



## JAY MCGUINNESS

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Jay McGuinness is a British singer, songwriter and actor best known as a vocalist with boy band *The Wanted*. He won the thirteenth series of BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing*. In recent years, McGuinness has forged a career in musical theatre. *Blood Flowers* is his explosive debut YA novel.

# **BLOOD FLOWERS**

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An explosive romantasy of love, witchcraft, betrayal and murder.

Seventeen-year-old Bear lives in the walled town of Calleston - a place of stark divide between the rich and poor. Living down in Cobblestone, Bear is painfully conscious of the inequalities between him and residents of Roofside.

When the town's annual Field Day - an event during which those who've recently come of age test their Sinsen-growing capacities - shows Bear to have unprecedented abilities, he's hurtled into the upper echelons of society and everything he's ever wanted is within his grasp. But it soon becomes apparent, that it's not all he expected it to be.

He finds himself existing amidst an uncaring, callous people, concerned only with themselves, living in a society in which corruption is rife. Finding himself unwillingly entangled with the Overlord's beautiful but spiteful daughter, Bear is forced to make decisions which may jeopardize everything he's dreamed of - or risk the lives of the people he once lived amongst.

## BLOOD FLOWERS

### PROLOGUE

*He's clearly uncomfortable, she thought.*

Townpeople were always uncomfortable touching strangers. They stood at the edge of the city wall and looked out over the endless, empty fields. It wasn't cold, but it was blustery, and so she stood close to him. Close, but not close enough that their bodies touched. She was keen that he see himself as her protector and not her guard.

However, this one mustn't fall in love with her. That always made things tricky.

The crowd beneath them was in high spirits. It seemed to be a celebration of some sort. The rather dishevelled people packed tightly down below the wall were clearly having a good time. Banging drums, dancing and singing raucously. It looked like a pickpocket's dream to her.

The folk that surrounded the pair up on the wall were a little better dressed. Men and women jostled politely for a better view at the front, but nobody dared get too close once they saw the ruby-red uniform her protector wore. He stood a little stiffly. Good. The awkward ones were more easily manoeuvred. He cleared his throat.

"I didn't introduce myself. My name is Aber. Watchman Aber."

*Here we go, she thought.*

"Elsbeth," she lied. May the name grant her protection.

"Well Elsbeth, it looks like we're right on time."

He looked rather sad, she thought, but maybe that was just his eyes.

She followed where the dark eyes were looking. High above where they stood, among glinting rooftops, a golden flag pole extended out into a clear blue sky. Below the pole, dotted along the marble parapet, stood a smattering of distant figures dressed in a dazzling array of yellows and oranges. The rooftop residents strolled in front

of enormous, fragmented windows that glittered in the sunlight, or idled in the shade of the sweeping cloisters. Their surroundings made where the pair of them were standing look rather shabby.

She rather liked that. They were in the middle of the pack.

At the bottom of the pole, behind a gleaming balustrade, a young man in Watchman garb began hoisting a large white flag into the air. The crowd below began chattering excitedly.

She frowned. A white flag. Did that mean...?

“Surrender?”

He frowned right back at her and then huffed out a short laugh. “You haven’t seen the flag before? Keep your eyes on it.”

The material flapped loudly in the wind as it was drawn to the top of the pole. The crowd hushed as crisp white cloth rose up into deep blue.

She glanced at Watchman Aber, who was still studying her face. He gestured for her to continue looking upwards. The flag snapping back and forth in the wind was the only sound for a long moment. Then, without warning, and in the blink of an eye, the cloth flooded a deep and unmistakable red.

She gasped. Watchman Aber’s dark eyes crinkled as a wide smile spread over his face. The people below erupted into loud cheers, and from somewhere amongst them, the various drums began beating fast in unison.

“Was that...?”

“Just a trick.” He said it almost defensively.

“Nothing unnatural. They dip the material in something before they hoist it out. It reacts to the air. Or the light maybe. I forget.” He hadn’t stopped looking at her the whole time. He was easy to read.

She kept her eyes on the flag. The rapid drumming below endured. He cleared his throat again and continued.

“Just a trick. But I love watching it through new eyes, so thank you.”

She turned to look back out over the empty fields. She’d better stop

all this talk of eyes and love.

“What does it mean, the flag?”

He cocked his head to one side, the way a dog might. “Wait. You’re not from this town at all, are you?”

She held her face as blank as she could.

She needed to tread carefully. The drums continued. He sensed her unease.

“It’s OK. Whatever you were running from” – he took a hurried look up at the folk lounging on the roof – “I don’t need to know.”

She unclenched her jaw. He carried on.

“Field Day is a day of new beginnings... You ... you look like you could use a fresh start, Elsbeth.”

She breathed. Even in death, sweet Elsbeth was still protecting her.

“The power of a name,” she whispered.

“The what?”

“So, what *does* it mean? The flag turning red?”

“Well, it’s supposed to signify a good harvest.” He paused a moment. “Truthfully, it turns red every year, good harvest or not. But really it’s the signal for the new bloomers to start the first bloom. If you liked the flag, you’ll love this.”

She gazed out over the fields where people were dotted about, spaced maybe fifty paces apart. Some wore wide-brimmed hats. Each wore white and each had both hands placed over their eyes. Some of them appeared to be muttering to themselves.

The racing drums stopped.

The crowd below them hushed.

As one, the people in the field lowered their hands from their closed eyes. They lifted their faces to the sky.

She saw now that they were all young, newly adult. Some held their hands on their chests. Some let their arms drop to their sides.

The drums began again. A slow beat that throbbed out over the

fields. The closest in the field was a girl with brown hair. Very fine hair and very long. It flowed around her like silk as she began to turn elegantly on the spot, the curves of her body soft and full. Her arms opened delicately outwards, like a bird stretching its wings. Behind her, others began going through their own set of motions. Some strong and others tender, even tentative.

As she watched, she sensed that this moment, these actions, were personal to each soul. It was like watching someone undress. This was beginning to feel... what was the word Aber had used? *Unnatural*. She shivered.

She felt her heartbeat quicken.

She placed her hand on his forearm. They watched together.

The girl with the fine hair smiled a sweet, closed smile. Her whole body leaned to one side like a sapling in the wind. Her hair wafted like a sheer curtain. The drum was a heartbeat. The girl extended her arms outwards and to one side. Her fingers seemed to play an instrument that nobody could see.

And then, as quiet and as unnerving as bleeding, neat rows of deep red flowers surfaced from the ground below her twirling fingertips. Twisting and unfurling into the light. An unrelenting scarlet eruption that continued to extend as the young girl let her hands drift in front of her. More red petals bloomed where her arms flowed. The girl seemed to sigh. Her closed smile opened wide. As did her arms.

Like blood in water, the red bloom spread far and wide. Each person out in the field began to cultivate their own pools. A red tide.

She couldn't believe her eyes. Elsbeth had been right. After all this time. She had found it. *Magic*.

Springing in a corner of the land thought long dead. As simple and as clear as morning.

She was far too scared to do anything about it.

She felt a tear roll down her cheek.

She looked up at Aber.

He was so foolish not to see it for what it was.

He couldn't see magic because he didn't want to. Or, maybe, he was afraid to see it.

He was easy to read.

He looked at her as if he had discovered a magic of his own.

*Oh Lord. He's clearly falling in love.*