

THE  
LAST  
THING  
YOU'LL  
HEAR

JAN DUNNING

 SCHOLASTIC

Published in the UK by Scholastic, 2024  
1 London Bridge, London, SE1 9BG  
Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin  
Industrial Estate, Glasnevin, Dublin, D11 HP5F

SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or  
registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

Text © Jan Dunning, 2024  
Cover illustration © Dan Couto, 2024

The right of Jan Dunning and Dan Couto to be identified as the  
author and cover illustrator of this work has been asserted by  
them under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

ISBN 978 0702 33293 7

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

All rights reserved.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way  
of trade or otherwise, be lent, hired out or otherwise circulated  
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is  
published. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in  
a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any other means  
(electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise)  
without prior written permission of Scholastic Limited.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.  
Paper made from wood grown in sustainable  
forests and other controlled sources.



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, incidents  
and dialogues are products of the author's imagination or are  
used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people, living  
or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

[www.scholastic.co.uk](http://www.scholastic.co.uk)

# 1

The sun is setting beyond the gently rolling hills, the peak of the Wrekin a looming silhouette against the shades of red and gold. I perch on the garden wall, a can of cider in my hand, shivering in the cool evening air. In the field below the house, the marquee glows blue, yellow, pink, green, in time to the throbbing bassline coming from within. It looks like a spaceship has touched down and the aliens have decided to have a rave.

Except what alien in their right mind would come to Hamlington?

I knock back my cider and wrap my arms round myself. It's the end of March and still too cold to party outside, but

that hasn't stopped the entire population of Hamlington sixth form rocking up to celebrate Charlotte Jensen-Scott's eighteenth. And who can blame us? The Jensen-Scotts are loaded – no expense spared for their princess, meaning free food and booze all night. Plus, nothing interesting usually happens here.

Or that's what we thought.

I can hear her name, tossed upon the breeze. It's the only thing anyone has talked about for the past fortnight. It might be Charlie's birthday but there's another girl on everybody's lips.

*Anna Walker.*

Eighteen years old; the same as Lark. Only a year older than me. A "good" girl, according to the papers – a prefect at a posh private school in Shrewsbury, an A-star student who sang soprano in the Abbey choir every Sunday. That is, until she upped and disappeared from home two short weeks ago.

Vanished without a trace.

The French doors bang open and a group of girls stumbles outside. Upper sixth form friends of Lark.

"I heard she met some guy online and went to meet him in real life. The police are trying to trace him."

"I heard she met him at a church group."

"A church group, are you serious? That's it, I'm deleting Tinder. Girls, we've been doing this all wrong. Apparently, we need to get God if we want to get laid."

"Aisha! You can't say that!" They trip past, giggling in mock horror. "What if it turns out he killed her?"

“Killed her? I doubt it. More like she got sick of living in the back of beyond and decided to piss off somewhere else.”

“Ha. Fair.”

They drift towards the marquee.

“Wren!”

The voice makes me jump. My sister Lark shimmies on to the terrace, her long blonde hair glistening in the glow from the fairy lights. She looks stunning in wide-leg palazzo trousers and the fitted sequin tuxedo jacket she picked up on Vinted last week. I feel boring in comparison, with my plain black dress and mousey-brown crop.

“Why are you moping out here by yourself?” Lark swigs from a bottle of prosecco. “Come down to the marquee and dance!” She waves to her friends up ahead.

“Mmm. Later, maybe.”

I frown. Lark reckons she knew Anna – knew *of* her, at least. But then, Lark knows everyone. She collects friends the way we used to collect Pokémon cards – or rather, people collect Lark. They’re drawn to her. Attracted like moths to a flame.

“The DJ sounds terrible,” I say, pulling a face.

“Aww, it’s Charlie’s brother Jem, back from uni. You’re just a music snob.”

“And you’ve got no taste.” I swipe the bottle from Lark’s hand, helping myself to a swig.

“Manners, little sister!” She snatches the bottle back and eyes me meaningfully. “I get it. You’re waiting for Danny. Where is he?”

“Who knows?” I try to shrug nonchalantly. “It’s not like we’re joined at the hip.”

“*Sure.*” Lark snorts. There’s another bang behind us and she barks with laughter. “Ha! Right on time!”

I spin round. Danny is framed in the double doors, looking shambolically handsome in his dad’s best suit and a battered felt fedora, his one concession to Charlie’s roaring twenties theme. His broad shoulders and six-foot frame are silhouetted against the kitchen lights, his face in shadow. As he moves towards us, the light hits his cheekbones. He smiles and my heart skips a beat.

“I’ll leave you two alone.” Lark jumps to her feet. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!” She winks.

“For God’s sake, shut up!” I hiss.

“Oh, relax!” She giggles. “He didn’t hear.”

It’s a thoughtless remark but I glare as Lark scurries off towards the marquee. Sometimes I really *hate* my sister.

“There you are.” Danny’s voice is soft and deep. It sends a shiver running through me. “What’s up with Lark?” His eyes linger on her disappearing form.

“Nothing.” I make sure I’m facing him so he can clearly read my lips. Spiralling dark curls escape from the brim of his hat. “Just being annoying, as usual.”

“Oh, give her a break.” Danny’s chestnut eyes sparkle. “So, are you having fun?”

“Hmm.” I consider the question. Contrary to what Lark thinks, I do like parties, but this one is pretty dull. It’s more like a wedding, what with the posh canapes served on

silver plates and the boring speeches about how wonderful Charlie is. And now we've been herded out into the cold for some awful "disco" in a marquee – a blatant ruse so her parents and their mates can get drunk round the fireplace in peace.

I shrug. "It feels a bit wrong to be partying when a girl has gone missing, don't you think?" I frown. "I mean, I know Anna wasn't from Hamlington – and it's not like any of us really knew her, but..." I trail off. "Maybe I'm overthinking. There's probably a simple explanation."

"Yep." Danny squeezes on to the wall next to me. Our thighs touch. "Don't worry, Wren. I'll look after you. Get you home safe and sound." He slings a muscled arm round my shoulder and gives me his best ironic smoulder.

My cheeks heat up, even though I know he's only joking. Danny drove tonight because Mum insisted. She didn't want me and Lark walking home to our estate in the dark. Mum's always paranoid about safety, but since Anna went missing she's been even worse than usual.

"Well, if you're *sure* it's not out of your way?" I grin.

"Oh, it is. Miles and miles." Danny grins back. "But anything for you."

My face burns again. *I'm such a cliché*. In love with the boy next door – literally. Our family moved in next to Danny's when I was eight. My bedroom window faces his, for God's sake. I can barely remember a time when I didn't know Danny. It feels like we've always been friends.

*And sometimes I think that's all we'll ever be.*

A sigh escapes my lips. Luckily, Danny doesn't notice. He drops his arm and gets to his feet. I drink in the clean lines of his profile as he stares at the darkening sky.

"It's too late." He tuts. "We've missed it."

I touch his arm to get his attention. "Missed what?"

"The murmuration."

"Murmur *what?*"

He smiles down at me. The light is fading and his pupils are massive, drowning his irises in huge inky pools. "When the starlings fly home to roost, it's called a murmuration," he explains. "It happens around this time of year. Thousands of starlings, moving together as one."

I smile. It's adorable when Danny geeks out. And he's not even been drinking, obviously. He gets as high on science and nature as I do on music.

"Aww. Sorry you missed the big flock of birds."

He rolls his eyes good-naturedly. "It's not just a flock. You have to see it to believe it. Like, on their own, starlings aren't that special. But when they come together as one..." He shakes his head. "It's like magic ... or art..." He shrugs, embarrassed.

"Sounds cool."

"It is." He smiles and it's like sunshine. A dimple appears in his cheek. "One day, I'll show you."

He offers me a hand and I take it, letting him pull me to my feet. His fingertips graze my skin; they're calloused from guitar-playing, like mine.

"Is that the only reason you came tonight?" I tease.



Danny's famously not a party person. "For the excellent bird-watching opportunities?"

"Ah, you got me." He laughs softly. "Although the views round here are also very nice."

His eyes sweep the landscape, and settle on me. We stand there, staring at each other. Still holding hands. The breeze runs fingers through my hair. The sunset is turning fiery and the night feels full of possibility. I lean closer – just a fraction – my heart thumping wildly in my chest. I hold my breath. Danny doesn't move away—

"Guys! Are you coming down?" Ruby pounces, making us jump. Isaac follows behind, like an adoring puppy. "Charlie's threatening to make everyone do karaoke. Some new business contact of her dad's gave her a top-of-the-range machine as a birthday present."

Danny drops my hand. "Did you say karaoke?" He groans.

"Yes! Come on!" Ruby urges. "We're the last ones! Wren?"

My fingers feel cold, dangling by my side. I search Danny's face, trying to read his expression. Annoyed? Relieved? It's impossible to tell. "What do you think?" I ask him.

He shrugs. "Sure, let's check it out."

My heart sinks, but I smile and nod. Grabbing Isaac's hand, Ruby leads us across the grass.

*It's better this way, I tell myself. I don't know what I was thinking.*

Danny's my best friend. I can't go messing that up.

\*

As we peel back the canvas entrance to the marquee, the heat hits me first, followed by the pungent smell of perfume, sweat and beer. On the sawdust-strewn dance floor, dozens of bodies jostle for space, while two big sound systems pump music from an elevated stage where Charlie's brother Jem is DJing from his laptop. The makeshift bar is heaving, frazzled bartenders pouring garish concoctions into plastic cocktail glasses. A blackboard propped against an easel proclaims the night's philosophy in swirling art deco-style letters: *A little party never killed nobody!*

"I disagree." Danny grimaces, reaching under his hair, behind his right ear, to adjust the settings on his hearing aids. Loud background noise is his nemesis. "And Gatsby didn't say that, anyway. It's not in the book."

He's back to his normal, whip-smart self, acting like whatever that was, outside, didn't happen.

"I think Charlie's going for vibes, not accuracy," I shout over the din, as the birthday girl herself wafts past waving a neon feather boa. Jem's playlist is more Baz Luhrmann than F. Scott Fitzgerald-era, while the room looks like someone did an ASOS search for "flapper dresses" and decided to buy the lot.

We grab a couple of drinks – water for Danny, a Coke for me – and find a bench near the edge of the tent. I'm not feeling the music and Danny's funny about dancing. Self-conscious maybe, though I wish he wasn't. When we

were younger, he used to dance a lot. He turns his left ear towards the speakers.

“What’s the track? I can only hear the bass.”

I wrinkle my nose. “You don’t want to know.”

The moment I’ve said it, I feel bad. It’s a lazy reply and it shuts Danny out, something I try not to do. Usually I’m the one calling out other people’s crappy behaviour, pointing out the obvious: it’s not Danny’s fault he can’t hear. You need to face him and speak clearly – not slowly, like some people do. His ears might not work perfectly these days but there’s nothing wrong with his brain. Plus, he’s an incredible lip-reader, which is a bloody difficult skill.

“Sorry. It’s pretty cheesy. I don’t know what it’s called.”

Danny shrugs it off. His eyes have found Lark. She’s right in the middle of the dance floor, because *of course* she is, gyrating with her friends. Lark’s a great dancer and she knows it. The only person here who could actually pass for Daisy Buchanan or Jordan Baker. Beneath the flashing lights, her hair turns pink, blue, green, lilac, then back to gold again, like some magical rainbow child.

I run my fingers through my boring crop. “Another drink?”

Danny doesn’t answer; he’s still watching Lark. She has that effect on everyone. It’s not just the way she looks. My sister is *special* – she shines. We couldn’t be more different if we tried.

A microphone screeches with feedback. Danny winces. I jump.

“OK, people! Who’s ready for karaoke?”

There’s a groan from the crowd, but Charlie calls birthday privileges and in seconds Jem’s set has been binned. As the dance floor thins out, Charlie and her gang crowd round her phone, queuing up songs on an app. As the jerky string intro to “Toxic” kicks in, I brace myself for Charlie’s Britney imitation. She throws everything into it, oblivious to the sniggers of the crowd, blowing kisses and curtsying at the end.

“Tempted?” Danny nods towards the stage.

“You must be joking,” I mouth back.

“Who’s next?” Charlie calls, holding out the mic.

I close my eyes. I know what’s coming.

“Lark, you go!”

“Yeah, go on, Lark!”

“Lark! Lark!”

*And there it is.* Because if it wasn’t enough that Lark is supermodel stunning, Little Miss Popular and the golden child of the Mackenzie family all in one...

My sister can also sing.

*Really* sing.

The X Factor. The Voice. Whatever you want to call it, she’s got it. And the most annoying thing of all?

She doesn’t care.

Lark’s friends push her up on to the stage. Taking the mic from Charlie, the first thing she does is kick off her

platform shoes. It looks cool and effortless, like everything she does.

“What shall I sing?”

“Whatever you want!” Aisha shouts, waving Charlie’s phone.

Lark shrugs. “I don’t mind. You pick.”

A moment later, a sensuous beat kicks in and a slow guitar riff plays languidly over the top. “Dangerous Woman”. Wow. That’s quite a song choice. But can Lark pull off an Ariana cover?

I sigh.

Of course she can.

The second the first lyric drops, the crowd stills. Conversations hush. Everybody stares. Not because Lark sounds like Ariana – she doesn’t. This is not an impression. Her voice is unique, entirely her own. Pure, clear, almost otherworldly...

And she doesn’t even have to try.

Danny nudges me. “You OK?”

I nod, and plaster on a smile, shoving down the ugly thoughts that always seem to surface whenever I hear Lark sing.

*Why her? Why not me?*

Lark doesn’t take music A level. She’s never had a singing lesson in her life. *I’m* the one who lives and breathes music, who plays piano and guitar – and even the bloody violin for god’s sake. I’m the one with the lyric notebook and the phone full of voice note recordings, the one who hears

songs in her sleep. I'm the one who dreams of playing sold-out stadiums filled with rapturous crowds singing my own words back to me.

I'm a good musician, I know that.

But Lark was born to be a star.

As she reaches the chorus, her voice soars, hitting the high notes with ease. My sister has a range to die for, seriously.

"She's killing it," Danny whispers, gaping at the awestruck faces all around. "Look at them, under her spell." I watch him adjust his hearing aids again, scowling. Even wearing them, I know Lark's singing voice is hard for Danny to hear. He struggles most with high-pitched sounds.

A breeze hits the back of my neck.

I turn to see a guy standing in the entrance to the tent. He's not from our sixth form – I think I'd remember if he was. Male model good-looking, with sharp cheekbones, a pierced eyebrow, ice-blue eyes and bleached, cropped hair, he's maybe eighteen or nineteen at most. A laptop bag is slung across his chest, and an expensive-looking pair of headphones hangs round his neck. His phone is raised in Lark's direction.

Filming her.

The song comes to an end and Lark jumps off the stage as the applause rings out. Some suck-up even shouts "Encore!" I roll my eyes. We're in a tent in a field in Hamlington, not the Birmingham O2.

There's an inevitable lull in proceedings, because of course, no one wants to follow *that*.

Aisha is climbing on stage when Charlie spots the new arrival. Her eyes widen and she pushes her way through the crowd towards him. Model Guy whispers something in Charlie's ear and she beams with delight, grasping him by the arm and leading him back towards the stage.

"Everyone, listen up!" Charlie snatches the mic from Aisha, in the middle of murdering Taylor Swift's "Blank Space". The backing track cuts out.

"Guys, you're never gonna believe this. We have a special guest! I'd like to introduce Evan... But you may know him as Spinner!"

Murmurs break out.

"Spinner is here to play a set for us!" Charlie squeals. Model Guy is already busy connecting his laptop up to Jem's controller. The marquee thrums with anticipation.

*Spinner.*

I mouth the name to Danny, who shakes his head. He doesn't remember, but I do. Spinner, also known as Evan Wheeler. The unassuming West Midlands teenager who went from mixing music in his bedsit during lockdown to starting a YouTube channel and DJing the Birmingham clubs.

"Whoever arranged this surprise, thank you!" Charlie gushes. "This is the most amazing birthday present ever!"

I look around, but nobody takes the credit. Meanwhile,

Spinner has finished setting up. He pauses for a moment, his right hand raised in a strangely complicated salute. Half a dozen people do it back.

Suddenly a funky beat explodes, assaulting my eardrums. It snaps and bounces beneath a jangly guitar. From behind his laptop, Spinner surveys the crowd, the light from his screen catching those chiselled cheekbones. A smile creeps across his face.

“Track?” Danny mouths, looking pained. The volume is intense. “Actually, don’t tell me. I can guess.”

I smile, lip-syncing along to the opening lyrics of “Last Night a DJ Saved My Life”.

Danny shakes his head. “I knew it.” He takes out both hearing aids and slides them into his pocket, replacing them with a pair of earplugs. The relief is immediate on his face.

Up on stage, Spinner cues up the next track, headphones hanging off one ear, apparently oblivious to the girls – and boys – dancing seductively under his nose. Lark isn’t among them, I notice. She’s wandered over to the bar, and I can’t say I blame her. For all his good looks and undeniable stage presence, Spinner’s surprise set feels a little ... predictable.

I knock back my drink, wondering if it’s too soon to suggest that we leave. I’m pretty sure Danny won’t mind. Some bloke from his biology class has ambushed him and is shouting about Anna Walker. I can tell by Danny’s polite but strained expression that the drunken rant is impossible to follow.



I'm about to interrupt when the track that's playing comes to a sudden end.

A jarring chord fills the air.

My ears prick up, my body oddly alert.

The chord fades and a beat kicks in, slow and insistent like a heartbeat. It feels like it's coming from inside me, fighting to get out.

A creeping bassline follows, dark and twisting. My foot starts tapping along.

*What is this?* Whatever it is, it's good.

I'm clearly not the only one who thinks so, because in seconds the dance floor is swarming. Out of the corner of my eye I see a spangle of light as Lark tosses back her drink and joins in. I find myself standing too, pulled like a magnet towards the crowd. The rhythm is intense, contagious. Impossible to resist.

A riff slides over the chords, looping and repeating, hooking my brain. I sway to the music, moving without thinking, my cheekbones aching from grinning. Everyone around me is the same. At the front of the stage, Charlie climbs on top of the biggest speaker and dances eight precarious feet above us, arms in the air and eyes closed. I laugh, but my voice is lost in the layers of sound. A strange wild energy is coursing through me. This track is *amazing*, I love it. Like, totally, one hundred per cent obsessed.

Strobe lighting flickers, making everything seem jagged and surreal. I see Ruby dancing with Isaac, and Meena too, with Jiv and Alex. Their faces are glowing

and their eyes are shining bright. I wish Danny was here, dancing with me, and I twist round, looking for him, but then my attention is pulled to the stage.

Spinner – beautiful Spinner – has emerged from behind his laptop. He’s lifting the microphone from its stand. And now a melody begins to play, high and pure, one short sample on repeat. Its beauty sears my brain. I stare as Spinner’s mouth begins to move. My mind has gone blank. He seems to be repeating one word over and over, and I don’t really understand it, but at the same time it’s all I can hear, all I can think. I can’t recall anything else, not even my own name. All I can do is dance, as Spinner’s words fall down like rain.

There’s a dull thud. Then a scream splits the air.

“Oh my god!”

The music cuts abruptly. I gasp as the crowd surges backwards, sweeping me along. Someone starts to wail. For a split second the crowd thins and I see a shape, lying in the sawdust beneath the speaker. It isn’t moving.

A neon feather floats by. I feel like I’m in a dream.

“Wren!” Someone grabs my arm, pulling me out of the throng.

I blink up at Danny. “What happened?”

“It’s Charlie. Didn’t you see?”

I shake my head, struggling to make sense of his words. My mind flashes back to the shape in the sawdust. “She fell? Oh my god. Is she ... *dead*?”

Danny shakes his head. “Jem’s calling an ambulance.

Her family are coming. Let's give them space."

He takes my arm and I let him guide me. Around us, people huddle, dazed, in groups. I feel it too: the horror, the emotional whiplash. A moment ago, we were on top of the world, then reality intruded and destroyed our dream.

"That track. What was it...?" I will the riff or the melody to come back to me, to hook itself once more inside my brain. Danny doesn't reply. His face is turned away.

We join the other party guests gathered outside the marquee, the wind biting our bare flesh and the wet grass soaking our feet. Up by the main house blue lights are flashing. The dark shapes of the paramedics advance towards us.

"Where did the DJ go?" I scan the field.

Danny scowls, straining to see me in the dark. "Does it matter? Charlie's hurt." He peers closer, right into my eyes. "You're acting weird. How much did you drink?"

"Not much."

"Could someone have spiked you?"

"I don't see how." I do feel odd, though. I lean into Danny's solid shoulder. It must be the shock.

"Wren!" Lark comes over, pale and bewildered. "I can't believe it. Did you see her fall?"

I shake my head. "No. You?"

"No." She frowns. "I was dancing ... I don't really remember."

We fall silent as the paramedics push past us, into the tent. Two of them are carrying a stretcher.

“We should go,” Danny murmurs. “We’re getting in the way. There’s nothing we can do anyway. We’ll hear how she is in the morning.”

We trudge across the field. The night sky is beautiful, peppered with stars, but we’re too stunned to speak. It’s a horrible end to a party.

I climb into the car feeling empty and adrift. I don’t even object when Lark grabs the front, forcing me to take the back. Danny cranks up the heater while Lark searches for a radio station to fill the silence.

Her hand pauses on the dial. A local news broadcast is coming to an end.

*“And that headline once again. The body of a young female was discovered earlier this evening by a person walking their dog in public woodland near the Wrekin. The victim has been formally identified as Shropshire schoolgirl Anna Walker, who went missing from her home on March the sixteenth...”*

I shiver, despite the heater’s blast.

Anna Walker isn’t missing. She’s dead.

And they’ve just found her, right here in Hamlington.