ASK ME ANYTHING



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For Billy Lindon, Emma Hughes and Laura Kay,
who made all the difference

THE AUTUMN TERM

CHAPTER 1

I am Mary-Elizabeth Baxter, and I can do anything I put my mind to. I can make a great soufflé, I can apply red lipstick on a moving bus without a mirror, I can ace my A levels and get into the most competitive art history degree in the country, I can perfectly calibrate the amount of bleach and dye needed to achieve my trademark candy-floss hair colour. And this year, I'm putting my mind to having sex with Felix Balfour.

He's over there, actually. That guy – no, not that guy; come on, he's so not my type – yes, that guy. The one with the swishy blond hair flopping back from his face and those light-blue eyes and the stupidly full lips and the rather stern jawline and the tight, white T-shirt and the bell hooks tote bag. Him. He of history's most rakish smile and the editor of *Quad Magazine*, the mag for students of Queen Anne's College, London.

I gaze at him across the top of my single glass of rosé, simultaneously hoping he doesn't catch me looking, but also knowing that if he does then maybe that can be a nice little gateway into . . . something. I let my crush marinate, simmer, if you will, all throughout my first year – a little flirting here,

some highly charged eye contact there, a bit of very close dancing in the club on magazine nights out – but didn't convert the potential into anything more than that. I wanted to get my feet under the table at the magazine, establish myself as a Talented Person on the staff, before crossing that particular sexual bridge. And now? I'm ready to cross.

'This is kind of weird, right?' Patrick says to me, nudging his hip gently against mine, snapping me out of my Felix-flavoured daydream.

'Hmmm?' I ask, tearing my eyes away from Felix.

'Like, having us all in one place.' His eyes scan across the room, where there are very much two camps: the newspaper people and the magazine people. I feel if you didn't know there were two camps, you would still be able to tell. It's not that the newspaper people are dry, per se, it's just . . . they're not as stylish as the magazine lot. Don't quite have the same élan. More serious. Less fun. So we generally keep ourselves to ourselves, but for some reason Jack Sampson, the president of the Quad Media organisation, decided we had to kick off the new academic year by mixing. Or, more likely, he didn't want to spring for two separate events, so here we are, the week before term starts, pretending that we're going to mix!

'Yeah, it is a bit,' I say, taking a sip of my drink. 'Well, they tried, I suppose!'

'Two households, both alike in dignity . . .' Patrick says drily.

'Ha! Try saying that to one of the newspaper lads. I don't think they consider us magazine lot very dignified.'

'What's not dignified about arts and culture and lifestyle and fashion?!'

'And advice columns!' I add. Naturally, I think my advice column is very important, and so do the students of Queen Anne's College. I started it halfway through last year when I was a mere fresher, just a little baby fish swimming in the great pond of London's biggest interdisciplinary university, because last year's editor, Emily Daly, was also a cute, chubby gal with great taste so basically let me write what I wanted.

'And advice columns,' Patrick reassures me. He's the deputy editor, Felix's right-hand man, having graduated to that position after being last year's film editor. Patrick is notable for being one of the Hot Gays – conspicuously good-looking and, well, gay. 'I'm going to get another drink – do you want something?'

I shake my head. 'No, I'm all right, thanks, Pat.'

'You sure?' he says, glancing at my nearly empty glass.

I shrug. 'I'm not much of a drinker.'

'Very wise,' he says before disappearing into the throng.

Instead of joining Patrick at the bar, I make a beeline for the jewel in the crown of the Queen Anne's College student union: the jukebox. An actual, old-fashioned jukebox that's somehow been rewired to operate digitally and contains about one million tracks, give or take. I weave my way through the crowd, making a very concerted effort not to look at Felix again, instead bumping my hip against Tyler – my beloved music-editor buddy – as I pass. They wink at me across the top of their beer bottle and go back to chatting to a girl I recognise from the newspaper – probably much deeper and cleverer than any of us magazine folk. And just as I'm about to reach my hand out and flip through the list of tracks ('From

ABBA to ZZ Top!' as the original faded lettering behind the glass top proclaims), another hand darts out in front of me.

'Wow!' I say, taken aback, looking up to identify the owner of the interloping hand, which is now pressing numbers on the machine.

The interloper hears me and looks over his shoulder. 'Oh, sorry,' he says, looking down at me. He's very tall and just generally quite large, like a bear. 'I didn't see you there . . . not sure how, though.' He looks me over, presumably taking in my rather ostentatious hair, rather ostentatious make-up and rather ostentatious outfit. I raise my carefully plucked and filled-in eyebrows. 'What were you going to queue up, anyway?'

'"Fantasy" by Mariah Carey but you just –' I cut through the air with my hand in a swift gesture – 'snuck right in there.'

'Well, you could do worse than my choice,' he says, shrugging. 'Since "Genius of Love" by Tom Tom Club –' he begins, but I get in there first, not willing to let him think he's telling me something I don't already know.

'Is sampled on "Fantasy" by Mariah Carey,' I say, fluttering my eyelashes and smiling sarcastically. 'I'm Mary-Elizabeth Baxter, by the way.' I decide to be polite, but nonetheless try very hard not to instinctively start swaying my hips to the extremely catchy sound of the track he chose.

'That's a very sensible name for –' he begins before cutting himself off, instead moving his jaw from side to side.

'For what?' I ask, folding my arms across my chest. Or rather, slightly below my chest, because my chest is rather large. He doesn't say anything. 'For such a silly person?' I

run my fingers over my 'M' necklace, feeling the comforting smoothness of the puffy letter against my fingertips.

He rolls his eyes. 'Well, you do have candy-floss hair. And are wearing –' he surveys my outfit – 'some kind of nightie?'

'It's a babydoll dress!' I protest. Why am I defending myself to this rando?!

'Babydoll dress,' he says, nodding. 'Got it. I'll remember that for next time I go shopping.'

'Anyway,' I say, flustered, 'who are you? I bet you've got a very silly name for such a sensible person.'

He exhales. 'Laurie O'Donnell,' he says flatly, holding out his hand. It's big and fleshy and looks pleasingly warm. I extend mine, not dropping my gaze so he doesn't think I'm intimidated by him. Instead of shaking it, he picks up my hand and looks at my nails. 'Of course,' he says with a smile.

'Of course what?' I ask. But I know. I know it's going to be something about the lilac glitter gels that I've got on my long, oval nails.

He drops my hand. 'Of course nothing,' he says. 'Ignore me.'

'Oh, believe me, I will,' I say, narrowing my eyes. Who is this guy? I mean, beyond being Laurie O'Donnell.

'I take it you're on the magazine?' he says.

'Why, because I'm so frivolous?'

'Because I don't know you,' he says, exasperated, as if he hadn't just been intensely judging me for my frivolity. 'I'm the research editor on the newspaper. I . . . well, I report on the research the different departments of Queen Anne's are carrying out.'

'Very noble,' I say. 'I'm the advice columnist for *Quad Magazine*.'

'Delightful.'

'It is, actually. I'm extremely delightful.'

'And what kind of advice do you dispense?'

'Wise advice about dating and relationships.'

'And do you have a lot of experience in that field?' I can't quite tell if he's asking if I'm a slut, but he might be.

'I suppose you could say that,' I say, blinking slowly, unwilling to defend myself against his assumptions because I fundamentally don't think there's anything wrong with being a slut. 'But mostly just my own natural wisdom.'

'What kind of qualifications do you need to be an advice columnist?' he asks nonchalantly, sipping from his pint glass.

'None in particular,' I say breezily. 'I'm not exactly a marriage counsellor. Just a chatty gal with lots of opinions.' But then I second-guess myself. Want to defend my section, my little column. 'It's not as easy as it looks though. I know everyone thinks they could do it, just because they have opinions.'

'Oh, I'm sure it takes a special kind of person,' he replies.

'You should give it a go,' I say, giving him my best sarcastic smile.

'Maybe I will.'

The track is winding down and no one is going to get between me and the jukebox this time. 'Excuse me.' I gesture for him to move to the side so I can get to it. I type in the number for 'Fantasy' by Mariah Carey, which I know by heart. Laurie looks at me, a faint, amused smile dancing on his lips. Annoying. I turn and say to him over my shoulder,

'Anyway, I think the best version of "Genius of Love" is the live version with Mystic Bowie.'

'So do –' Laurie begins, but suddenly our little tête-à-tête comes to an abrupt end with the arrival of a gaggle of what I would be able to identify at a hundred paces as Newspaper People just by their artfully unstudied outfits.

A tall girl with lank blonde hair says very much to Laurie and very much not to me, 'We're going to head off to the College Tavern if you're coming.'

'Oh, I'm coming,' he says drily. A very dry person, isn't he?

'Well, it was a pleasure meeting you, Laurie,' I say sardonically.

'You too, Mary-Elizabeth,' he says, as if my name has air-quotes around it. Ugh!

And with that, he's gone! What a strange, infuriating little person! Well, not that little, I suppose. Quite big really.

Finally, my beloved 'Fantasy' by Mariah Carey blasts out over the speakers, and I rejoin my crew of mag lads, ladettes and those like Tyler who have decided the gender binary does not serve them. With the newspaper lot disappeared off to the pub, there's less of a sense that we somehow have to be on our best behaviour, and we dance and chat and drink in peace until there's only a few of us left.

'Love the babydoll dress,' Felix murmurs into my ear as he hugs me goodbye. He always says exactly the right thing. Let me state once again for the record: this year, I'm putting my mind to having sex with Felix Balfour.