

AUTUMN  
BIRD &  
**THE RUNAWAY**

Melanie Florence and Richard Scrimger

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Apart from not laughing, that is.

Cody's mind is drifting. Like a scene in the movies that's slow motion and out of focus. What to do?  
*Whaaat toooo dooo?*

There's Dad's fist at the end of his arm. Which makes it about arm's-length away. Here it comes. Now Cody's lying on his back.

There's Dad's shoe on the end of his leg. Which makes it about leg's-length away. Is that a thing?

Cody turns his head. There's the door. Think about that.

Think about going out the door. Think about doing that.

Here comes the shoe. Cody's world goes black.



## AUTUMN

**A**utumn was scared.

It was a heart-pounding, cold-sweating, hands-shaking, bone-deep terror. She literally felt like her heart was going to pound out of her chest. That couldn't really happen, right?

God, she felt like she was about to have a heart attack. Maybe someone would find her, draped across her bed like some old-timey movie star in those black-and-white films her parents loved, dead in the Wonder Woman Underoos she stuffed into the very depths of her top drawer whenever a friend slept over. She could see the obituary now:

*Thirteen-year-old girl found dead in her home of apparent heart attack, in superhero underwear, because she was going on her first date and her heart couldn't take the utter stress and anxiety of it all.*

Text notifications kept going off. She threw herself across the bed to grab her phone.

**Are you almost ready?**

Mia. And no. She wasn't. Not unless Connor was okay with her showing up at his place in her underwear. Actually, from what she had heard about him, he probably was.

Oh God.

She had to be there in two hours. It seemed like a huge amount of time, but not in the circles Autumn found herself circulating these days. She was well aware that if she could just throw on a pair of jeans, leave her hair in a messy bun, and wear her glasses instead of the dreaded contact lenses that felt like they were constantly gluing themselves to her eyeballs, she actually *could* be ready in twenty minutes. But the thought of what her friends would say if she showed up without making herself look absolutely perfect, just to hang out at someone's house, catapulted her off of the bed and into the shower.

There was a pretty lengthy checklist Autumn followed to get ready every morning, but prepping herself for a date was even more complicated. She shampooed her hair twice and then conditioned with the expensive Aveda conditioner her friends swore made their hair grow two inches a month. She stepped out of the shower, wrapped a blanket-sized bath towel around herself, and leaned across the counter to put her contact lenses in. She still struggled with them.

How did anyone *not* blink uncontrollably when they tried to stick something in their eye? But she had begged and pleaded with her parents to let her try them, and there was no way she was going to wear her dorky glasses outside the house unless she got pink eye or something.

On second thought, she'd definitely stay home if she got pink eye. Something like that could lose your spot at the lunch table quicker than you could say, "Do you watch *Doctor Who*?"

Thinking of hanging out tonight as Connor's date made her suddenly wish for a raging case of pink eye. Probably not how you were supposed to feel about going out with the most popular boy in school.

Autumn studied herself in the mirror. Her face was clear. She thought she had nice eyes. And she always liked her long, dark hair, like her mother's. But in middle school, that wasn't enough anymore. Autumn blow-dried her hair in sections with a big round brush, then followed that up with a curling iron to get her stick-straight hair to fall in soft beachy waves on her shoulders. When that was perfect, she opened her makeup bag and started on her face. Her parents hated her wearing makeup, so the trick was to keep it as light and natural as possible. But she was going on a date! She had to look especially good tonight. A little tinted moisturizer to make her skin glow. And since it was a date, she

brushed some highlighter on her cheekbones and touched her eyelids with a little shadow. Mascara on her lashes, and a quick slick of pink gloss on her lips. There. She nodded at her reflection.

Last, Autumn had to pick out her clothes. That was probably the most stressful part of getting ready. Autumn had never really been into clothes. She'd be perfectly happy slouching her way to school wearing a Spider-Man T-shirt, flannel pyjama pants and her scuffed Chucks, or throwing on an oversized comfy sweater for a party.

But that's not how girls like Autumn were supposed to dress.

Autumn had somehow managed to become one of the popular kids at her school. She wasn't even sure how it happened. But the popular girls did not wear Spider-Man T-shirts. The popular girls wore designer jeans and cute tops from Forever 21. The popular girls turned heads. And you didn't turn heads in pyjama pants and Chucks. You didn't go out with guys like Connor unless you put an extraordinary amount of effort into your appearance.

It was absolutely exhausting being popular.



## CODY

**C**ody opened his eyes with a gasp of pain. *Ouch!*

You knew you were in trouble when it hurt just to open your eyes.

It took him a moment to work out where he was. Oh yeah. The living room floor. No idea how long he'd been lying there. There was a little daylight left, so not too long.

Back to *ouch*. Cody felt like Toronto FC had been using his head as the ball, kicking it all over the field. Come to think of it, *ouch* wasn't strong enough for how bad he felt. More like *AUUUGH!* Or maybe the way those excited foreign sportscasters celebrated: *Gooooooooooooooooooooal!*

He remembered how he got there. Dad.

Was the old man still around? Cody listened hard. He heard the tick of the kitchen clock and a rustle from maybe mice. But that was all. No swears or snores. Dad was out somewhere. Cody was on his