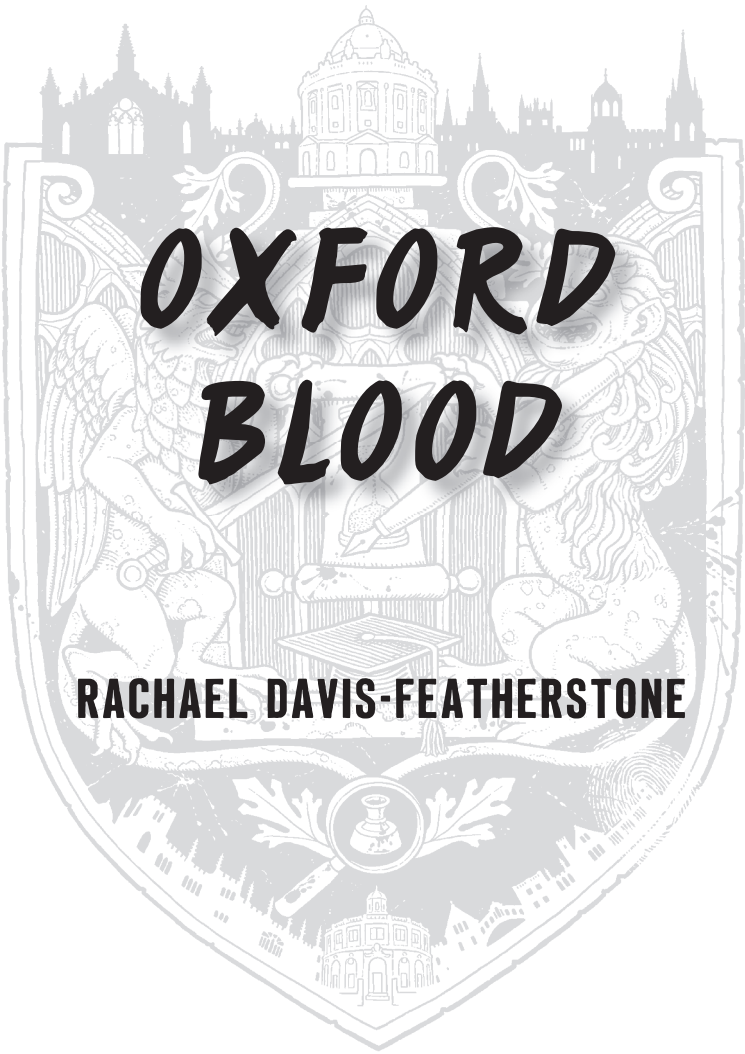

OXFORD BLOOD

RACHAEL DAVIS-FEATHERSTONE

WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

CHAPTER 1

DECEMBER 5

George

Can't see you. You here yet?

1:38 p.m.

Eva

You're early?!!

1:39 p.m.

George

Had to beat you x

1:39 p.m.

Eva

Whatever x

1:40 p.m.

"You ready?" Dad asks.

"As I'll ever be," I reply, trying not to let the nerves crack my voice. I step off the park-and-ride bus in Oxford city center, clutching my suitcase. I feel like I'm walking through a postcard as we mingle through the picturesque high street. University colleges are interspersed

between designer clothes shops and fast-food chains. It's hard to know where the university starts and the city ends.

I stop dead in my tracks outside the front of Oxford's domed library, the heart of the city. I've longed to explore the Radcliffe Camera's arched bookshelves since I was little. Pictured myself curled up in a secluded cubbyhole on the upper floor of the dome, looking out onto the bustling cobbled streets, full of tourists and students on their bikes. Imagined myself poring over books that could be hundreds of years old, making notes on my latest essay. Then running my fingers along the cold banisters of the winding spiral staircases as I make my way out, off to a lecture by a world-class scholar.

"Your mum would have loved this," Dad says, taking another photo.

We do a full lap around the cylindrical building, which looks more like a mini palace than a library.

"It's just like Mum described it," I say. "No wonder it was her dream to study here."

Dad winces. "It was, for a long time," he says, turning to face me. "But this—*this*—right here, right now, was your mum's greatest dream, and mine. To see you, Eva, following your own heart and studying here."

I smile and fight back against the deadweight pressure pushing on my shoulders. Mum had the grades to study here. But she never got to go. Not after she fell pregnant with me. There's a lot riding on the next few days and it's not just about book smarts. Whether I get to be an undergrad at Oxford or not all comes down to how I perform during interview week.

Eva

Just seen Radcliffe Camera!!!!

1:48 p.m.

George

Defo going into the Rad Cam tomorrow. You in?

1:49 p.m.

Eva

Let's get our interview schedule first. But HELL YES!

1:49 p.m.

"Excuse me, are you In—?"

"No comment." Dad holds his hand up to block my face, as a random man flashes a camera at us.

A nearby tour group is edging closer. This is the *last* thing I need.

Dad grabs me and whisks us down a cobbled alley, away from the crowd. He power walks alongside the bike park, and in the blink of an eye, we're on Turl Street, where so many great writers have studied over the years. I know the layout from the university map on the website.

Tolkien's former college, Exeter, is to my right.

Dr. Seuss's old college, Lincoln, is to my left.

But none of that matters now, because in a few minutes I'll be in Beecham College.

Beecham.

That's how students refer to their colleges, apparently.

I need to start acting like I belong.

Fake it 'til you make it.

We walk through the ancient gates of Beecham.

Whoa. I thought jaw-drop moments only happened in movies, but this is as close as I'm ever going to get to it in real life. A mixture of giddy excitement and nerves is bubbling inside me. This could be my home for the next three years if this week goes well.

I glance at my watch. It's almost time. Beecham will be welcoming interviewees for English and classics at 2 p.m.

I've never stayed anywhere like this before. Inside is a pristine square courtyard, divided into four quadrants. Each quadrant must be four times the size of our back garden at home. A small black iron plaque at ankle height says DO NOT STEP ON THE GRASS and I get the sense I'm being watched.

I know it's a bold move—a risk—applying for English at Beecham, and not one of the other Oxford colleges. Me, an inner-city state-school English literature hopeful with no connections, alumni teachers, or wealthy parents who've made generous donations.

Each year, around 350 students are awarded a place to study English, classics, and English-and-classics joint honors. But these places are split between all the colleges. Each college has complete autonomy over choosing which students they admit. That's why picking the right Oxford college to apply to is so important.

Beecham isn't the biggest college—there are only five slots across English, classics, *and* combined honors up for grabs, making the odds of getting in even smaller. But it's the best of the best for humanities, and it's no secret that the top-ranking English and classics students at Oxford have all been from Beecham for the past five years running.

George didn't hesitate about applying.

"Don't let all that elitist bullshit put you off," he'd said, leaning over me to get to my computer. He'd scrolled to the drop-down menu on my application and selected the college for me.

"We have to apply for Beecham. Both of us," he'd said firmly.

"Ahh," I'd cooed, trying to laugh it off. "So we can be together?"

"That," he'd said, kissing my neck gently, "and because it's the best, and you deserve the best. Fuck the competition."

I'd rolled my eyes and he'd shrugged. "It is what it is."

George made a convincing argument. But still, the nerves and self-doubt had crept in when it was actually time to hit Send on my application.

Of course, George had the confidence to apply to read classics at Oxford. If I asked anyone else in my school to name three Greek authors, or three Oxford authors—or even three famous authors—they'd probably all say the names of white men who look just like George.

It's hard to find a famous Black scholar from Oxford. It's even harder to find one who's Black, mixed-race, and a woman.

Was I good enough? Did I deserve it?

But then I'd given myself a firm talking-to. Or rather, I listened to my mum—her voice in my head, telling me to go for it. I'll never forget what she told me in the hospice the night before she died. She gave me her ring, which Nanna had given to her: *"You astound me, Eva. There is nothing you can't do."*

The truth is, no matter my skin color, socioeconomic status, my education: I'm just Eva.

Just me.

And if Beecham is where I want to be, then Beecham is where I should apply.

A few days later, I did hit Send . . .

. . . and George and I both received those thick, creamy embossed envelopes, stamped with the insignia of Beecham College, on the same day.

"On three. One, two . . ."

Yes! Both of us got called to interview week—we'd passed the first hurdle. Of the twenty-odd thousand applications, we were in the top 40 percent and had the opportunity to show Oxford what we could do in person—stand up to the rigor and challenge of some of the greatest thinkers through multiple interviews held during one week in December. But only one in three interviewees get an offer to study at Oxford. George and I were interviewing at the same college, so the chances we'd both get offered a place felt even slimmer.

Was it asking too much of fate?

"But what if only one of us gets in?" I'd asked George, clutching my letter.

"Quit worrying," he'd replied.

And that was that.

Because George has this way of making everything sound so simple.

No drama, no problem.

I take a confident step forward on Beecham's paved pathway. Time to start the rest of my life.

Sure, it's nerve-racking as hell.

But, I mean, what's the worst that could happen?

CHAPTER 2

DECEMBER 5

George

Boom! Time to put on your game face!

1:55 p.m.

Eva

Bring it!

1:55 p.m.

My heart feels giddy with anticipation as I slowly walk through Beecham. These are the hallowed grounds where some of the world's greatest minds have wandered, conjuring theories and theorems that have shaped the modern world.

This place! The majestic buildings. The vibrancy.

I don't know where to look first.

Or what to do.

Or how to act.

Could this ever be home?

I take a breath.

I *can* do this.

I've *worked* for this.

Thin, paved pathways lead to a graveled area in the quad

featuring an imposing stone statue of an old man. Despite the bitter breeze, there are some current students lounging around on the steps that surround the foot of the statue, laughing and sharing earbuds. They've got badges on, so presumably they are here to greet all of us nervous interviewees.

Dad and I are a bit early, as always. The students look up and smile. One of the girls comes running over to us, her shoelaces undone and her gown catching in the wind.

"Sorry! We haven't quite got set up yet. Hi, I'm Amber. I'm a third year." She holds out her hand; her nails have black polish chipping off where she clearly bites them.

"Eva," I say, my voice hoarser than I expected. I shake her hand in an oddly formal way—it's even colder than my own.

"Sorry, I need gloves." She laughs. "No idea why I did the handshake, honestly. We're totally chill here."

She pulls her hair behind her ear. I wasn't sure I'd meet many matriculated students during interview week. The Michaelmas term for students is over, and most will have gone home for the Christmas holidays.

"So, welcome to interview week!" Amber says, as if she's suddenly remembered her volunteer training. "There's a couple of you dotted around already, but we'll kick off properly when everyone arrives. We'll take you to your room. I just need to get the list of who's where. The porters might know—they're over there. Steve, Matt, Ben. Oh, and you'll meet Danielle later too. She's our admissions officer. Sorry. I'm bombarding you now, aren't I?" She laughs, her cheeks flush from the cold, or maybe she's blushing?

She seems more nervous than me.

Then I clock her peering at my dad.

My heart sinks.

She knows who he is.

I'd hoped Dad wouldn't be so recognizable outside of London.

Wishful thinking.

Dad had appeared on every news channel in the country over the past two weeks.

"Do you guys want to hang with us until Danielle gets here? You can ask us anything."

Dad gives the group of students a fleeting glance and his shoulders flex. I can sense his reluctance to walk over to them. He won't be taking a photo of the statue they're standing around, that's for sure.

I know all about this statue, of course.

So does Dad.

Everyone does.

The first result on Google when you search Beecham College isn't a pretty picture of the quad, like most of the other Oxford colleges. It's a picture of this very statue—of the infamous and controversial Sir H. C. Glanville—and the growing campaign to destroy it.

Glanville is standing tall, holding a cricket bat, with his head tilted to the left to accentuate his strong jawline. He studied here in the 1800s, was captain of the college cricket team, and invested a lot of money in the sport for the country. It was all money he made from his sugar plantation—a plantation filled with workers he enslaved, a fact many choose to ignore in favor of what he did for not just Beecham College but the whole of Britain.

What bothers me even more than how he made his money is that it seems like the majority of people want to overlook it simply because having the conversation about slavery makes them uncomfortable. But *life* is uncomfortable. Feeling uncomfortable is part of my everyday life as a mixed-raced girl who has to walk the tightrope between two worlds.

"I think we—"

"Ho, ho, HO!"

I gasp. Standing on the roof of the cloisters behind the statue is a student wearing all black and a Santa hat. He does a running leap holding a piece of red tinsel and crash-lands on Glanville's head. He locks his legs around Glanville's large waistline and pretends to behead him with the red tinsel.

"Woo!" cheer the students sitting around the steps.

"*That* was *ridiculously* dangerous!" Dad says.

"I am so— I need to speak— I have to go. Please, make yourself at home!" Amber says, running over to the students by the statue.

Dad's about to march over but I hold him back. "*Please*, Dad, don't make a scene."

He reluctantly relents. More cheers and clapping come from the far side of the quad. I look over and a big grin spreads across my face. It's George.

I'd recognize that boy from any distance. The only boy I know who proudly states he loves yoga, who has perfect posture, and who never has a chestnut lock of hair out of place.

My heart hops up and down like a child on Christmas morning, but of course there's no change to my body on the outside. It's an art form I have mastered over the past eighteen months, since George enrolled at my school, Crawlingtons. I knew from the first moment our eyes met that we'd be friends. There is something so honest about him, nonjudgmental. There's a warmth that radiates from him when he smiles; his charismatic voice gives him the edge in any conversation, any debate.

I wish Dad could see it.

Dad seemed to instantly dislike him.

Probably because I *did* like him.

George hasn't noticed me, and Dad hasn't noticed George, which is probably for the best. The last thing I need is for Dad to lay on

the overprotective routine in front of everyone. George is talking to a girl in a long black coat. I reckon she's mixed-race like me, but her curls are tighter than mine and her skin a little darker. Another interviewee maybe?

Click, click, click.

"Seriously, Dad, can you stop taking photos like you're working for Oxford police? *Please*."

It's like Dad *wants* to draw attention to himself, walking around documenting everything like he's at a crime scene.

While normal people would be taking photos of the immaculate garden and majestic chapel, Dad is focused on getting close-ups of the gargoyles that line the college stone walls, their little scrunched-up faces scrutinizing every inch of us. Perhaps Dad feels he has something in common with them: Scrutiny is his middle name. Dad will always be an inspector, no matter where he is. Not even his only daughter's Oxford interview week could see him clock off for an hour.

"Hurry up, slowpoke," Dad calls, making me cringe. "Let's check out the rest of the grounds." I glance over my shoulder, hoping no one heard him. Why does he always have to say embarrassing stuff like that? But I know he wants to get away from the crowd.

Following the sign to the right of the quad, Dad and I walk under a large archway to what must be the main Beecham quad. It's four times the size of the quad we were just in. The grass—which has been mowed to create a checkered pattern, like a giant green chessboard—is encased on all sides by the old buildings of the college. One side must be the chapel, because there are colossal stained-glass windows lining the ancient walls.

"Good afternoon!"

The chirpy voice startles me. A smartly dressed twentysomething woman comes up beside us, with such a wide, infectious smile that I feel myself relax for the first time since arriving. She twitches her

freckled nose as if she's about to sneeze, but she doesn't. Her shoulder-length blond hair is blowing in the wind. She holds out her hand, her nails painted dark green.

"Amber said you two came this way. Welcome to Beecham, Eva. I'm Danielle, the admissions officer. We're going to have a kickoff meeting in the JCR—"

"The what?" asks Dad.

"The junior common room," explains Danielle. "At about . . . three thirty. But would you like me to show you your room? Some of the students will be taking the other interviewees, but seeing as we're here, I can do it myself if you're happy?"

"Yes, please." I nod and I can't stop a smile taking over. This is properly exciting now.

I still can't get over the fact that I am going to be staying *here* for the next few days. You'd think it was a few months from the amount I've packed. I've got an outfit for all kinds of weather and every occasion. Who knows how many formal dinners there'll be, or chances to learn to play croquet? I had no idea what to pack, so I brought my whole wardrobe, including a crisp new shirt and trousers for my interviews.

Danielle leads us inside the college through a heavy wooden door. I can feel the cold of the thick stone walls as we walk up a rickety wooden staircase. This is when you can really tell it's an original fifteenth-century building. Each slat of the stairs is twisted and uneven, making you second-guess your footing like you're staggering up the wonky steps inside a haunted house at the fairground.

"This is you," says Danielle, turning the key to one of the two second-floor rooms.

I step inside ahead of Dad and gasp. I don't even care if I look goofy—this room is unbelievable. It's twice the size of my bedroom at home. There's a sofa, an en suite, and a desk under the huge window that looks out onto the small front quad. I can see

more interviewees arriving now, and that tourist group from earlier look like they're about to come in for a tour of the college too.

Eva

Just in my room. Saw you in the quad.

2:05 p.m.

George

Stan

😉

2:07 p.m.

What stairwell are you? I'll come and find you.

2:07 p.m.

Eva

Dad's still here.

2:08 p.m.

George

Lol. Better you find me then.

2:08 p.m.

"Is that a single-key lock on the door?" Dad asks Danielle. "No chain?"

"They don't need chains," I say, and roll my eyes. "It's a university, not a prison." Trust Dad to ruin the vibe.

"Do the windows lock?" Dad continues, nudging me out of the way to examine the window frames.

"Err—"

"Presumably they can't be opened from the outside?" Dad asks, cutting Danielle off before she can answer.

"Well—"

"Does the college run regular safeguarding checks?"

"We—"

"Is that a tour group coming in? How *do* you manage who's allowed inside the college? Do you keep a record of ID?"

"Erm—"

"I think a room on the top floor would be best. I assume your buildings meet fire regula—"

"*Dad!*" I say. I look over at Danielle and try to send her an *I'm so sorry, please ignore him* smile.

Dad shrugs. "I am just looking out for—"

"This room is awesome, thank you," I say to Danielle and plonk my suitcase on the bed, deliberately messing up the duvet so there's no chance of switching rooms. "No one will be bothered about coming into a student room," I say to Dad, trying to reassure him. "Besides, Beecham is a quiet, secure, *safe* college."

"MURDERER!"

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

First published in the United States by Wednesday Books,
an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

EU Representative: Macmillan Publishers Ireland Ltd, 1st Floor, The Liffey Trust Centre,
117–126 Sheriff Street Upper, Dublin 1, DO1 YC43

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St. Martin's Publishing Group, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.wednesdaybooks.com

All emojis designed by Shutterstock

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-1-250-34230-0 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-1-250-34231-7 (ebook)

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Originally published in the United Kingdom by Walker Books Ltd.
First US Edition: 2026

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1