

Nature's Kiss

by Rachel Crosby

Chapter One

High school English teacher Faye Bloomberg despised mandatory standardized school tests. And her attitude was especially negative when she was proctoring such a test on a warm and sunny Friday afternoon in late May on Cape Cod. She glanced around her classroom which, despite a school-wide rehab a decade previous, looked much the way it had when Faye had been a student. Some days, standing in front of the “smart board” and behind her streamlined, mostly plastic, “teacher’s module,” she swore she could still smell the chalk dust and hear the thwack of Mrs. Cooke’s wooden pointer on her massive oak desk. Faye often wondered what had happened to that worthy piece of pedantic furniture.

On normal school days Faye’s classroom hummed with the suppressed excitement only a group of restless teenagers can generate. But today the mood was dampened by widespread anxiety and desperation. The 10 graders, most of them 15 or barely 16, were sweating, fidgeting, chewing their pencils and muttering to themselves, while sneaking peeks through the windows at the glow of spring a few tantalizing yards away. Faye had opened the room’s windows and the bird calls and bee buzzes wafted in, along with the delicious scent of new growth, all announcing that, after a typical wet Cape Cod spring, nature was finally in labor to birth summer.

The majority of the students were pressured by the exam time limit and glared at the clock every couple of minutes. A few sat motionless, overwhelmed by the number and complexity of the test questions, staring at an answer sheet filled with endless rows of empty little circles.

Faye scanned the room to provide at least the illusion she was doing her job as exam proctor. Her gaze stopped at Ariella Cardona, sitting as usual at the end of the front row next to the windows. What an interesting, but strange girl, Faye thought, not for the first time. Ariella, often referred to in the teacher’s lounge as “The Dreamer,” wasn’t showing any signs of anxiety nor any real interest in the test. She wasn’t ignoring the questions, because every two minutes or so she bent over the exam booklet for fifteen seconds and made a mark on the answer sheet. Then she’d raise her head and gaze out the window, her hands folded together on the desk, her legs crossed just so at the ankles. Faye often wondered if the girl was stoned.

Ariella was in one of Faye’s 10th grade English Composition and Literature classes and had attracted everyone’s attention from the start when she’d arrived as a new transfer in September. Almost every day Ariella wore vintage, black patent leather Mary Jane shoes with white ankle socks. Unlike the other girls, she always wore an ironed dress or blouse and skirt. And the skirt was invariably full and bell-like and fell below her knees. Faye had even caught a glimpse of petticoats. Ariella’s tops were simple, usually a

solid pastel color, often with a Peter Pan collar and cap sleeves. When the weather was cold, Ariella added a demure white cardigan which she draped over her shoulders. She was tall for her age, which also made her stand out. Faye was 5 feet 8 inches and Ariella was just an inch shorter.

After her astonishing green eyes, Ariella's thick, long, reddish-blond tresses were her best feature. Her hair was always neat, either up in a complicated chignon or in two long, thick braids, sometimes tied off with neon-colored electrical wire. The jewelry pieces she wore were small and delicate, with the exception of a gold ring set with a large green stone on the third finger of her left hand. But her makeup was unexpected. She used startling near-white foundation, reminiscent of Kabuki actors, with poppy red clownish rouge spots on her cheeks, and bright pink or purple on her lips. Small beauty marks made with black eyeliner appeared above both corners of her mouth, and, on her lids, pastel colors coordinated with her blouse or dress. She reminded Faye of a china doll, updated to the 21st century.

Faye knew Ariella wasn't stupid because the homework she turned in was well-written and thoughtful, if a bit predictable. In fact, she wrote as if she were trying to sound like an ordinary, smart 10th grader. Plus, she always behaved in class and was responsive when called upon, never seemed to be bummed or angry and often had a quirky, enigmatic smile on her lips. And Ariella liked Emily Dickinson and quoted the poet often in her essays. This endeared the girl to Faye, as she herself was a Fan of Emily D.

Faye knew she wasn't alone in singling the girl out. Both boys and girls were always sneaking glances and even staring, but Ariella never took notice. She did none of the in-class primping, flirting or gossiping which preoccupied many of the other girls. Faye couldn't tell if Ariella had a boyfriend or even a best friend. Like the teachers, students also had nicknames for Ariella. "Spooky Kabuki" was almost funny and "Airy Fairy" wasn't as vicious as it sounded because the girl was ethereal. However, a 10th grade boy had written a suggestive song called "Let Me Tell Ya, 'Bout My Girl Ariella." The video of him playing the guitar and singing the song on YouTube was the talk of the school for a week. The lyric's teasing and sexual innuendos were softened by the song's last lines:

"Ariella, Ariella, don' want to hem and haw,
Got's ta tell ya, Ariella, yeah, I really love ya."

But the girl never complained about the video to anyone in authority and took no less or more interest in the boy. And the expected outraged phone call from her parents didn't happen, so the gossip and speculation was allowed to run its course. If anything, Ariella seemed pleased by the extra attention she got.

Faye understood while the students made fun of Ariella, they also granted her minor celebrity status. Her peers recognized Ariella was making a statement, even if they didn't understand what it was. So, having Ariella at your cafeteria lunch table was a social plus, like owning the latest cell phone. In a peculiar way, the girl was popular, never in the center but never excluded. She seemed to float along, part of the action, but hanging at the edge of the jostling herd.

Faye envied Ariella, because she herself had been a true Plain Jane Nobody in high school, who kept her head down in the halls and hugged books to her chest. She actually had had a nice figure (and still did, plus 10 pounds) but, like Ariella, had hidden her curves beneath clothes. Her hair, black and curly, gave her a gypsy look when unbound, but she had minimized its allure in high school by pinning it back severely. And her mouth, when it wasn't pursed into a tight line, was full and sensuous.

She hadn't been repulsed by boys, but got tense and silent when one tried to talk to her. Her scalp would start to tingle, her facial muscles would tighten and her hands became ice cold. She would hunch her shoulders to make herself shorter and looked at anything but the boy. Her mind would fill with a paralyzing blankness through which her thoughts darted randomly or not at all. If she tried to force herself to speak, she wound up stammering, so she generally just walked away without speaking. The boys, and even the popular girls, thought she was rude and stuck-up.

By the time Faye was a sophomore in college and desperate for a social life, she went to a therapist and was told her freezing-up was caused by an unconscious fear she was going to be compared to her four-years older sister Clara, who had cut a wide swath through the high school. Clara had been super popular, was class valedictorian, editor of the school paper, captain of the soccer and tennis teams, dated only the smartest, most athletic, gorgeous boys and had the coolest girlfriends. Clara had graduated the June before Faye started 9th grade and throughout her entire time in high school, teachers and students always asked after Clara and weren't surprised she was going to become a doctor.

Even now, at age 36, despite various coping mechanisms, Faye could still go into stasis and be unable to talk or, at best, manage a few spastic bursts of words when she was in an intimidating situation. She likened the phenomenon to the instinctive reaction of some animals to play dead when in the clutches of a predator. Thinking this all through for the millionth time, Faye turned to see Ariella, who had a small smile bowing her pink lips, staring at her. Faye immediately glanced away and went back to scanning the other students, ostensibly to watch for cheaters. Faye didn't care if the kids shared a few answers. If she noticed small signs of suspicious behavior, she tried to ignore them. Or, if the cheating was blatant, she glared at the offending students until their faces got red and they stared down at their test papers.

Faye was deeply resentful of the assumptions behind the standardized tests, assumptions based on the belief that the sole goal of public education was to make sure graduates were equipped with skills needed to meet the "demands of the modern workplace." That phrase irritated her no end, implying the school was little more than a factory designed to turn out skilled workers whose only aim in life was to be functional, productive and "successful." Successful at what? Fitting into some corporate slot where they got treated like a proverbial cog in the machine?

Every year, Faye railed against the tests. "What about their hearts and feelings? What about their appreciation for beauty and nature? What about learning what it is to lead a good life and about

philosophy and ethics? What about learning to read for enjoyment and insight?" Most of her colleagues ignored her on this issue.

Faye fought back by proctoring the exams. Not only did she not prosecute students she spotted cheating, she also bent the rules in how completely she answered their questions. When the situation indicated, she used the Socratic method to focus their thinking. She would lean down, get close to the student's ear and began whispering questions designed to nudge them toward the correct answer.

Today was no different and, as the exam time reached the halfway point, raised hands appeared like long stemmed flowers blossoming all over the room. Faye was kept on her feet, all the while delighting in the thrill of her secret rebellion. As she sat down after one successful "proctor response," she saw a pale, slender arm, with its hand at an artful angle, go up. It was Ariella, which was unusual, because in English Lit class she almost never asked a question. Faye hurried over to Ariella's desk, being careful to put herself between the girl and the rest of the students.

She leaned down and whispered, "Yes, Ariella, how can I help you?"

Ariella looked up with eyes so green Faye had often thought they might be contact lenses, though she was pretty sure the gold flecks in the girl's irises couldn't be faked. Faye had a sudden vision of how she might look with eyes as green as Ariella's. Would life be better, different, more exciting?

"I lost my pencil," Ariella said at normal volume.

Faye twitched as if stuck with a thorn and whispered, "Oh, you did?"

Ariella continued at ordinary volume, "Yes," and her unreadable smile curled her lips. She waved the hand with the large green stone ring in Faye's direction, as if she was at a loss about where the pencil had gone.

"Please try to whisper, dear, so as to not disturb the others," Faye managed to say, realizing she was felt a little lightheaded. She reminded herself to eat the lunch she had packed.

"They can't hear me," said Ariella. In fact, Faye saw none of the students were looking their way.

"Huh!" said Faye, turning back to the girl and trying to focus. "Where's your pencil then?"

"I don't know, it just vanished." The girl's gaze was steady, her smile mysterious.

"Well, it can't have 'just vanished'." Teenage girls can be so dramatic, Faye thought. "It must be somewhere. Did you drop it? Did it roll away? Didn't you bring another one?"

"No, I only had one and I don't know where it went. I need your help to find it," Ariella said, her tone flat and matter-of-fact.

Faye, having bent down to whisper, felt her face go hot. Then there was a twang in her head and she put her hand over her mouth to stifle a gasp, sensing a shift of something important, like a glacier calving from an ice shelf. She forced herself to stop staring at Ariella and, looking away and down, saw a bit of yellow beneath the nearby baseboard heater. Without thinking, she got down on her hands and knees,

crawled over and coaxed out a dusty pencil with teeth marks all along its stubby length. She straightened, holding up the pencil as if it were a prize and exclaimed, "Here it is! It was right here! I found it!"

Now the students did turn their way but, ignoring their curiosity, Faye felt a big, sappy grin capture her face. She beamed at Ariella and repeated, "I found it!"

Ariella, still smiling, said, "That's not my pencil."

Faye frowned. Surely this had to be the pencil.

"Well, I'm afraid it must suffice, my dear," she said, proud in an odd way of how deliberate and normal she sounded, despite how squirrely her head felt. She was aware she and Ariella now had the attention of the other students. "Time is running out."

"I don't think it will work," said Ariella and gazed up at Faye, who studied the pencil and realized the point was broken. Her mind went blank and she gaped at Ariella like an actor who had forgotten her lines.

Finally, Ariella shrugged and said, "Can I at least sharpen it?"

Faye clutched the pencil tight, needing to hold onto something. "No," she said slowly, "No, I should do that." Still light-headed, Faye watched herself, as if from a distance, walk to her desk and, her hand wavering, stick the pencil into the electric sharpener. The buzz from the sharpener was sudden and sharp and pop! Faye's dizziness left. She pulled the pencil out and examined its point with exaggerated care, before walking back and handing it to Ariella with what she hoped appeared to be confidence.

"Everything okay now?" she asked, and realized she was also asking herself the question.

Ariella examined the pencil and seemed in turn fascinated. Finally, she said, "I guess so."

Faye marched back to her desk module, sat down with a bump and yanked her lunch bag from her purse on the floor. She unwrapped the pita bread sandwich of organic humus, lettuce and tomato and devoured it in quick bites, feeling deserving and righteous, but also still a bit quivery. What was it about that girl?

Having eaten the sandwich, she felt not energized but exhausted. She felt the way she did after one of her infrequent gym workouts. She struggled against the need to put her head down on the desk. Checking the time, she saw an hour and a quarter remained before she had to call a halt to the exam. Not long at all, surely she could hang in there. She leaned back in her ergonomic desk chair and her eyes closed. *Just for a moment...*

Chap Two

Faye had majored in English Literature at Brown University where she was, she had to admit, a mediocre student. After she struggled to a Master's degree, she at last understood she was only interested in immersing herself in the books and stories. She just wasn't motivated to discuss themes, plot lines or the author's hidden meanings. Her especial passions were for fantasy and alternative reality novels. She was also quite fond of graphic romances. She simply wanted fiction which took her away from her every day, ordinary life.

Faye's love of fiction and fantasy had begun when she learned to read, but got a huge boost from a girl she met in 6th grade after Faye's parents moved the family from Boston to the Cape. Wanda Eldridge was a true Cape Codder, having the requisite double set of grandparents buried on the peninsula. She was, like most of the other native kids, scornful of "washashores" like Faye. Wanda's friends were all natives and she was de-facto a member of their clique. But she wasn't popular, mostly because she was a tomboy, taller even than Faye, and tended to be bossy. But she was marginalized because she was always going on about magic and dragons, strange realms and other dimensions. Wanda saw Faye as another fantasy nerd and understood she could make an instant friend. Things clicked between the two girls and, within a few months, they were inseparable.

Wanda took Faye to many pristine, beautiful and "magical" natural spots not on tourist maps. They hiked to quiet, isolated beaches and waded through tidal marshes, watching small fish and hermit crabs dart away. Wanda's small sailboat took them out into Nantucket Sound and Faye learned to sail. They kayaked in the tangles of small rivers and streams which wound through wetlands and ponds populated by herons, frogs, turtles, fish and dragonflies. When it was hot enough, they would swim naked. And occasionally, when saturated with idyll, they lay on the sandy bank of a pond and kissed, just for fun, and call each other by fantasy names of endearment, before dozing entwined under the summer sun.

They spent hours discussing the merits of various kinds of unicorns and which was worse: getting caught by a troll or an ogre. They also debated what to name their personal dragon (of course, they each had one) and what its magic powers were. And they argued whether they could ever be enticed to break their white magic vows and use black spells on a particularly nasty person - Faye said she could never and Wanda said she absolutely would.

Adult Faye was still a lover of fantasy and felt no embarrassment over it. In fact, she often livened things up by pretending she was a character in one of the novels and their mannerisms and way of talking even leaked out into her conversations. More importantly, she could often deflect a freeze up by shifting into a fantasy persona. As time passed, she developed a repeating cast of characters, such as the Posh Brit, the Irish Lass, the Flamenco Dancer or the Cowgirl.

After graduate school, Faye moved to Boston intending to find a position as an assistant editor at one of the local publishing houses, but her just average transcript and her tendency become monosyllabic or shift into one of her personas in the middle of an interview led to zero job offers. Desperate, she took a

job as a sales clerk in a major chain bookstore, primarily because it provided her ample opportunities to read. Two years drifted by and no other literary job opportunities appeared.

She did endure several tepid affairs with bookish men she met in the store. Men who, thankfully, enjoyed sitting around reading as much as they did having sex. One of these men, Stanley, was also into role-playing. With him, she went to several RPG Conventions to participate in cosplay, to dress up as a character from a game, book, TV show or film. Behind a mask or elaborate make-up, Faye was free of her social phobias. But Stanley moved to the West Coast and without him she hadn't the courage to cosplay by herself.

Her mother, Rhoda, who had continued teaching math in the same high school Faye and Clara had attended, suggested, with frequent use of the phrase "it's important to be realistic," Faye try teaching. At first Faye ignored her mother, if only because she hated the idea of having to be realistic. She did, however, understand she needed to start some sort of a "career" or risk sinking further into the family role of little, and lesser, sister. Of course, Clara, with her successful practice as a Doctor of Internal Medicine, continued as the family star. She had married another doctor and already had two children, which thrilled the grandparents and were mentioned often in conversation. So, after another six months at the bookstore Faye gave in to Rhoda, especially as she imagined part of an English teacher's job would be to read a lot.

Faye's Master's degree meant all she had to do was pass a competency exam to qualify for a teaching license. A month later, Rhoda told her of an opening for an English teacher at the high school where she was teaching - the same school Faye and Clara had attended. The job interview quickly became cozy and friendly once the two women administrators found out Faye was an alumnae. And Faye didn't freeze up, but chatted with the women as if they were old friends. She felt an unexpected sense of belonging which was simultaneously welcome and confining.

Being a high school English teacher didn't compare to Clara's career, but it did provide Faye focus and purpose. Also, it provided her a real income - magnificent compared to what she had been making as a bookstore clerk. And she found she liked teaching. Not only was she able to offer literary knowledge to young minds, but she had a non-fantasy role of importance and authority in the same school where she had been invisible as a student. She could look the most beautiful, slender girls in the eye as she talked about books. And she could converse easily with the handsome, popular boys.

Faye lived with her parents for her first two years of teaching, but then her father died and her mother decided to downsize to a one-bedroom condo in a senior living complex. So Faye, 30 and single, took the plunge and bought a small two-bedroom Cape in a woodsy development where the houses were on good-sized lots, yet near enough for neighbors to say 'hi' when going to the mail box. A year later she met rakishly handsome Drake Hershfeld, another Cape Cod teacher (of Social Studies, of all subjects) at a teacher's conference. To Faye's amazement, their attraction was mutual and they became a couple.

She and Drake had talked marriage and children, but those discussions, while civil enough, never went beyond anywhere. Drake always suggested they “think on it.” Five years later, at 36, Faye struggled to accept she might never be a mother. But, as she put it, “the alarm on my biological clock appears to be broken.” Instead of obsessing about having children, she devoted herself to becoming the best possible teacher and mentor to her students. When asked by her friends about motherhood, she said being with teenagers five days a week gave her all the youthful sparkle she could handle.

“Ms Bloomberg?” Faye heard a distant voice. “Ms Bloomberg?” Faye opened her eyes with effort and realized she had dozed off. She searched out the wall clock. Oh no! She had been out for ten minutes. She wondered how many students noticed her sleeping. Had she snored? She smiled to herself. Well, if they took advantage and did some real cheating, so what?

“Ms Bloomberg?” Faye understood the voice was right next to her. She turned and saw Ariella gazing down at her. Faye sat up and managed to ask in her teacher voice, “Yes, Ariella, what is it?” She ignored the fact the girl was supposed to stay in her seat unless given permission.

“I need to go to the bathroom.”

“Okay, let’s get the hall monitor to take you,” said Faye, rising from her seat, avoiding looking directly at Ariella.

“I don’t feel well. Can you take me?”

At this, Faye did face Ariella. For once, the girl wasn’t smiling and her eyes were flat and expressionless. Even under her pale makeup, her face was drawn and she was clutching hard at her backpack. When Faye did try to catch Ariella’s eye, the girl instead dropped her head, making her braids fall forward like thick tentacles. Faye glanced down too and started. Was blood oozing down Ariella’s leg? Was blood staining the top of Ariella’s white sock?

Faye gently took the girl by the arm and guided her toward the door. Opening it with a jerk, she propelled Ariella ahead of her. Faye stuck her head into the hallway, careful to keep most of her body in the classroom, not wanting the other students to think she was going to leave them unattended, not after napping off. She called to the monitor at the next corridor intersection “Sarah! Can you watch my room for a few minutes? I need to escort this young lady to the restroom.”

Ariella was silent as they walked side-by-side through the halls. When they entered the bathroom, Ariella dropped her backpack into a sink and began rummaging through it. She pulled out a small white jar.

“What’s that?” Faye asked.

“It’s some healing cream of my mother’s.”

“May I please see it?”

Faye turned the jar over in her hands. It appeared to be a recycled face cream container, with the original label partly scraped off. Someone had scrawled "Healing" on it with a black magic marker. She unscrewed the lid and saw the jar was half-full of a greenish jelly with leaf fragments and other planty bits mixed in. Its scent was green and earthy but not offensive. It reminded Faye of walks in the deep woods on misty mornings. She had pang of longing for something ineffable and felt herself start to drift like she had in the classroom. Struggling to maintain composure, Faye said, "Your mom makes this stuff?" and gave the jar back. Ariella nodded and turned toward the stalls.

"Wait, don't you need a tampon or pad?"

Ariella stopped with her back to Faye and said, "I don't have my period," and reached for the stall door.

"Hold on," Faye said with more emphasis. "You need to tell me why blood is running down your leg and on your sock. If that's not from your period, where's it coming from?"

Without turning around, Ariella reached behind her and lifted the hem of her dress, exposing the backs of her thighs and the long red welts crisscrossing them. Most of the welts had scabbed over but a few were leaking blood. Blood that had dribbled down Ariella's leg and into her sock.

Faye stared in disbelief. Somebody had whipped or cut Ariella! She tried to say something, to ask who, what and why, but Ariella let her dress fall back into place, went into the stall and locked the door. Faye spun around, wondering if anyone had overheard them. Had she violated the girl's privacy? No, a quick glance showed no feet under the other stall doors.

She couldn't ignore this. She had a responsibility to to to what? Should she report it as possible child abuse or try to talk to the girl first? She caught her reflection in the mirror above one of the sinks. In the mirror she saw a tense, not-young, woman whose hair was frizzed out, her blouse rumpled, and with some dried sleep drool at the corner of her mouth. *These kids must think I'm a total ditz, nodding off during the test. But, what else is new?* What was more important is what she did now about Ariella. She pulled her hair back and secured it with a hair band, the fluorescent light highlighting a few new gray hairs. She straightened and tucked in her blouse and wiped the gunk from the corner of her mouth.

Ariella emerged from the stall and actually looked refreshed. I gotta try that cream, thought Faye, then mentally slapped herself upside the head. Focus, Faye, focus! Ariella picked up her backpack and dropped the jar and her bloody socks into it. She started for the bathroom door.

"Wait a minute, Ariella, we need to talk about what's going on with you. I need to know how those ...", Faye searched for the right word, "... wounds on your legs got there."

Slowly Ariella turned and gave Faye an unreadable look. Her green eyes flared, but then she rolled her eyes and said, "Right now?"

"No, not right now. You need to get back to the test. Later, maybe ..." Faye paused, thinking it was Friday and everyone was about to flee the school once the test was over. Could she make the girl stay

and wait until all the exams were turned in and she had completed all the proctor paperwork? No, that would be awkward, plus Ariella might have to catch a bus home.

“Is there any way we can talk over the weekend? Maybe on the phone?”

Unexpectedly, Ariella dropped into a perfect curtsy, holding the her dress out to the sides so she looked like a big, beautiful flower. “Sure!” she said with a big smile.

They pulled out their phones and typed in each other’s numbers. Faye was surprised to see Ariella didn’t own some big-screen smart phone but rather a much older flip-open model with duct tape across the back, apparently to hold in the battery.

Faye was pleased, but not surprised, at Ariella’s quick agreement to talk on the phone. Faye had, over the years, embraced and cultivated the reputation of being a teacher the kids could come to with their problems. Ariella must know Ms Bloomberg was someone safe and easy to talk to, someone who could keep a secret.

When Ariella and Faye returned to the classroom, Ariella went directly to her desk and sat down without any apparent discomfort. Faye thanked the hall monitor and resumed her place at her teacher’s module. A glance at the clock showed only 55 minutes of exam time remained. A boy in the back was waving his hand at her. Three minutes later, after whispering several leading questions into the boy’s ear and seeing a light go on in his eyes, she straightened up and saw movement at the front of the room. Faye watched as Ariella dropped her exam papers on the teacher’s module’s desk and headed for the door.

“Ariella!” she exclaimed without thinking. The girl glanced back, flashed her brilliant smile and held her hand to her ear with the thumb and little finger extended. “*Call me,*” she mouthed and slipped out the door. Faye hustled up to the desk and picked up Ariella’s papers. They were all there, but when she took a closer look she saw almost half of the multiple-choice questions had not been answered. Shocked, she turned toward the classroom door, feeling a strong impulse to run after the girl. She took one step and stopped. Several students had their heads up, watching her with quizzical expressions.

Okay! This has to end! Ariella’s test still in her hand Faye sat down hard in her chair. She was trembling with the need to do something, anything. But what? Ariella was gone, no way to go after her. She stared at the answer sheet, at all the blank, empty boxes. The test was an abomination, but Ariella was going to fail it and might not get a normal diploma. Faye took deep breaths, closed her eyes, and tried to put herself in the quiet place she often reached when she meditated. She hoped the kids wouldn’t think she had fallen asleep again. All that had happened in the last 45 minutes skittered through her mind in a herky-jerky movie – flashes of brilliant, emerald green eyes, a yellow, tooth-marked and dusty pencil, the dizzy disorientation, blood staining a white sock, ugly red stripes on the back of tender, white thighs, an inscrutable smile which both asked a question and offered an answer, the blank, blank answer sheet, the buzz of the pencil sharpener.

Faye's eyes popped open and she grabbed a pencil, centered the girl's answer sheet in front of her, and began to fill in the multiple-choice circles of the unanswered questions. Her movements were quick, making random choices from the five lettered circles per question. She quickly fell into a rhythm. On and on she went until every last question had a circle filled in. She stopped, checked the time and saw there were still 30 minutes of exam time left. She sat back, her heart thumping. Well, Ariella might have done that herself. Just random choices. Surely no harm in that. By the time the last half hour dwindled away, Faye had calmed down.

"Time! Please close your booklets and put down your pencils," she called out in a clear, firm voice. "Bring your papers and form a line in front of my desk." She paused, then said, "Good luck to you all!"

When the classroom was finally empty of students, Faye glared at the pile of exam papers. What had she done? Was she nuts to mess with Ariella's exam? She could so be fired for this. She reminded herself how much she hated these tests and her nostrils flared. Screw it! She had done it on principle, not because she particularly cared about Ariella. One small action, one small gesture - it might not make a difference in the big picture, but it mattered to her. Gathering the papers into a neat stack, she again rationalized that, in reality, the answers she had filled in at random could, at best, only add a few points to Ariella's score.

Faye stood, straightened her spine, picked up her bag and the papers and strode into the hall. Locking the classroom door behind her, she marched toward the Administration wing to log in the exams.