

ASK ME ANYTHING

Also by Bethany Rutter

Slowcoach
Melt My Heart
No Big Deal

ASK ME ANYTHING



BETHANY RUTTER

HOT
KEY
BOOKS



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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.





CHAPTER 2

Ah! The first week of term. All those freshers scuttling around looking furtive and nervous but trying to style it out – I can't believe it was a whole year ago that I was one of them, and now I'm all grown up and handing out copies of the magazine to the sweet little baby students.

'We have a stand at the Freshers' Fair if you're interested in writing for the magazine!' I say brightly, handing a copy to a blonde girl through a cloud of vape. She smiles politely and takes the magazine but doesn't seem that interested. On to the next one!

Finally someone I recognise is heading my way. 'Leonie! Magazine?' I know she'll take it because I literally sat next to her in our French Modernism seminar this morning. And she does take it, so now my stack of magazines to distribute is almost gone and my work is so nearly done.

'Magazine?' I say, extending my arm towards a passing fresher in a very daring neon-orange sweatshirt.

'No, thanks, I've already got one,' he says, waving a copy of the newspaper.

'That's the newspaper! This is the magazine!' I explain





brightly.

‘Oh.’ He frowns. ‘Are they different?’

‘Yes! Completely different! Completely different teams! The magazine is much more fun,’ I assure him.

He grudgingly takes a copy of the magazine and slopes off, leaving me with one solitary copy left to distribute, plus the one I shoved in my bag for my own perusal. I’ve not done a bad job today – most of the *Quad* writers and editors hate doing distribution, but I don’t mind standing around convincing people to take a copy of a free magazine, probably because I’m very nosy and like an excuse to see what people are wearing, what they’re doing, what’s the vibe on campus and all that.

I hold out the magazine to every passing student, but the fact that I only have one left makes me look slightly odd and very unofficial. ‘Please?’ I all but beg a tiny blonde girl who surveys my outfit of a vintage pussy-bow blouse tucked into a sequinned pencil skirt with curiosity. But she takes it! And my work here is done!

I’ve got the first magazine meeting of the year in an hour, which means there’s definitely time for a coffee first. The campus café, the Workshop, has had a sleek makeover since we were last here and has now been brought kicking and screaming into the ‘aesthetic’ age – everything is wood and cream with hanging plants everywhere. It’s all a bit samey, but I can’t deny it’s an upgrade from how unloved it was looking in my first year.

With my iced mocha in hand, I take a seat at a corner table. Ordinarily this would be the perfect opportunity





for people-watching, but I feel like I should probably flip through the magazine before our first official meeting tonight.

I have to say, Juliana has done a great job of designing my page. She's really got a good eye. Much like this café, *Quad Magazine* used to be a bit of a mess before Juliana started working on it. She just made everything look . . . tidy. Intentional. Obviously, Felix is going to do a great job as editor this academic year – he already is, in fact – but Juliana's input cannot be overstated. She found me the perfect retro-inspired font for my column, 'Ask M-E Anything', and has made the page look appropriately stylish. My first column of the year wasn't anything too tricky (which was nice, because my brain was very much in summer-holiday mode when I wrote it for the Freshers' Week issue), just a classic moral quandary for me to advise on.



Dear M-E,

My mate was going out with a guy she met in Freshers' Week last year. We'd often go out as a group with people from our halls, and I'd sometimes feel like he was flirting with me on nights out. I don't think it was all in my head, and I definitely fancied him back. They broke up after a few months, but whenever he saw me around uni we would chat, and I was definitely getting flirty vibes. I bumped into him over the summer, and we ended up hanging out, and at the end of the night we kissed even though I'd spent the whole evening telling myself I wouldn't or couldn't. He felt bad about the kiss and told





my mate, and now she's pissed off at me, but he wants to give it a go. They've been broken up for months now – am I being a dickhead for even considering it?

Confused and Conflicted

Dear Confused and Conflicted,

It's always such a tough situation when you've got feelings for someone that your friend has dated. I guess it just comes down to how strong your feelings are, for both of them. Are you super-close to this friend, or do you think this guy could be the One? It all depends on what you're more willing to let go of: the friendship or the prospect of a relationship with this person. Flirting and making out in the club is fun, but if it's not worth losing the friendship over, then you know what the right decision is. But if you really see a future with this guy, and you don't feel like your friendship with this mate is super-strong, then on balance maybe that's the right answer for you. In general though, I would always counsel against choosing a potential date over a friend. Flirtations come and go but friendships are more likely to last. Whatever you choose, be definitive and don't let things drag on with this guy in secret. Make a decision and pursue it with integrity.

With love from M-E

I think that's pretty decent and even-handed advice, right? I try not to be too prescriptive because I think most people already know the answer to whatever question they're asking,



and I just want them to figure it out for themselves. I also think most people are fundamentally good but come up against these moral dilemmas more than we would like.

I glance at the big clock above the counter. Oooh, better dash off to the mag meeting!

There is a stack of *Quad News* by the door of the café, as well as a smaller pile of magazines, so I pick up a copy of the paper as I dash out.

With less enthusiasm than I read the magazine, I flick through the pages of the newspaper as I walk, being careful not to bump into anyone. Blah blah blah, important news, internal politics of the university, groundbreaking research, same old same old. I've just made it to the Quad Media office for our meeting and am about to leave the newspaper on a nearby coffee table for someone else to read when –

What. The. Hell?

Do my eyes deceive me? Or am I looking at . . . 'NO NONSENSE'? A new advice column. In *Quad News*.

Dear No Nonsense,

My mate used to go out with this guy and I really fancy him. They've been broken up for ages and I want to ask him out because he fancies me too. We kissed on a night out recently and then he told her because he felt guilty and now my mate is pissed off at me, but she was the one who dumped him in the first place. Am I being a dick or should I go for it?

Wannabe Girl Code Respector



Dear Wannabe Girl Code Respector,

Frankly, I wouldn't bother: the main problem here isn't whether you're allowed to go out with someone your friend went out with, but with the fact that it seems like he's using this situation to make his ex – your friend – jealous. Yes, it does sound like he fancies you, which is always nice and flattering, but the fact that he went straight to her to tell her that you two kissed, even though they've been broken up for months, speaks volumes. It sounds like a level of drama you could do without. Don't hold back because you respect the girl code, hold back because you respect yourself.

No Nonsense



I stand in the doorway, my eyes scanning over it as my fellow writers and editors enter and take a seat. My blood is absolutely boiling. There is no way this column is by anyone other than Laurie. After he was so amused by me at the drinks last week! Silly little me with my silly little column! And now he's basically taking the piss! All our copy lives on the same server, so all he would need to do is wait for me to upload mine for printing so he can see the problem I've answered and then write his mean little version!



'Urgh!' I burst out, slamming the door behind me now that everyone's duly assembled.

'What's up?' Felix asks.

'What's up is this bullshit,' I say, holding up the newspaper. 'This tedious guy I met at the mixer thing last week was so, ugh, dismissive of me and my column, and now a week later





he's started his own fucking advice column in the newspaper!

'Yikes,' Katie Jones, the lifestyle editor, says, adjusting the blazer that's elegantly draped over her shoulders.

'Big, rude yikes,' I say, finally sitting down. I don't want Felix to see me losing my cool – must project an air of nonchalance at all times – but this has really taken it too far.

'Which guy?' Olu, the fashion editor, furrows her brow.

'Laurie O'Donnell,' I huff.

'Oh, him,' Felix says, his lip curled dismissively but his interest clearly piqued in some way. 'Never trust a mathematician, that's what I say.'

'It's deeply unchic!' I fume.

'The newspaper stealing stuff from the magazine! This is the last thing we need,' Patrick says, exasperated. Felix shoots him a look. Uh-oh. What does that mean?

'What?' Tyler asks as murmurs go up around the room.

Felix exhales, disgruntled. 'There's . . . well, things are tight in the Quad Media budget. Tighter than ever. The cost of paper has gone up so much over the past few years, and there's been a lot of – I suppose you could call it discussion and negotiation within Quad Media about what that's going to mean for us. Anyway, long story short, our funding has already decreased for this year and there's a chance . . .' He trails off. Infuriating.

'A chance what?' I ask impatiently.

'A chance that only one of us will survive.' At this point, everyone starts to look nervous.

'And you know which one that'll be,' Patrick says, rolling his eyes.





'Fuck!' Olu bursts out. She said what we're all thinking.

'It might not be as bad as it seems,' Felix says calmly. 'We have no idea what's going to happen. I wasn't even going to mention it, but obviously I didn't have much choice.' He glances at Patrick again, who's looking slightly sheepish. 'But it's better that we know what's going on, given how much time and effort we all put into the magazine, on top of our degrees. And anyway, we've still got a magazine to produce, so, section editors, tell me what you've got going on this issue?'

The energy is slightly subdued as the section editors go around and list their plans for the next issue, but by the end of the meeting Felix has managed to rally the mood a little.

We go to the bar for a drink afterwards and I try to put the whole thing out of my mind. I need a Felix-shaped distraction, and lucky for me he's pulled up a chair right next to me.

'Do you ever drink anything that isn't pink?' he asks, glancing at my glass of lemonade with blackcurrant cordial, the dark of the blackcurrant so diluted by the clear lemonade it's become a pale pink.

I flutter my eyelashes at him. 'Not if I can help it.'

He smiles and takes a sip from his pint. We're sitting so close to each other that I can smell his aftershave, all expensive and heavy and woody. 'I'm sorry about the whole Laurie O'Donnell thing. He really is the worst.'

'It's starting to look that way,' I sigh.

'I was never a fan, I have to say.'

'Do you know him?'

Felix nods. 'We were at school together.'





I frown. 'That surprises me somehow.'

'Go on,' Felix says, a sly smile on his lips.

'I don't know, I just mean . . . you have a particular vibe about you. And he doesn't really have the same . . . vibe,' I babble inarticulately.

'Ha!' Felix bursts out. 'Don't get St Alfred's College vibes from Laurie? Might be the fact he was on a scholarship.' Naturally, Felix went to a very fancy school. And so, apparently, did Laurie.

I shrug. I don't know enough about this boy to decide what vibes he has at all. Only that he's got to me. A lot. I let us sit in silence for a moment before I burst, unable to contain my irritation any longer. 'So, him doing an advice column for the newspaper is even more annoying for me than it looked, right?' I say. 'If the magazine does get wound down and they try to merge us with the newspaper, if they already have an advice column then what is the point in me? What do I have to offer?'

Felix sighs. 'I know, it's pretty fucking rude of them. Definitely taking liberties.'

'Rude of him in particular. I know it must have been his idea.' I narrow my eyes and think of Laurie O'Donnell and his smug face and him choosing 'Genius of Love' on the jukebox last week.

'Look,' Felix says, laying a reassuring hand on my thigh, 'all you can do is focus on what you're doing. Not what anyone else is doing. Just keep doing your thing the way you want to do it, and he can just fuck off. And there's no point worrying what's going to happen to the magazine; that's something for



me to figure out. All I can do and all you can do is try to control the shit we can control, right?’

I nod, feeling a little flutter in my chest as I see his hand on my thigh. ‘Felix, you’re so wise.’

‘I am, aren’t I? Maybe I should start an advice column,’ he says, giving me a sly sideways look, before taking another sip of his drink. His hand is still on my thigh.

On second thoughts, maybe it won’t take the whole academic year for me to get with Felix . . .