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SAVING PHOEBE MURROW

‘A tale of missed opportunities, conflicts of personalities, and misunderstandings leading to disaster, Herta Feely’s *Saving Phoebe Murrow* is a **compelling first rate domestic drama**, a book to set on the shelf alongside Sue Miller’s *The Good Mother*. Insightful, gripping, in the end thrilling. Most highly recommended’

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‘This debut novel tells an important story about cyber-bullying and its sinister consequences, making for harrowing yet also **completely addictive reading**’

Reviewed the Book

Herta Feely is a writer and full-time editor, working with a wide array of authors and writers from around the world. Born in former Yugoslavia, she and her parents emigrated to Germany when she was three, and then to the United States at the age of seven. Her work (both short stories and memoir) has been published in a number of anthologies and literary journals, and she has received the American Independent Writers' award for best published personal essay. In her previous work, she was a journalist, press secretary and activist, co-founding Safe Kids Worldwide, an organization dedicated to saving children from unintentional injuries.

She now lives in Washington, DC, with her husband and two cats, Monty and Albert. She has two sons, Jack and Max.

Saving Phoebe Murrow

Herta Feely



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For the three points of light in my life: Jim, Max and Jack

*In memory
of
Megan Meier*

Part I

Conflict

1

Monday, November 10, 2008

At the end of the day, as Isabel stepped through the large glass doors of her law office, a strange thing happened. Outside in the cold, she suddenly felt trapped in a bright cone of light. As if some alien spaceship were training its eye on her.

Uneasily, she gazed into the dark November sky. There was the culprit. A smiling gibbous moon. Or was it smirking, maybe even mocking her? Yes, she thought, that would be more appropriate. Work had become insanely busy, though in its own strange way that kept her mind from dwelling on her recent topsy-turvy personal life.

Which included that awful teen party at Sandy Littleton's, an event that had ruined the weekend. Phoebe drunk, and when Isabel brought her home, Ron found their daughter's wobbly walk vaguely amusing. In front of Phoebe, they'd kept a united front. But later, in the bedroom Ron told Isabel she was being too harsh on their daughter.

'She's thirteen, Ron.'

'Almost fourteen,' he'd said.

She really couldn't understand Ron's blasé attitude toward the drinking that Sandy had allowed, encouraged even, nor could she understand Phoebe's recent obsession with some boy named Shane. They'd met on Facebook, of all places, and he'd promised to show up at the party, then hadn't. Ron had attributed Phoebe's drinking to her disappointment over this no-show, as if that made it OK. Not OK, definitely not.

Nor did she like the fact that Phoebe had never actually met this character Shane, that all of her communication with him had been online. Who was he anyway? Again, Ron thought it was no big deal! ‘That’s the way kids communicate these days,’ he’d said.

In the end, Isabel had caved, and Phoebe was only denied use of her computer and phone for a day. Mostly because she feared the possibility of the ninth-grade kids teasing and taunting her as so many classmates had the previous year. Now, she was eager to get home to find out how Phoebe’s school day had gone. She hoped there had been no fallout from the Saturday night fiasco, though of course Phoebe didn’t know what her mother had done. Kids could be incredibly cruel.

Isabel strode hurriedly to the underground garage. The wind, gusting up Pennsylvania Avenue, tossed stray bits of paper into the air, bouncing them about inside tiny swirling tornadoes. She flipped up the collar of her raincoat.

Traffic seemed unusually heavy, though rush-hour congestion in DC was routine, and cars were backed up as far down Pennsylvania as Isabel could see. As she inched along in her BMW, she mused on the few recent signs of behavior that Ron, her husband of sixteen years, had exhibited only once before. It had been two presidential campaigns ago, to be precise, after he’d been on the road for several weeks covering John McCain’s bid for the Republican nomination. In early 2000. At home, Ron had turned sour, testy, distant. She’d attributed his mood to work. He’d wanted to be on George Bush’s campaign trail, in the company of the sudden darling of the Republicans and his attendant court of megawatt reporters. Traipsing after McCain, Ron saw himself as nothing more than second string. She’d tried to soothe him, and he’d come around, at least a little.

But then she discovered the true source of his discontent. One night she picked up the phone to call her mother and stumbled on Ron speaking with a woman in an unmistakably amorous tone. Making plans. Her insides had grown watery. Their relationship suffered a blow. She'd been on the verge of calling it quits. If not for five-year-old Phoebe and their infant son, Jackson, she might have. No, she would have. She wouldn't suffer another betrayal. She'd made that clear. And Isabel was a woman of her word. Actions had consequences.

When Phoebe entered her Cleveland Park home, an elegant Victorian where she'd lived her entire short life, she could feel the void of human vibration. She hated coming home to an empty house. It depressed her. 'Hagrid,' she called out. 'Where are you, kitty?' At least their housekeeper, Milly, had left the light on in the foyer.

She'd had a tough day. Shortly before lunch, her once best friend Jessie had hissed accusingly, 'Your mother called the cops on my parents, do you know that?' Followed by: 'Do you get what a b-i-t-c-h she is?' Phoebe had stared at her mutely. Had her mother done that? It was true on Saturday there'd been drinking at Jessie's party, but afterward Phoebe had been with her mother and she hadn't heard her make such a call. It would completely suck if she had. So embarrassing. Not to mention that her relationship with Jessie had been on the precipice of a thaw.

Phoebe switched on all the lights in her path – 'Hagrid, here kitty, kitty!' – and stopped in the kitchen. If Milly had been home, she would have offered her some cookies and milk, and they could have had a chat. She loved their housekeeper, her

reassuring grandmotherly manner. But it was probably best that she not have cookies. No, cookies were the enemy. Had her mother been home, which she rarely was at this time of day, she'd probably have given her carrots.

Phoebe rummaged through the fridge, found a couple of plastic-wrapped cheese sticks, grabbed those along with a small bottle of carrot juice and trudged up to the third floor, her heavy backpack weighing her down. As she ascended, one thought brightened her mood. At last she'd be able to talk to Shane. Well, sort of talk. On Facebook.

She'd finally be able to ask him the question that had plagued her since Saturday night. Why hadn't he shown up at Jessie's party? He'd promised, and she'd waited. And waited. Then, on Sunday, because she'd been caught drinking, she was denied use of her computer, her phone, basically all forms of communication, and she hadn't been able to contact him.

Now, at last, she'd discover what had happened, and even more importantly she'd remind him of her birthday party, only five days away. She and Skyla were turning fourteen and they'd invited the entire ninth grade, plus Shane, who lived . . . well, she didn't know exactly where he lived, but his handsome Facebook visage hovered in her mind. That mischievous dimpled smile that separated him from all the other boys she knew. Even Noah.

In her room, Phoebe flopped onto her bed, burrowing her back into a mad pile of pillows and favorite stuffed animals; she flipped on her computer, then logged on to Facebook. It had taken some doing, but her mother had finally agreed to let her invite Shane even though he went to Walter J High, a public school about twenty minutes away in Bethesda, and was only a Facebook friend. Phoebe knew she'd mostly agreed because

there, at the party, her mother could meet him in person and oversee their encounter.

Still, excitement and relief descended on her at the thought that, finally, she'd meet the real live sophomore boy who'd picked her and *friend*ed her. Who said he really liked her and was 'dying to hook up' with her. Whom she'd set her sights on after several weeks of private chats on Facebook. He was the single bright spot in an otherwise bleak Monday.

Her eyes darted to her private messages on the lower right-hand side of her Facebook page. Five awaited her. And, yes, one from Shane!

Eyes affixed to the screen, she read, *I don't want to see you. Ever.* Her hopeful smile faded into a frown. *Ever?*

Phoebe read the message a second and third time. What was Shane talking about? Her stomach dipped. She checked for the little green dot that indicated he was available to chat, but it wasn't lit. She stared at his name in the right-hand column of her Home page and prayed he would log on. Her mouth felt dry. *I don't want to see you. Ever. 'Ever?'* Why was he saying that? What had she done? And her birthday party only a few days away.

Phoebe's glance zigzagged across the room, her attic hideaway, landing first on her childhood saddle and riding gear, then on her Victorian dollhouse with the hidden box cutter, and, finally, on the wall to her right, where the lime green and purple bulletin board hung chock-full of photos and memories. She'd pinned Shane's Facebook photo in the middle of all the other memorabilia. He had gorgeous wavy hair and green eyes that blazed with self-confidence.

The green dot popped on next to his name. Her fingers typed as fast as they could: *Why are you saying that? You're joking, right?*

She held her breath.

Not joking.

A tiny gasp escaped her lips. *Shane, what are you talking about?* Again, she waited.

Your mother called the police on Jessie's parents . . . you tattled about the booze at the party. And then the Littletons were arrested.

I did not *tattle*, she thought briefly, but that was replaced by the bitter realization that Jessie may have been right: her mother *had* called the police. Had she? Panicked, Phoebe wrote: *I didn't say anything to my mom, I swear.*

So why'd she go inside the Littletons?

I don't know, I guess she was looking for me.

That's so lame.

Her thoughts swirled as she wrote. *You weren't even at the party, so how do you know all that stuff?*

No response. She waited, barely breathing, then his reply appeared. *Don't you worry how. I just do.*

She was hardly paying attention to these strange words; she could only think how much she wanted to see him, talk to him, get him to kiss her, to understand this was all a terrible mistake. What should she say? Finally, she wrote: *Why didn't you come to Jessie's? You promised.*

I didn't because I heard you've been messing around with Dylan.

What? Who told you that?

Instead of private messages, his response now appeared on her Facebook Wall, where everyone could see what he was saying: *I don't tell on my friends.*

She wrote back a private message: *It has to be Jessie, but if it is, she's lying.*

Again he posted his message on her Wall: *You're calling Jessie a liar?*

And now, to defend herself, Phoebe switched to making her responses public too: *No, I meant if she said that about me, she's not telling the truth. Why don't you believe me?*

Again, several moments passed before an answer appeared: *I don't trust you. I heard you said Jessie was fat and no boy wants her, especially Dylan. That's bitchy. Nobody likes bitchy girls.*

Tears sprang to Phoebe's eyes. Why was he making things up? *That's not true*, she wrote. *I never said that!! Please let's talk. On the phone?* In the four weeks they'd been communicating, she'd never heard his voice. All their exchanges had happened right here, on Facebook. He'd suggested that hearing the sound of one another's voices would be a wonderful surprise when they finally met. And to save it for that special day.

But then this from Shane: *I get it, your mom hates Mrs. Littleton, so you hate Jessie.*

She stared at the words. *That's sooo not true. I swear*, she wrote. Though in fact she knew her mother didn't care for Jessie, and probably not Mrs. Littleton either. This was happening because of her mother. All because of her mother. She glanced at the dollhouse. Through the blur of tears, she saw Shane's green dot disappear.

Her gaze fixed on his name. If only she had his cell number. She began rubbing her arms, her fingers absently running over scars and recently healed wounds. 'No, no,' she muttered softly. She typed a private message: *Shane, please believe me. I didn't say anything. Whoever told you I did was lying.*

She waited for him to respond, her breath catching. Her eyes flicked to the box cutter's hiding place and lingered there

for several moments before returning to Shane's photo. He was the cutest boy who'd ever friended her, and a year and a half older than she. His dimpled smile grinned at her from the bulletin board. He looked amazingly like the guy in *Twilight*, though without the ghostly pallor. Why didn't he believe her? Why would he believe Jessie? Had someone else said something? Yet, who could that be? Skyla? How could things get so messed up? Phoebe saw her dream of Shane as her boyfriend slip away.

Why had her mother called the police on Saturday night? This was all her fault. About to retrieve the blade from the dollhouse, she snatched her cell phone instead and angrily tapped her mother's number.

Isabel's iPhone released its symphonic chime. Without taking her eyes off the road, she grabbed the phone. 'Hello?'

A frantic voice shouted into her ear: 'Mawm, you've ruined everything! You called the police on the Littletons! How could you? Now Shane thinks I lied and he won't see me. Ever!'

Phoebe's attack caught her by surprise. 'Calm down. What are you talking about?' Isabel said, although her daughter was right. She *had* called the police. She'd felt duty-bound. Irresponsible parents feeding young teens alcohol! But how had this ridiculous Shane found out?

Phoebe's response came in the form of loud panicked sobs.

'Phoebe? Sweetheart, talk to me.' Isabel kept her voice even despite the sudden onslaught of guilt. 'Exactly what did he say?'

Between sniffles, she managed, 'That he couldn't trust me because obviously I must have told you about the drinking. And

you know that's not true! And then he claimed that I said Jessie's fat and no boy would ever like her.'

'Did you? No, I mean—' Isabel cast around for the appropriate thing to say. 'Phoebe, darling, are you there? I know you wouldn't say that. Where did he get such an idea?'

'Mom, what difference does it make? I like him and now he says he won't see me! Not at my birthday party! Not ever!'

Isabel recognized the panic in Phoebe's voice. For the past year, she'd been flying into emotional overdrive at the drop of a hat, but she was also sensitive, overly sensitive. For an instant, Isabel saw the wounds on her daughter's arms, self-inflicted cuts that made her want to cry. The whole thing actually did sound like a mess. But how had it happened? This guy was only a Facebook friend. 'Honey, I'll be home in ten minutes. I'll make you some hot chocolate and we'll sort this out. OK?' She knew it might take her as long as half an hour, but she'd get there and calm her daughter down.

Why wasn't Ron home yet, she suddenly wondered. He'd be there shortly, she reassured herself, unless some assignment had delayed him. She'd call him.

'This is horrible,' Phoebe moaned.

'It's going to be all right,' Isabel said soothingly. 'Just get off Facebook, OK?'

Once home, she'd explain the truth to Phoebe. She would explain how sometimes you have to make difficult choices, stand up for your beliefs, and that you can't worry about what other people think. Is that what she'd tell her? And then there was this mysterious Shane character; she'd been wary about him, apparently for good reason. Who was he to treat her daughter this

way? Maybe now, for once, Ron would listen to her. That's when she remembered he hadn't called her all day.

She waited for Phoebe to say something, but there was silence on the other end. 'Phoebe, honey, talk to me.' She had to keep her on the phone. Then she heard her weeping miserably. 'Phoebe, sweetheart, I'm sure he'll see you. It's just a misunderstanding.' The sounds of distress suddenly grew distant then stopped.

'Phoebe?'

She glanced at the phone and saw that Phoebe had disconnected the call.

The latticework of cuts on the inside of Phoebe's pale arm, and many more on her thigh, swirled into Isabel's mind as she finally reached 22nd Street and sped north, aiming for the entrance to Rock Creek Parkway near Dupont Circle. She had to get home, but traffic in the nation's capital – oh hell, the light was turning red. She stepped on the gas.

Seconds later, a siren wailed behind her.

The furious lights of a police car blinked in Isabel's rear-view mirror. 'Oh, God, not now.' She looked for a place to stop on the one-way street, hoping the siren was intended for someone else.

But the vehicle stopped behind her. 'Damn it,' Isabel moaned. In her side mirror, she watched the policeman's eyes sweep the length of her new convertible BMW, probably making a judgment about her. He sauntered up to the window in that idiotic, languid way some cops have of showing off their authority. If ever she needed to exhibit self-control, now was that time.

She rolled down the window, drew on her lawyerly restraint and explained to the man an abbreviated version of what had

just transpired on the telephone with her daughter. Surely he'd understand her need to hurry. Seeing his bemused expression, his complete lack of interest, she went on to describe Phoebe's high-strung personality, and then against her better judgment and sense of privacy told him of her tendency to cut herself when under extreme emotional distress.

But he just stared at her. 'You ran a red light, lady,' he said, 'I need to see your license and registration.'

Isabel fished through her purse, finally managing to locate the documents. 'Please, officer, I'm telling you the truth.'

He took the items from her, glanced at them, said, 'Be right back,' and strolled to his vehicle. She watched him retreat in her mirror. She picked up her cell phone and tried Phoebe again. After five rings Phoebe's voicemail switched on.

'Hi,' her sweet young voice said. 'You know what to do . . . so do it.'

Isabel felt the same alien anxiety she'd experienced earlier. *I have to get home.* With one more backward glance at the police car, she cut the lights, put the BMW into gear and eased into traffic. She drove toward the P Street entrance of Rock Creek Parkway, only a couple of blocks away. Never in her entire life had she done anything like this.

As the smiling gibbous moon shone overhead, she kept looking in the rearview mirror, but saw no sign of the police. Her foot pressed harder on the gas, one eye fixed on the odometer. She could kick herself for what she'd done on Saturday night. Calling 911 had been spur of the moment. She always said you shouldn't act in the heat of anger. Still she'd been right to do it. *Damn that Sandy!* Now she had to explain it all to Phoebe. She tapped their home number and waited for someone to answer.

Despite two more calls to Phoebe, plus one to Ron, no one picked up. *Damn it!*

Phoebe fought back her tears. She was struggling to make sense of the fact that her mother *had* called the cops. Now she knew for certain that Jessie and Shane had been right. But Shane had also accused her of having been complicit in Mr. and Mrs. Littleton's arrest. *Why can't you just admit it*, he'd said. And yet there was nothing to admit, she hadn't told her mother! Worst of all, he was no longer interested in meeting her and he WASN'T coming to her party! She'd NEVER get to know him. She'd never be a '10' in his eyes! And now everyone would HATE her for what her mother had done.

She fetched the box cutter and began marching around the room. What could she say? How could she defend herself? She ran her thumb across the blade's sharp edge, then returned to her computer on the bed and laid the box cutter beside it. She would announce that she was sorry, very sorry, but she couldn't be held responsible for her mother.

Before she typed a single word, there in broad daylight, posted on her Facebook Wall, she saw that all sorts of people were slamming her. Messages from girls *and* boys, some she hardly knew. A couple she didn't know at all. *What a loser. Glad you're not my friend.* Several accused her of tattling to her mother about the drinking and called her mother 'sick' for calling the police.

Oh, please, not again, Phoebe thought, she couldn't take another year like the last one. She just couldn't, and this was definitely worse.

How low! You are such a piece of trash!

The words on the screen became a grating noise in Phoebe's head. She closed her eyes and covered her ears. This can't be happening. Make it stop. Please! And where was her friend Emma? She knew she could count on her. But the slights and insults kept coming.

Her hand flew to her mouth when she read: *The world would be better off without you. Don't you know that?* She might have expected something this cruel from Skyla or some of the others, but not Shane. No, not Shane.

Isabel maneuvered the car along the curves of Rock Creek Parkway. She pressed harder on the gas pedal, allowing the speedometer to climb well past the speed limit, half an eye on the road, she kept the other on her iPhone. 'Hell's bells,' she said aloud, fumbling with the icons, touching the wrong one, banging 'end,' then striking another. Finally, she tapped Ron's name again and listened to the phone's endless ring.

'Damn it,' she said viciously, 'answer the fucking phone.'

A feeling of dread lodged itself in Isabel's gut, and a sense of foreboding and darkness galloped through her mind. One moment it was the certainty that something bad had happened to Phoebe, and in the next the irrevocable fact that only minutes earlier she'd escaped the policeman, who couldn't be far behind.

She looked into the rearview mirror every few seconds, knowing that when he or another cop caught up to her there'd be hell to pay. How would she talk her way out of this? Could she be disbarred? She only knew that she had to get home and make sure Phoebe hadn't resorted to anything drastic. Anything, God forbid, irreversible. Then she remembered something she'd read

HERTA FEELY

on the Internet about cutting: *the worst thing of all about self-injury is that it is strongly connected to later suicide attempts and death by suicide.* No, no, no, she told herself. NO!

Concentrating, watching the car lap up the road, she chased the thought from her mind.

Once more, she tried the home number. But no one answered. The gibbous moon continued to stare down at her with its mocking smile.

2

Two months earlier, Monday, September 8, 2008

There was something tragic about fall, Isabel thought, as she stared out the bay windows of her kitchen and saw a leaf flutter to the ground. She was in the midst of setting the table for breakfast, but in that instant, in Isabel's mind, the entire maple tree's foliage crumbled and fell. Though not often, because she didn't allow herself to wallow, Isabel felt a deep staggering melancholy. Today was such a day. The children back to school. The relaxation and joys of summer vacation over. Back to an intense schedule. Autumn death and winter ahead.

A pair of cardinals, chirping and flitting about, rescued her. 'Phoebe, Jackson, time for breakfast!'

'Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?' Phoebe said.

With only a few minutes left before she had to catch the bus to her new school, she stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her fat freckled cheeks had slimmed over the course of the summer, or was that her imagination? No, she'd trimmed a few pounds off her weight and she'd gained at least an inch or two in height. She tilted her head and gazed at her eyes, almost amber in color – yes, they were still one of her most attractive features, something she and her mother agreed on. Phoebe batted her eyelashes, which matched her strawberry blonde hair, and tried on a smile. Then, turning sideways and drawing in a deep breath,

she compared her body's shape to the magazine photos she'd taped to the mirror's frame, one of Emma Stone and the other of a skinny model from *Teen Vogue*.

Though her figure looked more slender than her pudgy eighth-grade self last year, she knew she wasn't the fairest of them all, but was she even in the game? Making faces at herself, she dashed on pink lip gloss, then grabbed her lime green monogrammed book bag and ran out the door, yelling good-bye to her mother.

'But you didn't even have breakfast! Don't you want me to give you a ride on your first day of high school?' Her mother's shout reached her as she crossed the recently mown lawn of her family's three-story home that stood in the shadow of the National Cathedral. 'I'm good,' she yelled back. She walked several blocks to the bus stop on Wisconsin Avenue and found a spot on the bench to await the bus's arrival.

Today was no day to have breakfast, not on her first day as a freshman at Georgetown Academy. Ever since last year she'd vowed to lose weight and leave the ugly duckling years of middle school behind. She could still hear the hideous insults Skyla VanDorn had thrown at her after grabbing her thermal lunch bag last spring and dumping its contents onto the cafeteria table. For everyone to see! Two sandwiches slathered with peanut butter and jelly, a container of yogurt, a banana, an apple, a Snickers bar and two Oreos. The girls around her had pointed at the pile of food and laughed. 'Gee, Phoebe, eat much!'

Her visiting great-aunt Marta had packed the lunch, and even Phoebe was appalled. What had she been thinking? But Phoebe knew. Growing up in Hungary after the war, Great-Aunt Marta had often gone to bed suffering hunger pains. And

then Skyla captured the attention of a few boys wandering by with their trays, and they'd joined in the hazing. Even Noah, who she had a crush on, hadn't defended her. Though he did avert his eyes.

Phoebe had wanted to die. Instead, her face had flushed red, even brighter than her hair, and tears sprang to her eyes. She rushed from the table and headed to the girls' bathroom. In the last stall, she sank to a crouch on the floor and sobbed. She was sick of being humiliated, sick of being the brunt of jokes and teasing; Skyla had picked on her so often she'd lost count.

That's when she found a paper clip in her pocket, and without thinking, untwisted it until one end jutted out like a tiny dagger. She'd taken the weapon and run the sharp metal across the inside of her thigh, pushing it hard until droplets of blood surfaced. Then she'd stabbed herself. She'd done it again and again. What had surprised her most was the sensation of relief that had flooded her body. The way the ragged cuts absorbed her sadness. She'd let out a deep breath of air, then torn off some toilet paper and dabbed at the blood, watching the scarlet color spread onto the tissue. That was the first time she'd resorted to what Dr. Sharma called self-injury.

Isabel stepped out onto the veranda that wrapped around the front of their house hoping to catch sight of Phoebe, but she'd missed her. Her shoulders drooped a little. She took in several deep breaths of air, then let out a final long exhalation. She straightened, her hands on her hips.

Was it really true, only four more years before her darling girl headed off to some university? The words Vassar, Columbia,

Brown, and Stanford cycled through her mind. They were all possibilities, though the thought that Phoebe might live all the way across the country left her breathless. Then again leaving the East Coast for a place like Stanford might be a good thing. Especially after last year's horror.

She glanced at her watch, its single diamond glinting in the early morning light. A few more minutes before she had to leave for work. She lowered herself into one of the wicker chairs and closed her eyes. Her mother had taught her the value of prayer, and though Isabel didn't place much stock in God, she did aim, each day, to be grateful for something.

Today she expressed gratitude for the fact that *mean* girl Skyla VanDorn would not be attending Georgetown Academy. It didn't seem altogether right that she'd wished for this last school year, and then rejoiced when she'd heard the girl didn't get in, and now felt so happy that it was the case. No, her gratitude usually followed more positive lines of thought. But once she'd discovered the perfidy of Phoebe's grade-school best friend – Skyla's attacks had been nothing less than vicious – she couldn't help herself. Since there was so little she could do to protect her daughter, not having Skyla at the same school felt like a step in the right direction. The other steps, as she knew all too well, involved building Phoebe's self-esteem and ability to defend herself. And they'd been working on that all summer long. Hopefully the sessions with her therapist, Dr. Sharma, had helped, as well as the talks she'd had off and on with Phoebe.

Isabel opened her eyes. They landed on something lying beneath one of the bushes on the lawn. She craned her neck to see what it was. Then she stood and ran lightly down the steps to

get a closer look. It was a brightly plumed goldfinch. Bloodied and mangled. 'Oh, Hagrid, how could you?' She couldn't help adding, 'Please, God, protect my girl.'

Fifteen minutes later, with a mix of trepidation, hope, and excitement, Phoebe joined a stream of students walking up the main drive of the leafy, manicured campus. The school, formerly a mansion, sat amid an entire residential block of Georgetown, all of it walled off from the prying eyes of neighbors and passersby. The red brick walls – some overgrown with ivy and moss, while others showed years of decay – had been constructed by the original eccentric and exceedingly private owner a couple of centuries earlier.

The school's carved wooden doors stood wide open and seemed friendly, as if beckoning students, new and old, inside. Also welcoming them was the recently installed headmistress, Ms. Kendall, who seemed young compared to Phoebe's former principal. This woman seemed approachable. Though Phoebe hoped there'd be no reason to approach her. Not like at Woodmont, where visits to the principal had been too frequent. All had included Skyla. The principal always wanted them to resolve 'their issues,' but they weren't her issues, she thought, and anyway, Skyla was so good at faking it.

As Phoebe was about to pass by her, Ms. Kendall said, 'Hello.' Phoebe came to a halt and greeted her in a small voice. 'Hi, Ms. Kendall.'

'Phoebe Murrow, right?' The headmistress's mouth and eyes smiled. Phoebe nodded. 'Welcome aboard,' the woman added.

'Thank you,' Phoebe said, impressed Ms. Kendall knew her name, and moved inside, hoping to find someone she knew.

‘Hey, Phoebe!’

Phoebe glanced around in search of the familiar voice. Jessie! Their eyes locked. Friendly, smiling Jessie. New at Woodmont last year, she’d been Phoebe’s lifesaver, rescuing her on more than one occasion from the wicked Skyla. Now Phoebe ran to her, her book bag sliding off her shoulder as they embraced, clutching each other for a solid minute. As if they were long lost sisters. Then Jessie latched on to Phoebe’s arm and together they continued into the large central foyer called the Great Hall.

They caught up on the last few weeks while each had been away. First, Phoebe had visited her uncle on Martha’s Vineyard, then she’d visited her paternal grandfather on Cape Cod. His wife, her Nana Helen, had died shortly after she’d taught Phoebe how to sew a few years earlier, the two memories intertwined, making her both weepy and wistful at times.

Jessie spoke animatedly about her family’s trip to the Jersey shore as Emma, their tall, dark-haired friend, joined them. In her skinny black jeans, simple white T-shirt, and assemblage of silver studs and hoops, Emma affected a goth look. In contrast to Jessie, and now the budding Phoebe, Emma was all angles, flat-chested and narrow-hipped.

‘Group hug,’ Emma said. The three threw their arms around each other for a lengthy, laughter-laced embrace. Though Phoebe’s friendship with Emma was recent, she admired this artistic, free-spirited girl. For at least ten minutes, they chattered and giggled, and talked over each other in a stream of gaiety and delight. All the while, Emma snapped a few shots with her new iPhone, capturing this milestone event for later scrutiny.

At once, though, Phoebe stopped, her forehead wrinkling. It couldn’t be. But yes, there it was, across the Great Hall.

A ponytail. Skyla's ponytail. About twenty feet away. The blonde-haired girl, squeezed inside a knot of tittering girls, turned slightly to reveal the set of mesmerizing emerald eyes Phoebe had come to fear and loathe.

Dr. Sharma had suggested that 'without the head of the snake,' Skyla's minions would be rendered powerless. Phoebe had counted on it. Now she groaned.

'What?' Jessie said, glancing around, trying to follow Phoebe's gaze.

'Look. Would you look?' The color had drained from her face.

In tandem, Emma and Jessie located the source of their friend's distress. Emma's fingers intertwined Phoebe's and gave them a squeeze.

'Aw, geez,' Jessie said, releasing a slight whistle. 'What the hell's *she* doing here?' Then going into typical Jessie rescue mode, she instructed, 'Act like you haven't seen her. Just keep walking. She's nothing. You're twice as pretty. Honest!' As if that were Phoebe's chief concern.

It seemed as if Skyla had heard Jessie's remark, because the pink-clad girl turned toward them, her eyes dismissing Jessie and Emma and zeroing in on Phoebe. She gave her a long appraising look, then turned away and continued on, several girls trailing in her wake like minnows.

The morning's excitement vanished. In its place, a lump the size of a small fist lodged itself in Phoebe's throat. She simply couldn't survive another year like the previous one, no matter what her mother said. ('Don't let her get to you, honey, you're stronger than that.') *No, I'm not*, she wanted to shout. *I'm not!* And Dr. Sharma's instructions vanished. Clutching Jessie's arm

and Emma's fingers, she moved forward, staring vacantly as last year's disasters flashed before her, one by one.

Mother and daughter arrived home at nearly the same time. Isabel had left work a little early to make this day a memorable one. When Phoebe entered the kitchen, Isabel could hardly contain herself. 'How was the first day of high school, sweetie?'

Phoebe's eyes slid across Isabel's face and stopped somewhere beyond her left shoulder. She slipped into a kitchen chair and propped her elbows on the table, her head heavy in her hands. Then her chin trembled and Isabel was certain she was about to break into tears. She stared at her daughter, trying to decide what to say or do. What could have happened?

She crossed the room and ran her hand over Phoebe's hair and across her shoulders, saying nothing. A few moments later, Phoebe wiped her eyes with her sleeve and finally told her mother about Skyla. In the process, her eyes darted about, as if frantic to find shelter. 'I can't do it, Mom, I can't go back to that school.' She sounded forlorn, like a child someone had abandoned in the woods. Like the fairy tale Gretel.

As she looked at her, Isabel's morning gratitude turned to dust.