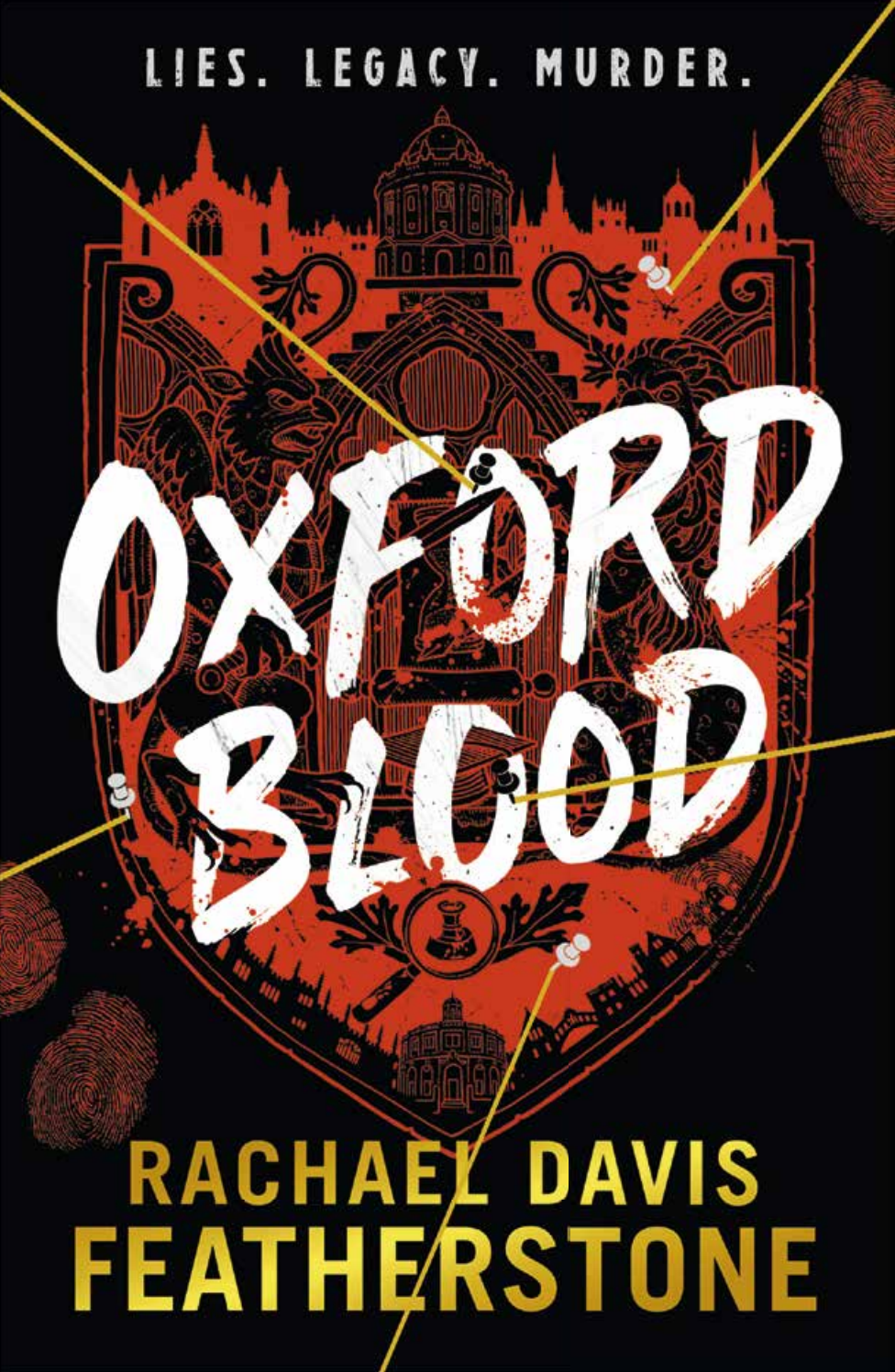


LIES. LEGACY. MURDER.



OXFORD BLOOD

RACHAEL DAVIS
FEATHERSTONE

Lies. Legacy. Murder.



Eva has one goal: to study English at Oxford University. Not only will she receive a world-class education – getting into Oxford is a pass to freedom. So when she and her best friend George are called to Interview Week, all her dreams seem to be coming true.

Until George is found dead.

All eyes turn to Eva, including the anonymous posters behind OxSlays, a student gossip forum that's more ruthless than any killer.

Eva has one week to uncover the truth, clear her name – and take back her future.

- A riveting murder mystery exploring themes of privilege and prejudice
- *Ace of Spades* x *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* x *The Secret History*
- Supported by a killer marketing and PR campaign

#OxfordBlood • @RachDavisAuthor • @WalkerBooksYA

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WALKER
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**To Mum, Dad,
Elodie and Felicity,
love you always**

x

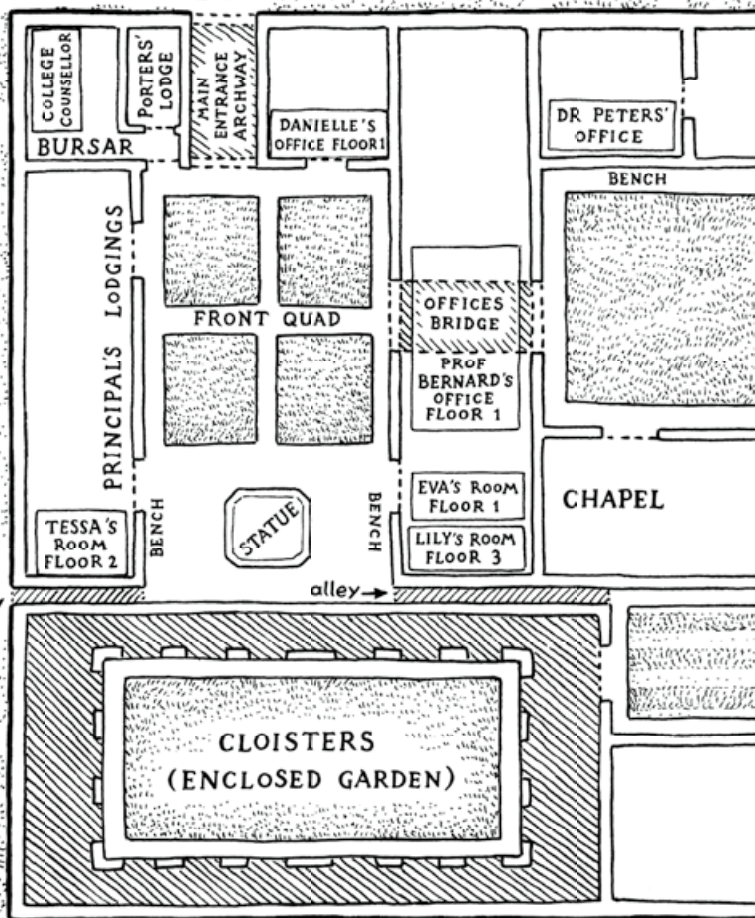
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ACCOMMODATIONS

REAPERS'
ROOMS

walkway

BEECHAM
GARDEN

RADCLIFFE CAMERA



CHAPTER 1

5th December

George: Can't see you – you here yet?

5 Dec 13:38

Eva: You're early?!!

5 Dec 13:39

George: Had to beat you x

5 Dec 13:39

Eva: Whatever x

5 Dec 13:40

“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 centre, 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 cubby hole 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!!!!

5 Dec 13:48

George: Defo going into the

Rad Cam tomorrow. You in?

5 Dec 13:49

Eva: Let's get our interview

schedule first. But HELL YES!

5 Dec 13:49

“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.

Woah. 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 three hundred and fifty students are awarded a place to study English, Classics, and English and Classics joint honours. 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 honours 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 that’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 colour, socio-economic 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 called to interview week – we’d passed the first hurdle. Of the twenty-odd-thousand applications, we were in the top forty per cent and had the opportunity to show Oxford what we could do in person – stand up to the rigour 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

5th December

George: Boom! Time to
put on your game face!

5 Dec 13:55

Eva: Go on then!

5 Dec 13:55

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 gravelled area in the quad featuring an imposing stone statue of a plump old man. 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 – she's even colder than me.

"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 favour 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.”

Dad 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, has perfect posture and never 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 was something so honest about him, non-judgemental. 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 decide from the first moment he laid eyes on George that he didn't like 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, slow poke," 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 chequered pattern like a giant green chess board – 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 morning!"

The chirpy voice startles me. A smartly dressed twenty-something-year-old woman stands 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 blonde 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 kick-off meeting in the JCR—"

"The what?" asks Dad.

"The Junior Common Room," explains Danielle. "At about ... 3:30 p.m. 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 weathers 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 slate 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 first-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 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.

5 Dec 14:05

George: Stan 😊

5 Dec 14:07

George: What stairwell are you?

I'll come and find you.

5 Dec 14:07

Eva: Dad's still here.

5 Dec 14:08

George: Lol. Better you find me then.

5 Dec 14:08

"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!”

CHAPTER 3

5th December



George: Shit going down in the quad. Where are you?

5 Dec 14:15

“MURDERER!” someone shouts again in the quad.

Perfect timing, I think to myself. I don’t need to look at Dad to know he’s frowning. I look out the window, as do Dad and Danielle.

“Oh, students, eh?” Danielle chuckles. “There are *no* murderers here in college. Well, not living anyway,” she adds with an awkward laugh.

Some sort of commotion seems to be going on outside. At first glance it looks like the students are just pretending to behead Glanville again, but something is different this time. A larger crowd

has formed, not just student-age people either. It's a huddle. And George and that girl he was with are in the middle of it. I recognize a few of the faces from earlier on, outside the Radcliffe Camera.

"Are those the tourists..."

"They are not tourists," Dad says, his voice stern, work-mode in progress.

"WHAT DO WE WANT? JUSTICE! WHEN DO WE WANT IT? NOW!"

"Protestors," Danielle sighs. "I'm so sorry. Mr Dawkins and Eva, I assure you it's rare they get past the porters these days. They pose as a tour group and then—"

"This has happened before?" Dad asks, his frown deepening.

"I'm afraid so. They're protesting to have the statue of Glanville removed from the front quad."

"Is there a reason the college hasn't removed the statue?" Dad asks, using his diplomatic tone that he saves for when he has a very strong opinion on something, which is most of the time.

"Money. Politics. All the usual, I'm afraid," Danielle sighs. "The truth of the matter is, the university is dragging its feet because the Glanvilles have made massive donations in the past, and in fact still do."

Dad visibly puffs out his chest.

"Perhaps the *Glanvilles* should spend their time focusing on making reparations for their ancestors' involvement in the slave trade rather than trying to alleviate their guilt by donating to a university," Dad says, making me gasp. I get why he hates the statue, but it's almost like he hates the Glanvilles. Like he actually knows them.

Suddenly the chanting outside switches to shouting.

“This is escalating,” Dad says, and I can see the cogs turning.

“Don’t stress, Dad. Isn’t it time you headed off now? I should really prep for my interviews.”

But Dad isn’t listening. He’s completely focused on the events in the quad.

I almost wish he hadn’t insisted on dropping me off now. I’d thought it was nice. He’d taken a day’s holiday. The first since Mum died. But deep down I think he only did it because George offered to travel up with me if he didn’t. George and I are going to be staying away from home together, and yet he was worried we were going to have sex on the train up to Oxford?

I think if Dad had known that Beecham was reverting to in-person interviews and I’d be staying up here with George, unsupervised, he’d have made me apply to another college – well, attempted to, at least. But an in-person experience was what convinced me Beecham was for me; that and Professor Bernard’s pioneering Access Scheme for Black state-school students. Their dedication to creating equity – not just equality but focusing on how to achieve equal outcomes – is spot on. Dad couldn’t disagree with that. Even if he didn’t like the idea of George and I being alone.

“It’s not compulsory that parents drop you off you know,” I’d said. “George’s parents aren’t dropping him off.”

“That’s because George’s parents don’t do anything,” Dad had replied. He was never subtle about his disapproval of their hands-off approach to parenting.

I mean, he is kinda right. George and I have been inseparable since we met, but I’ve only met his mum once, very briefly. His dad seems like he’s never home, always away on business. They’re

too wrapped up in their own lives according to George. He is an inconvenience.

I find it hard to imagine anyone could think of him as an inconvenience.

“I don’t need sympathy,” George had said, when he’d caught my expression. “It means I get to do what I want, when I want, with who I want.”

“And by that you mean spend all your time with me and piss off my dad,” I’d said, swinging onto his lap and giving him a quick kiss.

“Sounds about right,” he’d laughed.

“MURDERER!”

Shit, it’s getting worse out there.

“I’d better go down and sort this out,” says Dad, taking out his phone.

“I’m sure it will all blow over in a minute,” says Danielle.

“Don’t get involved,” I plead.

“You just said it was time for me to leave,” says Dad.

“Yes, Dad, *leave*, not become the college’s bodyguard.”

Dad rolls his eyes, imitating me, and looks out the window again, assessing the “situation”. He’ll have noted all the possible escape routes, calculated the probability of things turning violent, and the risk of getting involved without a back-up team. Nothing is ever left to chance with Dad.

“Honestly, it’s not a big deal. Can you please just—”

“Is that George Danvers?” Dad asks, now fully invested in intervening.

“Yeah, but please don’t make a scene, Dad.”

“I won’t,” he says, holding up his hands defensively. “But

I really do need to sort this out. These things have a way of turning nasty quickly.”

“Honestly, Inspector Dawkins,” Danielle says, “the porters know how to handle—”

Dad is out the door before Danielle can finish her sentence. It was futile from the start. He had that determined look in his eye that he gets whenever he goes in the field. Dad was gone. Inspector Dawkins was here.

“He does that a lot, I guess?” Danielle nods towards the door.

“You have no idea.”

Everyone at school thinks it must be so cool having an inspector for a dad. All they see is the fame after a “big win” like his recent TV interviews about how he “Nailed the Nail-Gun Killer”. What they don’t know is that Dad’s always stressed, always working a case, worried there’s a killer on the loose. Dad was so in the zone just now that he hadn’t even remembered to say goodbye to me when he left the room.

I guess I don’t mind really.

I hadn’t been looking forward to the goodbye. Dad and I haven’t spent a night apart since Mum died five years ago, and, frankly, I can’t deal with getting emotional about the enormity of this interview week. I need my game face on.

“Is this *really* a student’s room?” I ask Danielle, stretching out on the bed.

“Yep. There’s nothing quite like living in college,” says Danielle.

“Yeah, I bet... God, this interview week is brutal.”

Danielle laughs. “It hasn’t even started yet!”

“I know, it’s just ... we get to have a taste, and not just for an

afternoon, but a week of life as a Beecham student. And then it could all be taken away.”

“A life that could have been...” Danielle says, wistfully looking out of the window. Dad is down there now. One look at his badge, and shared looks of panic ripple through the group before the protestors quickly scatter.

“Take my advice,” says Danielle, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Don’t treat this as an interview week. Treat it as the first week of your degree and life here at Beecham. A lot of the students you’re here with are from fancy private schools; some will even be from boarding schools that look just as prestigious as this place. They’ve had seven years or more feeling comfortable in this kind of environment, and they are going to walk around here like they own the place. They’ll have been doing interview prep since they were eleven. This entire week will feel like a holiday to them.”

I gulp. “No pressure.”

“Act like you own the place too,” Danielle says, gently punching me on the arm. “Believe you deserve to be here, and that confidence will shine through. Everyone that makes it to interview week is intelligent enough to study here. The difference between who wins a place and who doesn’t is who wants it more, and who truly believes in themselves. It’s slay or be slayed, as the students say.” Danielle does an awkward laugh. “I’ve no idea who started it, but the slogan’s stuck. Been around since the days when I studied at Beecham.”

“Slay or be slayed, got it,” I say, and click my fingers like I’m shooting a gun.

She pretends I shot her, and we both laugh at the cheesiness of this conversation.

“It’s silly, I know, but it actually inspired an entire social enterprise,” says Danielle.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Have you heard of OxS? OxS with a capital S?” says Danielle.

I shake my head.

“It’s short for Oxford Slays and it’s the students’ anonymous social. It’s basically a long-running confessions forum,” she continues. “There’s a few threads that give prospective students tips on how to get through interview week, so you might want to check it out. Without an official ox.ac.uk email address you can only register as a read-only user though.”

“Who created it?” I ask, downloading the app on my phone.

“A Computer Science undergrad coded the app for their first-year coursework. It was supposed to be a joke but it took off.”

How have I not heard this story?

The app launches and I quickly set up an account.

“Wow, OK, so a lot of threads,” I say, skimming over them. There’s one with students having full-on debates about Oxford life, and one on Glanville’s statue that is blowing up.

Slayer 17644: Glanville protest in full force at Beecham right now!

5 DEC 14:22 500+ views, 220 likes

Slayer 28245: Holy shit - is that the #NailedIt Inspector breaking up the protest?????

5 DEC 14:33 450+ views, 33 likes

“OxS is more gossip than resource these days, I admit,” says Danielle.

“Yeah... I don’t think it’s for me,” I say. “With Dad being Dad, I usually avoid social media.”

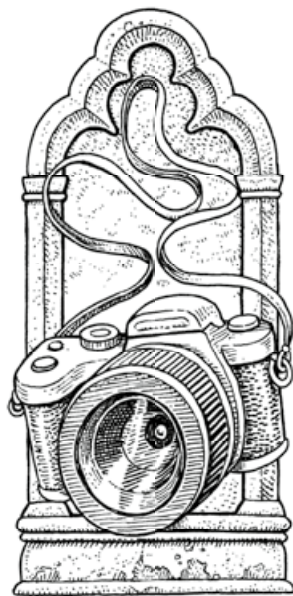
“Fair enough,” says Danielle, heading towards the door. “I’ll see you at the JCR at 3:30 p.m.?”

“Sure,” I say, hoping I didn’t offend her, “and thanks!”

After she’s gone, I turn off notifications on OxS. I haven’t got time for that shit. The last thing I need right now is a distraction. After all, Oxford interview week is slay or be slayed.

CHAPTER 4

5th December



George: The view from my room

is AMAZING. Come see.

5 Dec 14:42

Eva: Jumping in the shower.

Remember to be at JCR for 3.30pm.

5 Dec 14:43

Feeling better after a hot shower, I walk confidently over to the JCR. The arched door to the Junior Common Room is heavy. It creaks as I open it, and all the eyes in the room fall on me the moment I set foot inside.

To my left is a kitchenette with a sink full of used glasses and mugs with a coffee machine on one end of the counter. To my right is a board full of posters about various upcoming events.

There's a carol concert in the chapel next week, but I'll be gone by then. One for the ACS catches my eye – the Oxford African and Caribbean Society – I'd like to know more about them. Next to it is a poster about a pool tournament that reads "Town vs Gown". Is that a thing? An uncomfortable tickle moves around my stomach, that slight feeling of unease, like I'm out of my depth.

At the far end of the JCR is a pool table next to a foosball table that leads on to a lounge area with big black leather sofas and a huge TV with the latest Xbox and PlayStation.

That's where everyone is.

The eyes. Staring at me.

Thankfully there is one set I know.

"Hey you," says George, climbing over the back of the sofa and coming over to me.

"Hey yourself," I say. "I was beginning to forget what you look like."

"The next Beecham Classics undergrad." He grins.

I roll my eyes. He kisses my cheek and a warm glow rushes over my body as I instantly feel more at ease. I didn't know if he'd want everyone to know about us. Given there isn't an official *us*. Yet.

"Ignore him," I say, as the others come over to join us. "He can't help himself."

"Is he like this all the time?" asks a boy with shoulder-length brown hair.

"Basically."

"You must be Eva," the boy carries on, holding out his hand for me to shake. "George told us about you. Two students from the same state school getting Beecham interviews. Pretty impressive.

I'm James, by the way. And this is Tessa, George – you clearly know – and Lily."

"Nice to meet you all," I say, trying my best to remember their names.

Lily is the girl I saw talking to George earlier.

"We were all just swapping numbers in case we want to hang out between interviews," says Tessa.

I take out my phone and start adding them all as contacts.

"So, what shall we call ourselves?" asks James, rubbing his hands together. "The Beecham Beginners, or The Mighty Musketeers?"

A momentary silence forms before we all burst out laughing.

"OK, we can work on that," says James, adjusting his shoulders and trying to brush it off.

"Have you seen any of the tutors yet?" asks the other girl. She has short, bobbed blue hair that's pinned back with a rainbow hair clip. She looks as nervous as I feel.

I shake my head. "Have you?"

"No," she says, biting her lip.

"Don't worry," says Lily. "They're lovely. Not scary at all. I know them *really* well."

"Huh?" says James.

"I was chosen for the Access Scheme, so I've met them all before. Beecham feels like home to me already. They're all so welcoming. You'll feel less nervous in no time," Lily says with a patronizing smile.

I force myself not to react. She wants the attention.

The thing about Oxford is that it attracts the top two per cent of students in the country, and the top two per cent tends to be the geeky kid from every class. Which effectively means I'm

in a college full of geeks – and it doesn't take more than a few minutes for me to suss out the room.

Lily is undoubtedly a teacher's-pet-geek, while James is a geeky-geek, the out-and-out nerd and proud of it. The other girl, Tessa, I'm less decided on, but I'm leaning towards the shy-geek, who prefers to stay out of the limelight. Then of course there's George, the cool geek who is a natural genius, doesn't need to pay attention in lessons and just gets it; and finally me, the workaholic geek, who's smart but not so gifted that the grades come without a lot of hard work.

The door creaks open and we all swivel round to gawk at who it is.

"Good afternoon, everyone." Danielle beams. "Please grab a seat," she says and gestures to the sofa. I squeeze between George and James. "I'm the Admissions Officer for Beecham, and Access Scheme Coordinator. It's lovely to see a familiar face – hi, Lily!"

"Hello," says Lily, standing up and giving a little curtsy.

She must have been on the Access Scheme. A prang of jealousy rushes over me. I was gutted when I didn't get selected for the inaugural Beecham Access Scheme. I'd spent ages writing my application and researching Professor Bernard and what the programme had to offer. I listened to her TED talk about how changing an institution can be done from the inside, how creating an inclusive student body will evolve into an inclusive academic faculty and offer the opportunity for groundbreaking research because diversity is at the heart of truth, evolution and discovery. Her programme was more than just a token "experience Oxford" day trip. They offered week-long courses to Black students from state schools to learn about life at Oxford, give interview tips, and

even long-term mentorships from college tutors.

My rejection letter from the Access Scheme said nice things that effectively amounted to “don’t give up”.

I almost did. But now I’m here. And I still have a chance.

“Think of this JCR as your hang-out room while you’re here,” continues Danielle. “I know it’s hard when it’s called ‘interview week’, but switching off and leaning on each other is so important.” She leaves a pause. “The elephant in the room is that there are more interviewees than there are places at Beecham. However, as you know, that’s why you’ve all been allocated a second-choice college, which is in your packs along with your individual interview schedule.”

She hands us each an envelope.

I rip mine open and my heart sinks. My second-choice college is St Thomas’s, one of the most sought-after colleges at Oxford. Your second college is supposed to be a lifeline. If Beecham doesn’t have space, the professors link up with the other college to see if they can take you instead. But if Beecham doesn’t want me, I hardly think St Thomas’s will.

“You’ll notice there are three interviews. Usually there are just two, but part of the extensive research Professor Bernard did for the Access Scheme, on making sure the interview process is fair for all, revealed that – alongside a strong preference to have the option to stay at college and have in-person interviews – interviewees often felt pressure with only two interviews, and they wanted more time to warm up and get used to the college. You’ll see from your individual timetables that we’ve scheduled it in such a way that there will be one interview per day, so you’ll have a fair amount of free time to explore the college and Oxford. Please feel

free to use the library and the JCR, of course. Any questions?”

“Food?” asks George, always thinking about his stomach.

“Oh yes,” laughs Danielle. “Thank you for reminding me. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are served in the dining hall, and the times are on the board by the steps outside the hall. As we’re out of term time, dinner is semi-formal with a waiter service. All that means is that the tutors seated at high table will be in gowns, but it isn’t compulsory for students to wear their gowns, which we hope will make all of you feel more comfortable.”

“Sounds good, thanks,” says George.

Danielle looks around at us, inviting more questions.

I want to ask what she means by the tutors sit at “high table”, but I don’t want to look stupid. There’s really only one question that I keep thinking about...

“When do we find out if we’ve got in?” I ask.

“Early January,” says Danielle.

“You still have some schedules left,” says Lily. “Are there more of us?”

“Yes,” says Danielle. “There are a few more travelling up together but their minibus was delayed.”

“Minibus!” says James. “How many are there?”

“Oh, not many – just five.”

“All from the same school?!” asks James.

“Err, yes, that’s right,” says Danielle, scrunching the envelopes in her hand ever-so-slightly. She heads for the door. “The college map shows where my office is, so please stop by if you need anything. See you all at dinner.”

“Wait!” says George as Danielle turns to leave. “What school are you waiting on?”

“Reapington Manor College,” says Danielle dryly.

The JCR door closes behind her with a loud thud, and James begins humming the retro “game over” music from some classic ’80s video game – Pac-Man, I think.

“Oh, come on,” I say as the others slump down onto the sofas. “It’s hardly surprising there’s some interviewees from Reapington. It’s like *the* most prestigious private school in the country.”

There isn’t a person in Britain who hasn’t heard of Reapington Manor College. It’s the school for children of the elite. Practically every prime minister, billionaire and international royal for generations is Reapington alumni.

“A busload, Eva,” sighs James. “Or did you miss that part?”

“Professor Bernard knows what she’s doing,” says Lily. “I *know* her. Access matters here. It’s not the Reapington show.”

“Or you’re just the poster girl,” says James, and Lily glares at him so viciously, James looks actually scared.

“I’m gonna get some air,” says George.

I follow him out. Despite being late afternoon, it’s now completely dark outside and the December air bites.

“George, wait!” I call, catching him up. “Don’t tell me the Reapington thing got you spooked?”

“It’s nothing,” he says, practically running towards the cloisters. “I’m fine.”

“You know you don’t have to put on a front with me?” I say, matching his pace.

I go to take his hand in mine, but he shoves his hand in his pocket.

“Hey,” I say softly, pulling him into the dark shadows of the deserted cloisters. “Why are you being cold?”

"I'm not," he says.

"Are you nervous?"

"No."

"Then what's up?" I ask.

"Nothing."

"George, it's me you're talking to."

"It was just getting a little intense in there." He sighs and rests his forehead on mine. I can see our breath merging into one single cloud beneath our chins.

"You're going to do brilliantly," I tell him.

"You too," he whispers. We kiss, and a welcome pang of excited *déjà vu* hits me as I think back to the night that was almost *the* night. We were in my bedroom, surrounded by revision notes, laughing at some mindless joke. Our eyes had locked, and all the weeks of pent-up desire had taken over. It was perfect.

I'd moved my hand down his body.

"Wait," he'd whispered. "Not today."

"You said we should make it memorable," I'd replied. "The day we get our letters about interview week is memorable."

George laughed lightly and shook his head.

"We can't do this now, here."

"Why?" I'd asked, shook. I could feel he wanted it too. The way he was looking at me.

"You mean aside from the fact your dad hates me already, and is an inspector who literally knows how to kill me and cover his tracks?"

"Shut up," I'd said, kissing him gently. "Dad won't be back for hours."

"It's not just that," he'd said, reluctantly untangling our bodies.

I'd crossed my arms, suddenly feeling exposed. I'd let my guard down and he'd rejected me.

"Hey, hey, don't look at me like that," he'd said, taking my hand in his. "I want to. I *really* want to. I just want you to have all the facts first."

"Facts? I get the birds and the bees."

"Not that." He'd blushed. "About Oxford and life and stuff."

"It's not a history lesson."

"Can we just wait? Please?" he'd urged. "Until ... until after we get into Beecham and we know where our lives are heading?"

"If we both get in."

George had grinned. "Oh, we will," he'd said, kissing me again. "I promise."

"Do you swear?" I'd breathed.

George had pulled me in close and looked me straight in the eye. "I swear to you. On my life."

George wasn't always sensible, but he was a gentleman.

He wanted us to be sure.

But suddenly tonight feels different. Like that night in my bedroom all over again. Our bodies are so close.

"Shall I come and check out your room now?" I ask, my heart racing.

"Maybe not," he says and pulls away. He looks at me and I know he wants to. But something's stopping him. "We shouldn't. We're not in yet," George says, and I can feel the moment has passed.

"Of course you pick this moment to be pedantic," I say, half joking, to mask the disappointment. If it wasn't so cold and dark, he'd be able to see my cheeks have flushed.

A weird and unusual silence falls between us. Suddenly an intense look ripples across his face.

“Will you please tell me what’s bothering you?” I ask. “It can’t just be nerves.”

“You know how much I care about you,” he says.

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I’m not saying no to *us*,” he continues.

I don’t know why but I feel myself having to hold back tears. I think maybe it’s just the pressure of actually being here taking over.

“I’m just saying not yet,” says George. “We had a plan. To wait until after we got into Beecham. We’re so close.” George begins pacing. “After *all* this,” he says, running his hands through his hair.

“Let’s not...”

“Fall...”

“At the final hurdle.”

Now George looks like the one about to cry. His usual cool, calm, collected vibe evaporates and I can’t help but wonder...

“George, are you still just talking about you and me?”

He takes a step back, and it suddenly feels like there is a gulf between us. “I— Yes. No. I— We should go. You *know* it’s going to take hours for you to decide what to wear to dinner.”

“OK, let’s—”

He doesn’t wait for me. He just turns and leaves.

What the actual? One minute he’s talking about our future, the next he’s running off. I don’t know whether to be pissed off or hurt.

I decide on both.

I can’t put my finger on it, but something isn’t right.

He’s hiding something from me.



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