



# WONDERLAND

JUNO DAWSON

Quercus

QUERCUS CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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## AUTHOR NOTE

*Wonderland* is a work of fiction but deals with many real-life issues including mental health, self-harm, sexual assault and drug use.

Support on these topics can be found via the organisations listed at the back of this book.

Love Juno x

*To Other Max*

*Alice! A childish story take,  
And with a gentle hand,  
Lay it where Childhood's dreams are twined  
In Memory's mystic band,  
Like pilgrim's wither'd wreath of flowers  
Pluck'd in a far-off land.*

Lewis Carroll – All in the Golden Afternoon

Sometimes

I

dream

that

I'm

falling.

I fall and fall  
light as a lullaby  
my fingernails clawing at thin air.

Blue sky  
above and below  
down and down  
down  
and down.

And it's funny because  
in real life  
when I saw the woman fall  
it was all over in a second  
and her head cracked like an egg  
on the kerb.



## ALICE'S INESCAPABLE FATE

Wake up, Alice.

The nasal voice finds its way to me in the honeycomb of my daydream.

I don't remember nodding off, but I was somewhere far lovelier.

I open my eyes and see the silhouette of Flossy Blenheim looming over me, her frizzy mane of hair like a halo. Behind her, marigold afternoon sun bakes the top of my head as I snooze on the desk, my folded arms for a pillow.

'Can I help you?' I say, annoyed at having been so rudely awoken.

'Ms Grafton wants to see you in her office. Again. Good luck.'

Uh-oh. I've no *Get Out of Jail Free* cards left. Oh, worse things happen at sea, and I've had a fair innings. I think, this time, I might really be expelled. And what a terrible shame when the poetry corner of the Upper School library is *such* a premium spot for a nap.

'Time is ticking,' Flossy says sniffily.

Isn't it always? 'Then I shan't delay her further.' I gather my books into my army surplus satchel and give Flossy, fascist handmaiden, a curt nod.

The cloisters of St Agnes are rather lovely without anyone else around. At this time of the day, most girls are in fifth period, bellies full of whatever beige shortcrust stodge they served in the dining hall at lunch. A ghost of garlic and cabbage lingers, and I can't help but wonder if garlic and cabbage pie was on the menu. There are no lows to which British cuisine will not stoop.

If this is death row, I'll milk it, idling through the handsome redbrick arches and ornamental gardens. I shall say this for my soon-to-be alma mater, it's certainly very pretty. Sunshine splatters down on the courtyard, illuminating the veiled marble statue of the school's namesake: the patron saint of chastity and virgins. Ironic, really, that St Agnes is presently Ground Zero for a particularly virulent strain of chlamydia. Good thing Aggy is also the patron saint of gardening.

From inside the classrooms, I hear teachers barking instructions; a screeching violin recital and a very hammy rehearsal of *Antigone*. I take a moment, enjoying the sun on my face. You can almost feel the freckles emerging some days.

I reach the Coulter Building and sigh deeply as I push the heavy doors. Time to take the plunge, I suppose. Can't avoid my fate a second longer and there's only so many bullets one can dodge. Coulter smells freshly polished, my Docs echoing down the endless wood-panelled halls.

The Principal's office is near the front of the school, where she has a personal secretary. I hover for a moment at Jean's desk. Jean and I go way back.

'Ahem.' I politely clear my throat.

Jean, a human cobweb, looks up at me with watery grey eyes. I wonder sometimes if she's actually a long-departed spirit who

happens to haunt this desk. ‘Take a seat, Alice.’

I do so on the familiar old sofa: Frankenstein’s monster, all bolts and green leather. I take out my grandpa’s brass fob watch and ping it open. This watch sailed all over the world when he served in the navy. He always told me he’d won it arm-wrestling a one-eyed Triad member in Hong Kong, although I remain doubtful of that. Regardless, now it’s mine and I love it. With heavy eyelids, I watch the second hand go round and around, and I find it soothingly hypnotic as I await the verdict. I shouldn’t, given I rather suspect time is something I’m rapidly running out of.

If I squint, the watch looks like a face.

I suppose that’s why they call it a clock face, imbecile.

‘Miss Dodgson?’

I snap out of the trance. The novelty of being a Miss never gathers dust.

‘Ms Grafton is ready for you now.’

I click the pocket watch shut and stow it back inside my blazer. I feel it tick-tick-ticking against my chest, playing my ribs like a xylophone.

The sofa wheezes as I push myself up. I catch sight of myself in the gilded mirror and smooth my kilt, straighten my tie – not that a tie can save my neck. I tug at the hem of my kilt so I don’t get admonished and/or slut-shamed.

My Doc Marten soles, much the same as my soul, are worn thin and parp with every step to the office door. I give a polite knock.

‘Come in.’

I enter Grafton’s office, which I oft think is deliberately

intended to intimidate the younger ladies of St Agnes. With its oak walls and glowering portraits of former heads it has all the appeal of stepping into an iron maiden. It's little wonder Grafton's demeanour is always so dour. Perhaps I shall buy her the jauntiest spray-paint-pink orchid in M&S by way of a parting gift.

'Take a seat, Alice.'

I slip into my usual spot.

Today Grafton is wearing a salmon Harris tweed that rather clashes with her strawberry-blond hair. She's something of a squirrel, or perhaps a chipmunk. Certainly the sort of rodent to stockpile nuts in her cheeks.

'You know what I'm going to say,' she begins, making semi-circular arcs in her swivelling chair.

'Then you hardly need say it,' I reply as sweetly as I can.

Five years we've been playing this game of chess. I mean, she must, on some level, enjoy it, or she'd have cut me free as a Second Former. 'Alice ...'

'Sorry.' I purse my lips and mime locking them shut. For good measure, I toss the imaginary key over my shoulder in the direction of the bin.

She opens a leather file approximately the size of a telephone directory. My criminal record. 'Mrs Beech tells me you haven't attended a single chapel this half term.'

'Well, Ms Grafton, I'm keeping my spiritual options open and—'

She cuts me off cold. '*And* you leave me with no choice but to issue a formal warning about your hair *again*.'

I play with a faded turquoise lock. It's long now, although I

keep my fringe grazing my eyes, ever-convinced it goes some way to hiding my fivehead. ‘What?’ I ask innocently.

‘It’s *blue*.’

If my hair isn’t blue, how will anyone know I’m transgender?

‘Natural colours only,’ she says for the millionth time.

I smile slightly. ‘Ms Grafton, I think I left *natural* behind years ago, don’t you?’

She stiffens in her chair. ‘I can’t make exceptions for you, Alice.’

Although she has, many times. I don’t think Ms Grafton is a fully committed transphobe, but she wasn’t exactly rolling out a red carpet for the first ever trans girl to attend St Agnes back when I started. She was certainly more supportive than some of the governors: fossils, dinosaurs and *Sunday Times* readers the lot of them. Sometimes I wonder if what she actually resents is the fact she’s not allowed to advertise my mishap gender to make the school look more woke. She remains the only person here who knows all my skeletons by name. And there are so many to count. She turns the page in the ossuary.

‘Your grades are at rock bottom.’

‘Yes. And I think that’s rather unfair.’

‘You do?’

‘Had I turned in the assignments, I expect I’d have done quite well on them. It seems unjust to grade non-existent essays so poorly.’

I think I see her shield a hint of a smile by pretending to wipe her lip. ‘Alice. You’re one of the brightest girls at St Agnes ...’

I can’t and shan’t argue with that. It’s truly a curse more than

a blessing. Oh, how I wish I could goldfish through my school career: turn up, sit, gossip, eat, sit, go home, forget.

‘When you transferred here, you came with a flawless academic record ... even with everything you were going through. Your grades were exemplary for your first few terms and then ... well, I don’t know. If only you could apply your brilliant mind to what you’re actually supposed to be doing, you could go so far ...’

‘Where?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Where, precisely, could I go?’ I ask.

‘Wherever you want! With a top-flight education from St Agnes, the world would be your oyster. Alice, you’re the very definition of potential. You already proved you could be anything you wanted to be.’

What’s that supposed to mean? I successfully fought off my gender, so getting through Oxford should be a cakewalk? If only.

When I say nothing, she continues. ‘Obviously you’ve been ... unwell ... but it has been a year, and your mother tells me the therapy is going well and ...’

‘Yes,’ I say quickly. ‘I am feeling much better, thank you.’

She makes what I can only describe as lazy jazz-hands. ‘Then why haven’t your grades improved?’

I refrain from telling her that ‘my grades’ weren’t my primary motivation in recovery. It’s honestly a miracle I’m still breathing. Can’t we celebrate that instead? They ought to make certificates: *Congratulations, Alice! You survived another week!* Gold stars all round.

I say nothing. My grades haven't improved because I don't care for them to. I don't. I just don't care. It's a con, you know. School, exams, grades. All ways of keeping us battery hens. And it's a class thing. You don't need grades when you have strings, and so education is a carrot dangling over a treadmill to stop the proletariat from revolting. *If you get all your exams you can go to Oxford where Little Lord Xanax is already sitting in your seat. He might let you sit on his lap if you're lucky.*

Grafton sighs and slaps my folder shut, jolting me out of my thoughts. 'Alice! Are you listening to a word I'm saying! This is enormously frustrating. I shall have to speak to your mother. Is there a good time to contact her?'

'I'm afraid that will be difficult. She's on tour again.'

'Ah yes, I've been meaning to read her new one.'

'The husband did it,' I say at once. 'I mean, I haven't actually read it, but he almost certainly did.' My father's absconion eleven years ago, leaving my mother penniless with two infant daughters, seems to have cut deep creative scars. I haven't read *all* of my mother's books, she really does churn them out, but the husband is *always* at least *partly* responsible for the corpse that's uncovered within the first five pages.

Another sly smile. 'And when will she be back?'

'Well, she has to work her way up North America and Canada. She's presently in Texas.'

Grafton is sighing so much I can't help but think she's slightly asthmatic. 'Very well.'

'Am I dismissed?'

'Not so fast. I wanted to talk about what happened in the Blume common room.'

Sometimes your face flinches before you can seize control of the muscles. Grafton, no doubt, picks up on this tic.

‘Alice, we’ve had our issues but violent outbursts aren’t usually your style.’ A good-cop tilt of the head. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Nothing.’

‘It must be something. Lucy Prendergast told me you had to be held back from Genie Nugent.’

I look her in the eye. ‘Genie Nugent is a simpering idiot and a liar to boot.’

‘Name-calling, Alice?’

It *is* beneath me, but deeply satisfying nonetheless. I shake my head slightly.

‘What lie did she tell?’

I don’t want to say it aloud in case it makes it true. ‘That Bunny Liddell killed herself.’

And now it’s Grafton’s turn to flinch. ‘Balderdash,’ she says after a moment.

‘That’s what I said. Only with different vocabulary and also my fist.’

‘Tea?’ She goes to pour herself a cup from a floral pot with a chipped gold spout.

‘No, thank you.’ I would kill for a tea, but I won’t give her the satisfaction.

Grafton plops one pink sugar cube into her cup and stirs it in. ‘Alice, if I’ve learned one thing during my tenure at St Agnes it’s to ignore idle gossip.’

Me too. I don’t for a single second believe Lexi Volkov is raising ponies on a ranch in Colorado either.

Grafton continues. ‘Bunny has ... taken time away before ...



and she's always come back. Safe and sound.'

*Take your time, Alice, you need to learn some patience.*

Take your time.

Impossible, I think. Time is not ours to take or hold, pour or contain; it isn't solid, liquid or gas. Sometimes – some time – I wonder about who set time. Who decided sixty seconds make a minute, sixty minutes an hour, twenty-four hours a day? The Earth, the sun and the moon very much do their own thing, but I think it's interesting that man (and I'm almost certain it was a man, no woman would have the deluded self-confidence to claim mastery of the universe) tried to regiment the terrifying globe of fire above our heads. Curiouser still that we all go along with it so obediently.

But I digress.

Bunny.

'We were supposed to meet,' I say quietly, looking up at Grafton. I haven't told anyone that, not even Dinah.

Ms Grafton takes off her glasses. 'I wasn't aware you were close with Bunny. She's not in your circle of friends.'

That would be difficult. I have only one friend and two people do not a circle make. We're more of a line.

I shrug. I'm not going to soil the memory of *that* night with wet clay words for my head teacher. *Previously on 'Alice's Adventures'...* A replay bursts across my mind's eye in vivid technicolour: the waltzers; her honey-blond curls strewn across her face; the violet glitter on her eyelids; the fillings in her back teeth as she laughed; the skinhead who spun us faster as we screamed. They're red hot pokers to torture my poor heart are those memories. I suppose I must like the tummy flip.

'Alice?'

'We didn't know each other that well. We don't.' The truth.

'She'll be fine,' Grafton says dismissively. 'The police and her parents aren't overly concerned at this stage. It's only been a week.'

In any other world, an eighteen-year-old vanishing without trace for a week would be cause for great alarm, but this is London high society. Last summer, so it's said, Bunny Liddell flew to her parents' beach house in Ibiza for the whole of August without telling anyone until she turned up on a podium at Pacha. The winter before that she was found, after a frantic search, in her aunt's Chamonix ski lodge toasting marshmallows with Lady Louise Windsor.

Bunny goes.

And comes back.

But I may well have been the last person to see her. Or the second-to-last person to see her alive.

Oh, it aches.

I so clearly remember waking up in the king-size hotel bed, and being the only person in it.

Praise for **CLEAN**

Written with verve and wit ...  
it's one to just enjoy – STYLIST

An emotional freight train of a novel – HEAT

Addictive – THE POOL

As bold and gritty as it is fabulously  
glossy and readable, it's a provocative,  
important read – OBSERVER

Compulsively readable – GUARDIAN

Gossip Girl goes to rehab...  
Clean hits the spot – i NEWSPAPER

Sharp, gripping and tender – ATTITUDE

Compelling – FINANCIAL TIMES

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literature that still portrays modelling as  
the stuff of dreams – GUARDIAN

Heartbreaking, painful, and worth every second ...  
you won't be able to put it down  
– HAPPY MAGAZINE

ALSO BY JUNO DAWSON

FICTION

*Margot and Me*

*All of the Above*

*Under My Skin*

*Say Her Name*

*Cruel Summer*

*Hollow Pike*

*Clean*

*Meat Market*

NON-FICTION

*The Gender Games*

*Mind Your Head*

*This Book Is Gay*

*Being a Boy*

*What Is Gender? How Does It Define Us?*

*What's the T?*