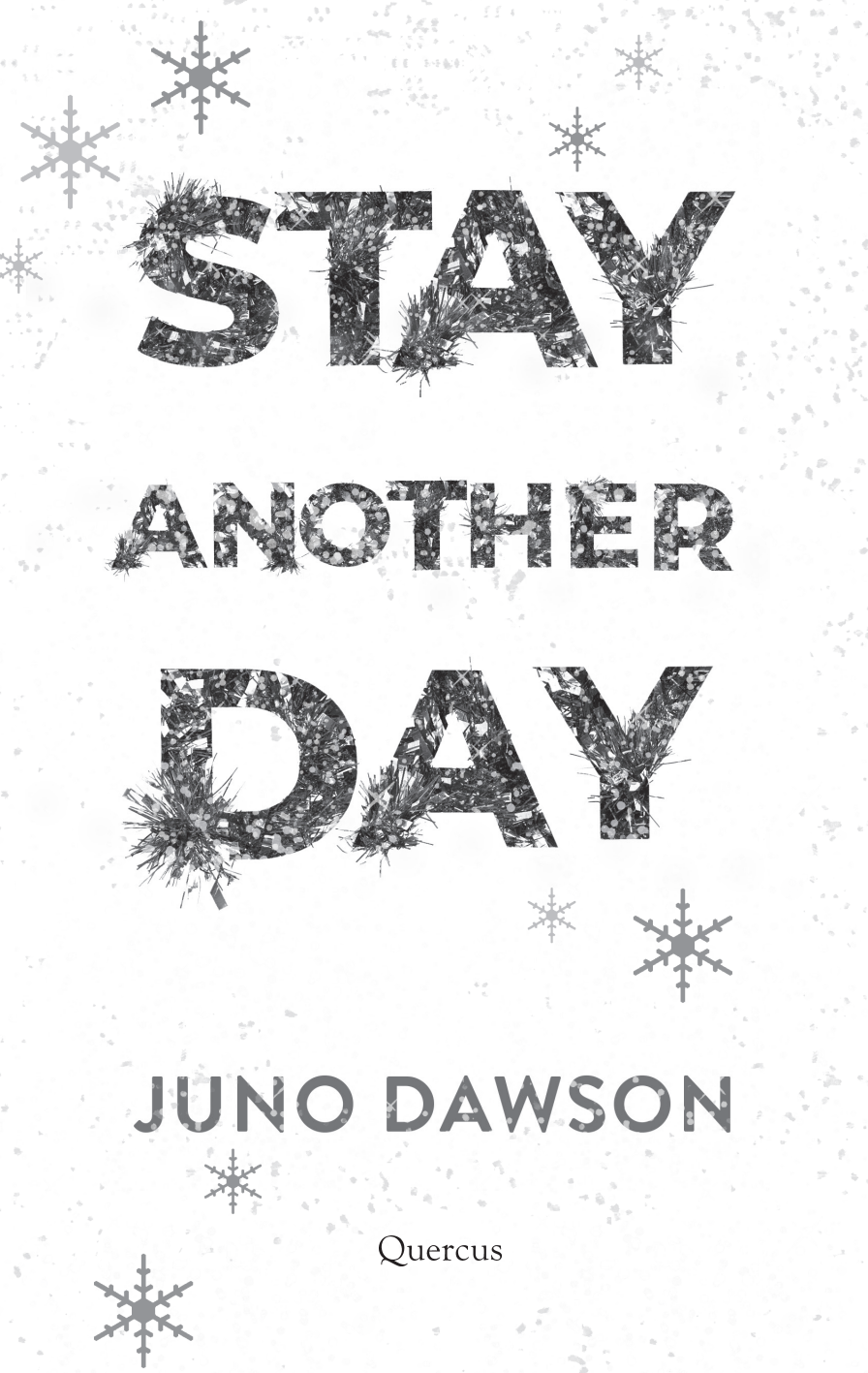


JUNO DAWSON

Quercus

QUERCUS CHILDREN'S BOOKS
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AUTHOR NOTE

This book is a work of fiction but includes subject matter that some readers may find triggering, including conversations about eating disorders and self-harm.

Further guidance can be found at the back of the novel.

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For my sisters, Joanne and Sarah Lea




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The house on Arboretum Road had seen 120 Christmases since its completion. With the ever-shortening days and a chill about its square shoulders, it knew another could not be far away.

Sure enough, as a milky winter sun set behind the rooftops of Edinburgh, for the first time that year, the house's lights came on. Ping, ping, ping! *First the trees in its front garden, and then a crown of white pearls strung along its guttering, and a final set around the door. Well, didn't that look enchanting?*

The house held its breath.

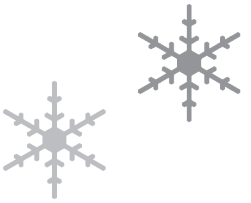
Perhaps, this year, the children would be coming home again.

What a sombre and muted affair last Christmas had been, maybe the worst the house could recall.

The current occupiers of the house on Arboretum Road traditionally put up their lights on December twenty-first each year. That could mean only one thing: it was four more sleeps till Christmas.

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22 DECEMBER

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FERN

… WE ARE PREPARING YOUR SERVICE … PLEASE WAIT ON THE CONCOURSE …

Nice try, Kings Cross, do I look like a rookie? Eyes on the prize, and I can see the train on the other side of the ticket barriers. So close, but out of reach. It *has* to be that one. It's always platform 3. That said, we don't want to inadvertently end up in Leeds.

Outside the station, the Salvation Army belt out a chirpy rendition of 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen', but the mood inside is bleak midwinter, despite a canopy of twinkly white lights with which the ceiling is festooned.

We're like lemmings; surrounded on all sides by fellow travellers, chins all tilted at the same angle towards the information boards. Lots of twitchy suitcases, ready to roll, and we don't have seat reservations together because *someone* didn't book the tickets soon enough. I gave him ONE JOB.

'Come on,' I say to Thom. Gosh, my jaw is achy from clenching too hard. 'Let's wait on the other side of the barrier.'

'What's the hurry? They haven't said yet …'

'It's that one, trust me.'

Thom sighs. 'Yeah, but if it's not, we'll have to get the guy to let us back and it'll be well awkward …'

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Tongue pressed against the side of my cheek, I give him a piquant DON'T QUESTION ME glare. He's pretty used to it by now. He knows what these bulging eyes mean. Thom Simpkins is so consistently, infuriatingly chill, that I have to stress for both of us. That's how it works. It keeps us alive, I like to think.

'Don't you wanna go to the Harry Potter store?'

I grimace. 'No, obviously not. One – because we'll miss the train, and two – Rowan would crucify me.'

Thom rolls his eyes. 'We have like twenty minutes to kill …'

Amateur. 'And the train doors close up to two minutes before departure. Let's roll, kiddo.' I clutch the handle of my suitcase in one hand and a Selfridge's bag full of gifts in the other. There's something pleasingly oxymoronic about buying my parents gifts with money they've given me, but it was that or no gifts. Studying in London is bankrupting us all. The gift exchange is purely symbolic, and one day I'll pay them back with a top-flight care home.

We slot our tickets through the barrier – I could really use a third arm at this point. Thom is mere inches through the gate when that strange robot voice blasts out of the speakers: *The 13.02 service to Edinburgh Waverley will depart from platform 3* …

My tummy drops. 'Shit! Run!' I cry. Our head start is shot to shit as a seasonal mass exodus surges towards us like a scene from the *Walking Dead*. 'Go!'

We weren't the only people to pre-empt the announcement. I already see bodies boarding our service.

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'Which coach is unclassified?' Thom asks, running ahead of me on long, winger's legs.

'I don't know! U? Or F sometimes?'

The only clue is the white cards poking out of the top of the seats. I wonder what the odds are of getting two seats together – preferably with a table – four days before Christmas. I could kill Thom for not booking the tickets sooner.

I suppose some kind soul might take pity on us, though looking around, it seems unlikely. You'd think people would be *nicer*, high on Christmas spirit, but the grim faces swarming towards us look murderous. At best.

And that's when one of the handles on my Selfridge's bag snaps and the top few presents spill on to the platform. 'SHIT. KEEP GOING. GET US SEATS.' I stop and scoop them up, unceremoniously thrusting them back in and cradling the lot like a dead body in my arms. Presents are replaceable. Standing in a draughty vestibule for the next six hours and forty minutes is not an option.

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ROWAN

'I think it's time for another wee gin in a tin, don't you?' It had been buy-three-get-one-free. So we got twelve for the train ride. That's the kind of mathematics I like.

'Rude not to,' Syd says.

I could do with ice and a slice. The tins have matched the unpleasant mouth temperature of the train carriage, but I'm feeling quite *merry* now – which seems only right for December twenty-second – so I don't mind so much. I'll be nicely drunk by the time we reach Edinburgh. They all think I'm a sloppy-lush-mess-queen anyway, and I wouldn't want to disappoint.

'Are you *sure* your parents are down with this?' Syd asks nervously.

'For the love of god, yes! Chill!' I say for at least the millionth time. 'For one thing, my mother is *very* into Christmas, and would never turn a stray out into the cold, but also I think they think you're my boyfriend.'

They laugh heartily. 'A theyfriend?'

Ew. 'Is that a thing?'

'Well, Rowan,' they say in the style of Ms Randolph, our fustiest lecturer, 'speaking for my people, we tend to say "I'm your *person*".'

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'OK, that's cute.'

'I know, right?' The thought of shagging Syd is ludicrous. Pure comedy. They're my ride-or-die, and I wouldn't ever fuck with someone I minded losing. And I have repeatedly told my parents that we're just friends, but they seem to think I'm lying. Why would I lie? They'd be *delighted* to have me married off.

My parents are not sitcom-level bad. It's not going to be some zany Ricky Gervais moment of falling over themselves to appear woke and getting it wrong with *hilarious results*, but I suspect they're going to Ask Polite Questions, and that can be just as cringe.

The train pulls out of Newcastle which means we're not too far away. Thank fuck. I've been low-key dreading going home, but I also need off this train. Vaping into the toilet bowl to avoid setting off the alarm is as glamorous as it sounds. It feels like we've been on this train for ever. We live here now. This is home. This seat smells of me: Tom Ford Tobacco Vanille and butt-sweat.

Staying in Bristol was not an option. With everything that was going down with Willow last year, Christmas was pretty much cancelled – cancel culture *has* gone mad – so no one minded that I escaped to France for the season. This year, attendance is mandatory, so I'm Joseph schlepping back to Bethlehem for the motherfucking census. Again, it's not that my parents are fascists, it's that they're dull. Back in Bristol, Jojo, Timo and Raheem are doing this whole 'Orphans' Christmas Dinner' and I kinda wish I was an orphan.

At least I have Syd as a comfort blanket from my new Found Family.

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'They know I'm non-binary, right?'

If they didn't, they'd probably figure it out from the shaved head, hand-poked tattoos and nose ring. 'They do, but neither of them has been so bold as to ask if you were *born a girl or a boy* …'

Syd groans wearily. 'Bitch, I was born a *baby*.'

I laugh, and shove another handful of Tangfastics in my mouth. The perfect amuse-bouche to accompany my M&S Slimline Gin and Tonic. Fizzy cola bottles are god tier. My Grindr alerts keep going off. It's the best road-trip game: regional snapshots of dick in the UK. So far, the highlight was skimming up against the green, green valleys of the Wales/Hereford border. Lonely farmers. Shame I'm just passing through.

Syd plucks the Haribo out of my hands. 'So fill me in. Who am I meeting?'

I roll my eyes. They're all so aggressively drab, I might as well just use a nude eyeshadow palette for reference. God, how to describe my family? 'You know those tumours that grow hair and teeth? Just imagine one of those but it's a mass of cishet white people who shop at Next.'

They're not *that* bad. But the next six days are still going to be a *challenge*. I haven't told Syd all that much about my little sister. Willow McAllister: the world's lightest demolition ball.

All around us in the packed, moist train carriage, people are drinking and laughing, slipping nicely into holiday mode, and I'm like, what idyllic Christmas-card families are these people going home to? Are they *happy* or something? Though

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I suppose my family do *look* like a Christmas card at a distance. It's only when you get close enough that the hairline cracks show.

You know what? I need to be a lot drunker. I down the rest of my gin.

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WILLOW

I'm sure I used to like Christmas. I must have done. I remember, I think, the fizz of excitement post-Bonfire night; going through the Argos catalogue with a pen to circle things; writing a letter to Santa; giving a shit.

It got dark at half-three today.

The sky from my bedroom window is orange-black, like it might snow. If it snows, maybe I'll be able to get it up. It never snows at Christmas, even in Scotland. We've been lied to. My breath fogs up the glass, obscuring the view of the botanic gardens. It's too cold for this window seat, as much as I love it. The second Fern left for London, I took over her room, just for this spot. *Jane Eyre* fantasies.

I'm so cold. All the time. That's the worst thing. I just can't get warm, not ever. All my heat has to come from without, I'm making none within. My biological central heating is broken. I climb out of the window seat and pull an XXL hoodie out of the bottom drawer and put it on over my sweater. Layers help.

I hear the front door close downstairs. Dad shouts; says he's off to get the others. I can't remember who's arriving first – Fern or Rowan. I'm excited to see them, that's the good part, but it means the BIG DAY is almost here. My heart skitters and my stomach cramps.

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Of course Mum is cooking a big dinner to welcome them home. I can smell it from up here. Chickpea and spinach curry (to be fair, only three hundred calories), but someone will be watching, waiting, observing my hands and mouth. They always are, because I cannot be trusted. There'll be an expectation that I get some rice (130 calories) or some naan bread (500 fucking calories – why don't I just inject some butter into my veins and have done with it).

Get some bread, Willow.

You get some fucking bread, you heifers.

It's so weird, it's like they *want* the demon to come out. We're not exactly new to this, they *know* what happens if they push me, and yet we do the dance.

Three times a day.

The cycle: dread, fear, panic, guilt, dread, fear, panic, guilt.

At least I'm *home* this Christmas. That's something. Being force-fed bone dry turkey by a nurse in a Santa hat was pretty wild. Six very thin girls chewing four-minute mouthfuls. Merry Christmas.

WAIT.

Welcome the intrusive thought. Acknowledge its presence. Interrogate your thought patterns. Turn it into a positive.

OK. Positives: I genuinely can't wait to see my brother and sister. Rowan is as funny as Fern is wise. I'm looking forward to meeting Thom and Syd, and watching how Mum and Dad fuck up Syd's pronouns. I will also get presents. Not mad at that.

Yeah, but you'll have to eat a fucking mountain of food and fucking Auntie Shelly is going to ask why you don't 'just eat a bit more'.

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I want to scream. Everyone else is so excited. I envy them. They make it look very easy. If I could take a pill and wake up on January second, I'd swallow the whole bottle.

Or throw myself through the glass and faceplant the drive below. If I hurt myself, I wonder if they'd make me eat in the hospital?

I WAIT some more.

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