



Knopf Books for Young Readers

Fact
of Life

#31

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Denise
Vega

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*To my niece, Sarah Elizabeth Perkins,
who continues to make a difference in the world*

First Trimester

During this wonderful first phase, things are happening already! You can expect all kinds of new and interesting changes in your body—changes in breast size and tenderness, feelings of fatigue, nausea and vomiting, frequent urination, and many more.

The baby starts as a cluster of cells before moving quickly to having a heartbeat. It has reflexes and the ability to move those teeny-tiny limbs. Backbone, spinal column, and nervous system are also forming!

1

911.

The numbers seemed to pulse on my pager, quickening along with my heartbeat. Abra only used the pager for emergencies, because sometimes I didn't answer when she called my cell. I jammed my headset into my cell and dialed her number.

"Katima, thank God." Her voice was soft but the words were quick, anxious. I rarely heard Abra sound anxious. "Where are you?"

"On my way to school," I said. "Where are you?"

"I'm at Linda's," Abra said. "She's in labor."

"Is everything okay?" Linda was one of my favorites of Abra's mothers. I had been working two afternoons a week at Abra's Midwifery for over a year and had gotten to know a lot of the women. Linda and I had hit it off, sharing a love of rocky road ice cream and a hatred of reality TV. I had helped her plan her birth—the music, atmosphere, different birth options. I didn't want her having complications.

"She's doing beautifully," Abra said. "But I'm not. Marion

broke her foot, Sarah is at another birth, and Carmen isn't picking up any of her phones or responding to my page." Abra sucked in a breath. "I have no one to assist me."

I eased down on the brakes of my Honda Hybrid as I came to a stop sign. "Um, okay. But you've delivered lots of babies without an assistant."

"I know. But Linda wants one, so I need you to get to her house as fast as you can."

"Say what?" I hit the gas too hard, jerking the car forward.

"I've excused you from school," Abra said. "This is life experience, Katima. A transcendent experience. You won't get that in any classroom."

My hands shook on the steering wheel. I turned down a side street and pulled over, shutting off the ignition. I didn't know if I was pissed at her for assuming I'd do it or excited that I might actually get to see a live birth.

But what did I know about assisting?

"You're out of your mind."

"Well, that's highly possible," Abra said, "seeing as how I've exhausted all of my usual assistants and I'm calling a sixteen-year-old high school student who's worked at the Midwifery for a year." She chuckled. "If I'm not out of my mind, I'm clearly a little desperate, Katima."

Clearly. "Is it all right with Linda and Wayne?"

"Of course," Abra said. "I would never do something like this without asking them." There was a pause before she spoke again. "Actually, Linda is the one who suggested it."

"She did?" A grin spread across my face. "Tell me how to get there."

* * *

I pulled up at Linda's house about thirty minutes later. It was in a new development—big gables and dormer windows, small trees, new sod. I was shaking with nervous excitement. I'd never seen a baby emerge like an oversized Otter Pop except in that movie we saw back in sixth grade. The idea thrilled and petrified me at the same time.

I glanced around the car. I had no idea what I might need, but I knew there would be times when we would just wait. Unzipping my backpack, I flipped through textbooks and notebooks, pulling out the Rocky Mountain Women's Triathlon brochure I'd been reading. Then I grabbed my sketchbook and some pencils before heading into the house.

"Kat," Linda said when I arrived. "I'm so glad you're here." She was wearing one of her husband Wayne's oversized T-shirts, her nipples poking through the fabric. Her maternity underwear hugged her butt.

"You sure you want me here?"

She made an "are you kidding?" face. Then she quickly sucked in her breath.

"Another one?" Wayne asked, rubbing her back.

Linda nodded, letting out her breath slow and even. Abra once told me that for some women, labor pains are menstrual cramps times a few hundred—for some, times a thousand or so. Yikes. But Linda's face wasn't all pinched up in pain. It was calm; her eyes focused.

I turned and watched Abra as she moved between tasks, so fluidly she hardly seemed to be moving at all. I thought of that phrase "She was in her element." But here in this room, with the shades drawn and a few candles flickering, Abra was more than

that—she *was* the element. I'd seen her at the office, but never at a birth, never like this—a person who moved with grace and perfect timing, anticipating, checking, doing. Always doing the right thing.

“Slowly, Katima,” Abra said as I hurried over. “You want to create a calm environment.” She motioned me next to her. “Help me with this.” I stepped around the large layer of plastic spread out on the floor beside the bed. “Your job is P-I-E,” Abra whispered. “Physical, informational, and emotional support.”

“I'm not a doula, Abra,” I said. “I'm your receptionist and occasional office visit assistant.”

Abra smiled, but I knew what she was thinking: *You don't have to remind me that you are a lame excuse for a birth assistant.*

“Just do what I tell you,” she said. “You'll be fine.”

Like I would know how to do anything except what she told me. But at least she had some confidence that I could help out.

“Hold the sheets up,” she said. I did, and she put plastic beneath them. We smoothed the sheets back down and fluffed the pillows.

“All right,” Abra said, surveying the room. I could tell she was taking a mental inventory, making sure everything was in its place. She had a table with all of her supplies at the ready; the birthing ball and birthing stool were resting in a corner in case Linda wanted to use them.

I wasn't sure what she needed me for. It looked like she had everything under control. I glanced at her as she stood out of the way, her eyes resting softly on Linda and Wayne.

Abra. The best home birth midwife in the Rocky Mountain region.

Abra. Practically perfect in every way.

Abra. My mother.

2

It was quiet except for Linda's and Wayne's soft steps across the carpet. Linda had told me she didn't like it too quiet. She liked a little noise, no matter what she was doing. But maybe now that she was actually here, in the middle of labor, she didn't want anything at all. Still . . .

"Would you like some music, Linda?" I cringed as my voice grated against the silence. "I'm sorry," I said. "I just remembered you said—"

"Music would be wonderful, Kat."

"The iPod system is over there." Wayne pointed to the dresser.

I wasn't sure where Linda was in terms of her labor stages, but she was still engaged in conversation and walking around a lot, so I selected the fifth song in our First Stage list and pressed Play. Nineties rock pulsed through the speakers.

Abra stepped forward. "I don't think—" she started to say, but Linda raised her hand. "It's perfect," she said, swinging her hips. "I know it's going to be worse later and I may not be able to do this." She waved me over to her. "Let's dance, Kat."

Wayne smiled as I joined her, shimmying to the music. Abra slipped into the bathroom and I heard her turn on the tub faucet so Linda could labor in warm water.

Halfway through a shimmy, Linda gripped her belly: “Oh, dear.” She breathed through the contraction, clutching Wayne for support. I took the chance to peek into their bathroom. It was huge, practically another bedroom. The tub was way at the opposite end, surrounded by sea-green tile. Abra trailed her fingers in the water, humming to herself.

“Kat,” Linda said, “could you get me some ice?”

“Sure.” I turned back to the bedroom and scooped a few small cubes from the cooler into a cup and brought them to her.

“Thanks.” She pressed her other hand into her abdomen. “I think I’d like to try the tub.”

Linda and Wayne went into the bathroom while I switched the music to something softer. I lit the candles next to the bed; they were lilac-scented, something Linda and I had talked about during her visits.

Abra poked her head out of the bathroom. “Get the birthing ball, please, Katima.”

I rolled the large ball across the room, stopping at the bathroom doorway. I had no desire to enter a bathroom where at least one adult would be naked, possibly two. Another of Abra’s mothers had told me how her husband stripped down and joined her in a large portable tub. Apparently the husband had knelt tall beside his laboring wife, his family jewels clearly visible through the water.

I’d prefer that the jewels stay in the box, thank you very much.

“Could you bring it all the way in, Katima?” Abra’s voice interrupted my thoughts.

“It’s right here,” I said, giving it a nudge. It rolled about a foot and stopped.

“Katima.” Abra was using her “enough nonsense” tone.

“Okay.” I lifted the ball in front of my face so I wouldn’t see any naked bodies. That was a mistake. I stumbled on my next step, the ball flying from my hands. Horrified, I watched it bounce off Wayne’s back (fully clothed, I had time to note with relief), then ricochet off the mirror before smacking me off balance.

“Oomph.” I fell back into the bedroom, clutching the ball to my chest.

Wayne’s chuckle made my face burn. I stood shakily, lowering my eyes as I rolled the ball toward them. Then I fled to a corner of the bedroom, Abra close behind me.

“My goodness, Katima.” She squatted in front of me. “Are you all right?”

“Fine.”

“What was that all about?” she asked. “And why were your eyes closed?”

I sighed. I knew I was supposed to feel the joy and sacredness of the human body, to relish the beauty of Linda’s pregnant one on full display. But I couldn’t. I just felt embarrassed for her, and for me for seeing her that way. “I was just trying to respect their privacy.”

Abra smiled. “There is no privacy in childbirth, Katima. We’re all one. It is us and we are it. We’re all naked and we’re all fully clothed.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. I didn’t need a cosmic Zen lesson right now.

For the next hour or so, Linda labored in the tub, Wayne and Abra assisting her. I pulled out my sketchbook and stared at a

blank page. Nothing. I drew a few lines but it wasn't flowing, so I set the sketchbook aside and sat by the bed, squishing the soft wax gathered at the bottom of the candles.

Linda and Wayne appeared at the doorway. Linda was wrapped in a towel, clutching Wayne's arm. "I think we're close."

I looked around. Should I sit in a corner, out of the way?

"Change the music, please, Kat," Linda said.

"Right." Okay, she was near the end of her labor—time to pull out the big diapers. I clicked through the playlists. Gone were the rock and pop; in their place I spun Native American flute music, gentle and natural.

"Almost there, Linda. You're doing beautifully." Linda was on the bed now, and Abra spoke in a soothing croon in rhythm with Linda's breathing, as if her voice was a part of Linda's breath, a part of her.

I stood next to the iPod system, feeling completely useless.

"Pat her face with a damp cloth, Katima." Abra nodded toward a shallow pan of water and a washcloth. I nodded, grateful for something to do.

Linda moaned and breathed through the next contraction. I blinked in the dim light, basking in the almost cavelike feel, the glow of candles flickering in time to breath and movement, the rumpled earthiness of the blankets forming natural hills and valleys.

Shifting uncomfortably, I was suddenly aware of my thin arms, the bony elbows poking out as I flipped the cloth over on her forehead. I felt out of place next to Linda's full, rounded body and wondered if Abra noticed the stark contrast at this end of the bed.

“Breathe in deeply, Linda. That’s the way.” Abra rubbed Linda’s thighs. “Exhale through an open mouth. Imagine your cervix dilating, growing wider to allow the baby to come through.”

I looked down at Linda. I knew she was thinking about what Abra had just said. I squeezed her hand. “It’s getting bigger,” I intoned, like a hypnotist putting a client to sleep. She chuckled, just before the next contraction.

Abra glanced up, surprised. “You laughed.”

“Kat made me,” Linda said.

Great. I’d screwed up again. Maybe there was some rule against laughing during a birth. But what did she expect? I was a last-minute replacement, completely untrained.

Twenty minutes later: “I feel the urge to push,” Linda gasped, sitting up taller.

My heart thumped. It was time. It was time to see the baby come out. Without waiting for instructions from Abra, I headed for the iPod, scrolling through the songs. I pressed Play and *The Lion King*’s “Circle of Life” filled the room. I glanced at Linda. She probably didn’t even notice the song. Her eyes were closed as she moaned softly to some internal rhythm. It was clear she was somewhere else, somewhere deep inside herself.

“I can see the head, honey!” Wayne’s voice startled me. He was staring at the mirror positioned at the foot of the bed, eyes bright with excitement. As I turned to look, my hand caught on the sound system’s power cord. The system flew off the dresser, smacking my thigh before hitting the carpet. The iPod popped out of its cradle and dropped to the floor, silencing the “Circle.” I scurried to pick it up, slipped on the plastic, and fell into Abra, sending her sprawling. My hand reached out instinctively toward

the baby's head—to catch it, protect it; to make sure it didn't fall into the empty space between the bed and the floor.

But the baby wasn't coming out yet, and I landed with a thud.

Abra pushed herself up and knelt in front of Linda, hardly seeming to notice the lump that was me next to her.

"Are you okay?" Wayne asked both of us.

Abra nodded. But I was not okay. I had to get out of there. Crawling across the carpet, I opened the door with one hand, slinking into the hall before pulling the door shut behind me. Could the floor please open up and swallow me?

Slumping against the door, I sighed heavily. Why had Abra called me? Because she had to. Why had I come? Because I had to. Not just because Linda had wanted me, but because I really, really wanted to see a baby born.

Linda moaned on the other side of the door and I bit my lip, tears pricking my eyes.

"Oh, God. Look at that hair!" Wayne's voice. I wondered if Abra even noticed I was gone, had slunk out like a cat who'd just knocked over the sugar.

I covered my ears with my hands. I wanted to run. Down the stairs and out the door, and keep running until my lungs burst open. But my butt was superglued to the floor.

Linda cried out. I drew my knees up and buried my head between them, my sobs rising. I swallowed hard, ignoring the pain in my thickening throat. I heard the baby's soft cry, then a "Thank God" from Linda and an "I love you" from Wayne.

The baby had been born, and I'd missed it.

Several minutes passed before the doorknob squeaked. I scooted away, looking up at Abra as I wiped my cheeks.

“It’s a girl,” she said, smiling. Then she pushed the door wider. “Linda asked for you.”

I dropped my head down again. “I can’t go in there.”

“Yes, you can.” I felt her hand on my head and ducked down. Why did her touch feel like fire to me when it seemed to console everyone else?

“They hate me.”

“Nobody hates you.” Abra tapped the wall behind me. “They want you to come in.”

I sighed deeply. I could either stay in the hall or go in and try to make things right.

Seconds slid by.

I took a deep breath and stood up.

Linda sat in bed, naked from the waist up, the baby nestled between her breasts. The umbilical cord was still attached, snaking out from under the blanket that was wrapped around the baby. Wayne sat beside Linda, his arm curving around her shoulders. The smell of sweet sweat mixed with the lilac candles pulsed around us, but more than that, the very air vibrated with life.

“Meet Claire,” Linda whispered, kissing the baby softly on her still-bloody forehead.

“Hi, Claire.” I knelt beside the bed, reaching out a tentative finger to touch the tiny fist next to the baby’s face. “She’s so beautiful,” I said. Then I sniffled, hardly able to look at Linda. “I’m sorry I screwed up. I hope I didn’t ruin it for you.”

Linda reached out and squeezed my hand. “You’d be amazed how much you don’t notice when you’re in labor. The outside world sort of disappears.” She smiled. “Besides,

you made Wayne laugh with the whole ball thing. He needed that.”

I smiled and placed my hand gently on Claire’s back, watching my hand rise and fall in time to her breathing. Tears sprang unexpectedly to my eyes, and I let them slip down my cheeks.

Abra crossed the room, rolling up the soiled plastic mat. Her bare feet made no sound across the thick carpet; her straw sandals had been tossed, forgotten, in a corner. She glanced at me and smiled. I managed a slight smile back.

I gave Claire another pat, then got up and followed Abra, holding the garbage bag open as she stuffed the mat into it. I snuck a peek at her as she blew a wisp of hair off her face. For a moment she looked old. Tired. But then she tossed her ponytail over her shoulder and turned. Her eyes were bright, happy, filled with joy and the knowledge that she’d just done something worthwhile, meaningful. Something that mattered.

I wondered if I’d ever feel like that.

I ran. In the dark of a Colorado Friday night. In the silence. With each inhale, I left behind the image of the flying iPod. With each exhale, I let go of myself curled up outside the door, missing the birth I had wanted to be a part of.

I ran for nearly four miles before my legs rubberized and my lungs ached, forcing me to slow down. I turned around, jogging back toward the rec center’s parking lot. I felt each breath, each muscle stretching and contracting; heard the soft pat as my shoes hit the dirt; smelled the cool September air filled with moist grass and leaves and the slightly sour scent of the canal, recently drained in anticipation of winter.

When I reached the trailhead, I cooled down, walking back and forth. Stretching out on the bench, I breathed deeply, closing my eyes and picturing little Claire in my mind, her soft cries and snuffles murmuring like a lullaby in my ear. The experience of seeing her small, breathing body washed over me again.

I opened my eyes and stared up at the few stars that had muscled their way out from under the glare of city and street lights. If I stared long enough without blinking, the stars seemed to pulse and spin, coming alive in the blackness.

The night sky made me feel like there was something much bigger and better than myself, an entire universe doing its thing without a lot of help from me.

It soothed and depressed me at the same time.

When I got home, I headed for my room, plopping down on the window seat in the dark. I turned on my cell phone and saw four text messages from Christy Buchanan, best friend extraordinaire. I had called her on the way to Linda and Wayne's to tell her about the assist. She thought the whole midwife thing was "cool and funky," and the messages were no doubt pleas for "the full story."

But I didn't feel like talking about it. I stared out the window into the night. As lights from a passing car lit the street, a picture came, fully formed, into my mind. I leapt off the window seat and turned on the light. Grabbing my sketchbook, I drew—Linda, Wayne, and Claire snuggled together on the bed, the umbilical cord winding its way around all of them, like a ribbon tying up a package. I used my pastels to add color, smearing a golden yellow with orange so the light was muted and warm.

It was just as I'd seen it when I'd come in after the birth—the

three of them, separate but connected, pain and love and hope swirling around and through them.

I'd drawn it because it had come to me and demanded to be put on paper. Now I didn't know what to do with it.

Sighing, I put the picture in the back of my closet and covered it with an old shirt.

3

“Watch out!” A shoulder rammed into mine. I spun sideways, reaching out for support. Lockers slammed. Heavy perfume and BO mingled in my nostrils. I blinked in the stark lights of Tabor High School Monday morning. Alien territory, even though I’d been here since I was a freshman.

I turned to see who I’d collided with, but he was already barreling down the hallway, shoulders rotating in linebacker fashion, ready to knock other unsuspecting bowling pin humans out of the way.

Slipping in and out of the flow, I made my way to my locker. The door groaned as I heaved it open, sounding like I felt. My run Friday night had only been a temporary fix. Humiliation and embarrassment had a way of prodding you again and again.

Abra had tried to make light of it on Saturday afternoon. We were in the kitchen, cleaning up after lunch. “Linda’s happy, Claire is healthy. Don’t worry about it.” Easy for her to say. She did everything perfectly.

“You just need more experience,” my dad had said, tapping

me on the shoulder as he passed me to put away the condiments. “Just wait till next time.”

Like there would be a next time. I doubt Linda was going around bragging about my wonderful birth assistant skills. *Want a birthing ball thrown at you? Call Kat. Want to birth your baby with no one to catch it? Kat will be sure to knock the midwife down so nobody’s there.*

Yeah. The invitations to assist would come pouring in.

Abra’s face didn’t tell me how she felt about a possible next time, but I could guess. She’d be against it.

“I’m not coming back to the Midwifery,” I said suddenly, there in the kitchen. It was a bold statement. An impulsive statement.

A stupid statement.

Abra washed an organic apple, not looking at me. “If that’s what you think is best.”

I bit my lip. That wasn’t what I had expected her to say, what I’d wanted her to say. Where was the surprise? The disappointment? The protests? She was playing the oldest parenting trick in the book—calling my bluff. Now I was stuck.

“I’ll need a few weeks to find a replacement,” she said, placing the apple in a bowl.

“Why? A monkey could do my job.” A hamster could do it. We’d put one of those little running wheels on the desk so she could exercise when things weren’t busy.

“A monkey could not do your job, Katima.” Abra looked at me. “If you’re serious about this, then please stay at the Midwifery for a few weeks until I can get someone else.”

“Fine.” I had rolled my eyes, but secretly I was relieved. Even though part of me was embarrassed to go back, the thought of not being there depressed me.

The first bell rang, bringing me back to the Tabor hallway. I sighed heavily. I'd had a disastrous first birth assist, had quit the best job I'd ever had, and now I was at school, where I felt completely incompetent.

Closing my eyes, I assumed the yoga Mountain Pose—feet close together, back straight, shoulders relaxed, hands at my sides. Then I moved my hands into prayer position, bringing them in front of my heart, breathing deeply. When I felt calmer, I opened my eyes. Two girls were walking by, giving me one of those “she’s so weird” looks. Whatever. I felt better.

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw Libby Giles and Mitch Lowry walking down the hall in my direction—so perfect together, the perfect golden couple. His arm was draped around her shoulders like a scarf. Her hand was up, fingers interlaced with his, as she whispered in his ear, bringing a smile to his face.

Libby and Mitch were seniors to my junior status, both athletes. Libby had lived in my neighborhood, about three blocks over, since I was in fifth grade. But it might as well have been thirty miles, for all we saw of each other.

Now, I try not to make assumptions about people because I hate when they make assumptions about me. Like, I'm tall so I must be a good basketball player. (I am, but that's beside the point. It's the assumption that pisses me off.) And my parents have always told me not to take things at face value, not to “judge the depth of the ocean by the color of its surface.”

And I really try not to do that. But for some reason, when it came to Libby Giles, I couldn't. Maybe because she was so completely opposite of me. I don't know. I do know that when I saw her the first day of my freshman year, it was like someone had shined one of those glaring spotlights at us and said, “Look:

Beautiful sophomore girl over here, freshman freak of nature over there.” And I guess if you judged by usual standards, it was true.

Libby	Kat
Strawberry blond hair— with a lot of help from Clairol	Oak Express desk—brown locks
A nice, normal five foot five, 118 lbs. (spied on her using the scale in the locker room)	A towering five eleven, 160 lbs. (But I work out and I’m not done growing. Besides, it’s mostly muscle)
Hourglass bod	Grandfather clock
C cup	Barely B, but again, I work out. Abra says breasts are mostly fat and if you don’t have a lot of fat, you don’t always have a lot of breastage. Sometimes you do, though, which is totally not fair. Of course, it doesn’t help that the women on both sides of my family are less than well-endowed. “Bigger doesn’t mean better,” Abra says. “If you want to have kids, what matters is your milk supply. Any size breast can give good milk.” Moooo.

Of course, Abra would hate that. “Never compare yourself, Katima,” she often said. “You are unique, exactly who you are supposed to be, created for a divine purpose. Comparing is a waste of energy better spent understanding that purpose and living it out.”

I had no idea what my divine purpose could possibly be, except maybe to inform the Divine Creator that when it comes to the diversity of the human race, she could have been a little less lopsided when handing out social natural and social misfit genes.

I watched Libby and suddenly wondered what the chart would look like if we judged by unusual standards, instead of the usual ones.

Kat	Libby
Tall, like a tree waving in the breeze	Short to average height, like a bush squished against a house
Able to perform yoga positions in crowded school hallways	Able to apply mascara without a mirror
Invisible to most people, thus possessing quality alone time in which to develop a deeper sense of self	Always surrounded by adoring fans, leaving no room for quality alone time, thus unable to develop any sense of a meaningful self (but has lots of admiring fans, so doesn't notice this lack—so it doesn't really matter, does it???)
Full breast would fit completely in average guy's cupped hand (assessed scientifically, not from personal experience, unfortunately)	Large breasts spill out of average guy's hand, forcing him to scramble for the best possible grip, possibly spoiling the entire experience

Yeah, right. Screw comparison charts. At least I was doing something cool like the triathlon. Libby's athletic prowess didn't extend beyond the volleyball court.

Organizing my books in my arms, I closed my locker. I watched Mitch and Libby, remembering one of Christy's reports.

Buchanan Field Report: ML & LG

- Mitch and Libby—first date—June
- Libby usually dates for 1 mo, but sometimes longer
- Prediction: Summer fling. Libby and Mitch will break up before school starts

It seemed to me that Libby liked to try out different guys, kind of like how you try on different clothes. To see if they fit okay. So far, she hadn't found her size.

But this was one prediction Christy had gotten wrong. Mitch and Libby had gone out all summer and now it was September—over three months.

I looked down the hallway. Libby and Mitch had broken free of the group and were now only a few feet from me. She was wearing tight jeans and a V-neck shirt stretched over her C cups. Her eyeliner was heavy, rimming her eye before curving dramatically up toward her brow.

I wondered if she'd notice me. I wondered why I just wondered that. Why I cared. But I did. Because there was a difference between being anonymous (my choice) and invisible (someone else's choice). Libby Giles made me feel invisible. And not even just your average, everyday, you're-a-little-bit-transparent-but-I-can-still-see-your-outline invisible, but completely obliterated. And the weird thing was, she didn't even do anything to make me feel this way. She just had this power to invisibilize me.

I tried to catch her eye as she got closer, but she only had

eyes for Mitch Lowry. They kissed as they passed me. I watched. Hey, if you're into PDA, you must be expecting an audience. Other people turned away, I guess to give them their privacy. *It's our hallway, too*, I wanted to shout.

But I just watched. And wondered what it would be like to kiss a guy in the middle of the hallway for everyone else to see.

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPT

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

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