so I leaned back to allow the waitress space to slide the plates onto the table. Ally hooked a strand of hair behind her ear and picked up her knife and fork.

She said, 'I've made a decision.'

'That you're keeping it.'

'Yes.' She nodded around the bar. 'I know it's not wonderful fucking surroundings for this conversation, but I wanted to tell you as soon as I was sure.'

I did my best to smile.

'I already knew,' I said.

'I just don't think I could *not* go through with it.'

She looked at me now, and it was like an armed conflict was going on behind her eyes.

'I know,' I said. 'I love you.'

'I love you too. But it's going to change everything.'

'It'll be okay.'

I did my best to sound convincing. Even though I'd been sure what her decision would be, hearing it out loud still made it feel like the bottom had dropped out of my fucking world. Obviously, I wasn't going to tell her that.

'It'll be okay,' I said again. '*We'll* be okay.'

'Promise?'

How can you promise anything like that? We'd only found out a week ago, and I'd barely had time to get my head round it.

The idea still wasn't real; it was impossible to imagine what *everything changing* was going to involve for me, for her, for us. Even so, I reached out and rubbed the back of her hand. Around us, the clinks and clatters in the bar seemed to have faded away almost to nothing.

I promised.

Back home later, I took a sip of ice-cold white wine, and stared at the screen of my laptop. Below my makeshift desk, the printer *chittered*. Paper stuttered out of the front, landing face up on the floor. The story I'd written, printing out in reverse order, the end working its way steadily back to the beginning. If only everything in life was so simple to undo.

My front room was my bedroom. Outside the window beside me, I could see the familiar neon row of late-night takeaways and off-licences across the road. I lived in a converted house, which had been divided by the landlord into two studio flats. The entire second floor – all three rooms of it – was mine. My neighbour had the first floor: he was an Argentinean student who didn't seem to do much besides listen to action films very loudly at random times of the day and night. We shared the stairwell and the communal front door, which was squeezed in-between a newsagent and a hairdressers. As I arrived home after work, I could usually hear the blow dryers through the thin wall and smell, just faintly, scorched hair.

It wasn't great. It wasn't even particularly safe. Round the back of the building, the door to the cellar was half broken. If you were determined enough to push through the rotting litter there, and then the broken furniture in the basement, you could get all the way up to my personal front door without busting a lock. Fortunately, I didn't have anything worth stealing. There was only my cheap laptop, which normally lived in a drawer beneath a pile of T-shirts – surely beyond the imagination of any thief.

The printer *chittered* to a halt, and I was left with the

gunshots and explosions from below. They were in full effect tonight – the floor vibrating beneath my feet. It was possible to imagine an actual war was occurring down there. I sipped the wine, then picked up the pages, tapped them into line on the desk, and read them again.

Pretty weird.

And pretty harsh too.

But stories are allowed to be, so long as they're honest.

For example, my father's last book was called *Worry Dolls*. It was about a small village, and a lonely young boy with a father who beats him and his mother. A doll maker teaches the boy how to make a worry doll – a little figurine fashioned from pegs and coloured cloth. At night, you tell the doll all your fears and place it under your pillow where it looks after them on your behalf, so you can sleep soundly. The boy makes a monster. His doll has used matchsticks poking from its back like burnt wings, and toenail clippings for claws. And that night, when the father is drunk and going to kill the whole family, the creature comes to life and rips him to shreds.

That story works on its own terms, but the book's about much more than that. The narrator of *Worry Dolls* is a very old man who witnessed the events first-hand. His wife was very sick at the time, and the doll maker taught *him* how to make a worry doll as well. The man created it in the shape of his wife, and told it that he was terrified of dying alone. In his case, the magic didn't seem to work, because his wife died anyway. And yet, on his deathbed at the end of the book, he realises the ghost of his wife has been sitting beside him the whole time, waiting for him to finish, and when he dies she takes his hand and they leave together.

Dad began writing *Worry Dolls* two years ago, when my mother was fighting cancer for the final time. It was the last battle in a long war, and he finished the novel just after she died.

At one point, the doll maker tells the boy:

It doesn't really matter how tatty or incomplete it is. All that matters is that it's yours.

And to my father, stories served exactly the same purpose as worry dolls, except he confided his fears and troubles in words on a page. That book contained all the emotions he would never have said to my mother out loud. Rather than breaking down and confessing his own pain – that he was scared of living and dying without her – he had concentrated on looking after her. Being selfish in his writing had allowed him to be the opposite in real life.

That was what I'd done. My story was a dumping ground for all the miserable, negative shit I was feeling deep down: the stuff I knew wasn't fair and which I would never say out loud to Ally. Obviously, this was going to be way harder for her, and require at least as many sacrifices and compromises as it did for me. So the guy on the page could seethe with stupid, childish resentment on my behalf, and I could get on with being a supportive partner, a good person. Close as I got to that anyway.

I finished the wine.

Even so, it did seem harsh – and I had another idea. I picked up a pen and scribbled at the end of the last page:

Regret.
Maybe guy changes his mind and has to fight to get child back?
A descent into hell?

I stared at that for a moment, thinking it through.

Maybe that would end up better. More satisfying.

More wine. I stood up. The night was young, after all, and fuck it – if you couldn't get drunk on the day you find out you're going to be a father, when could you?

I was heading through to the kitchen to explore that question more thoroughly when my phone rang. It was the landline: chirruping away in the corner by the bed. It surprised me; I'd almost forgotten it was there. Nobody ever called on it. My friends were all texters or emailers.

I put the empty glass down by the computer and walked over.

'Hello?'

'Hello. Is that Neil?'

It was a woman's voice, but not Ally.

'Yes.' I sat down on the bed. 'This is Neil.'

'Oh good. This is Marsha Dixon. I'm your father's agent.'

It took me a second, but then I thought: *Ah, yes*.

I'd met Marsha a handful of times, and found a mental picture of her now. A woman in her fifties, with grey hair in double plaits, like a schoolgirl. Very bohemian. When I was much younger, my father had explained to me that a lot of the people in publishing were *flamboyant*, and for a while I'd imagined he meant some weird variety of exotic creature, distantly related to flamingos. The last time we'd met, Marsha air-kissed me to either side, and smelled of strong perfume and wine. All of the book-length manuscripts I'd finished had passed – anonymously – across her desk and been returned. I'd actually held one of them up to my nose, checking for perfume. Nothing.

'Hi Marsha. What can I do for you?'

She paused, then sounded distraught:

'It's your father, Neil. I'm afraid he's missing.'