



WATCH OVER ME

Printz Award-winning author of *We Are Okay*

NINA LACOUR





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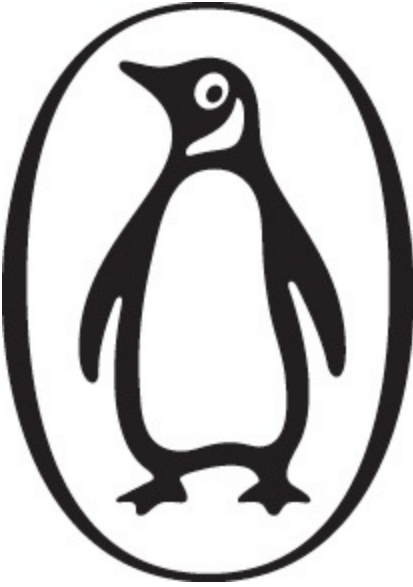


NINA LACOUR



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For Kristyn

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Acknowledgments

About the Author

had we been telling the truth

ON THE MORNING OF MY INTERVIEW I slept until eight, went downstairs to the kitchen, and poured myself the last of the coffee. I stood at the counter, watching out the window as I sipped, and then pushed up my sleeves and turned on the water to wash the breakfast dishes that Amy and Jonathan had left stacked in the sink.

In just a few days, I would leave them.

Amy had bought a crib and tucked it into the garage. A few days after that, she came home with a bag from a toy store. A stuffed bunny peeked over the side. She asked me how my English final went and I told her that I wrote about the collapse of social mores in a couple of short stories and she said it sounded great. And then she took the bag into their bedroom as though it were nothing.

She was only being kind. I knew that. They hadn't asked me to stay.

The sink was empty. I scrubbed it until it was perfectly white and then I turned off the water. I tried to breathe. I tried not to want this so badly.

My phone buzzed.

"Are you ready?" Karen asked. She'd been my social worker for four years and even though I could tell she was in traffic, probably dribbling coffee on her skirt and checking her email as she talked to me, she calmed my racing heart.

"I think so," I said.

"Remember—they read your letter. I've told them so much about you.

They've talked to all your references. This is just a final step. And you get to make sure you really want it."

"I want it."

"I know you do, honey. I want it for you too. Call me as soon as it's over."

He knocked at ten thirty, exactly when he said he'd arrive.

"Mila?" he asked when I opened the door. He stuck out his hand. "Nick Bancroft. So nice to finally meet you."

I led him into the kitchen, where a round table sat beneath a window in the sun and the chairs were close enough for friendly conversation but far enough apart for strangers.

“How are you doing?” he asked after we sat.

“Well, finals are over, so that’s good,” I said.

“Yes, congratulations. Your transcripts are solid. Have you considered

“Yes, congratulations. Your transcripts are solid. Have you considered college?”

I shrugged. “Maybe I’ll go at some point.”

He nodded, but I saw that he felt sorry for me. My eyes darted to the window. I didn’t know how to talk about my life with someone who understood.

I clenched a fist in my lap and forced myself not to cry. I was ready to prove my work ethic, talk about the hours I spent volunteering at the library, and assure him that I was not afraid of dirt or messes or children throwing tantrums—but I was not ready for this.

“So, let me tell you about Terry and Julia and the farm,” he said, taking mercy on me. “They adopted me when I was three, so it’s been home basically all my life. I haven’t lived at the farm in a long time, but I help them run the finances and I do all the interviews.” I felt my fist unclench and I settled into the chair and listened to him tell me about the things I had already learned from talking to Karen and reading a *San Francisco Chronicle* article from fifteen years ago with the headline MENDOCINO COUPLE ADOPTS FORTIETH FOSTER CHILD.

He talked about the farm and how everyone contributes to running it, from the children to the interns, and how as an intern I would spend my weekdays teaching in the schoolhouse and my Sundays waking up at five a.m. to run the booth at the farmers’ market. He told me about the holidays when all the grown-up children come back to visit. “It becomes home if you

let it,” he said. “Even for the interns. I know that might sound hard to believe, but it’s true.”

“When do I find out?”

“Oh!” he said. “I thought you knew. You’ve been chosen already. It’s yours if you want it.”

My hands flew to my face. “Thank you,” I said. And then I couldn’t say anything else. He nodded, that look of sympathy again, and kept talking.

“Most of your hours will be spent in the school. They’ve designed a curriculum and your job will be to learn it and teach the six- to nine-year-olds.

There is only one of them right now, I think, but more will come soon. And Terry and Julia will be there to help.”

“Would you like some tea?” I blurted. I had meant to ask him when he got there but had been too nervous. Now that I knew I was chosen, I wanted him to stay and tell me everything. Maybe that way I could hold it inside me—a real, live thing—in the days between that one and the one of my arrival.

“Sure,” he said. I filled the kettle and set some boxes in front of him. He chose peppermint, and as I poured the steaming water over the leaves I breathed in the scent and it was like starting over already.

“I want to make sure you understand what this is,” Nick said. “Quite a few people have turned it down. And some people haven’t known what they were getting into and it hasn’t worked out. You need to *want* it. It’s a farm. It’s in the middle of nowhere—to one side is the ocean and in every other direction is nothing but rocky hills and open land. It’s almost always foggy and cold and there’s no cell service and no town to shop in or meet people—Mendocino is forty-five minutes away. Farmers’-market days are the only times you’ll interact with the outside world, and you’ll be weighing squashes and wrapping flowers most of the time.”