

Rebel with a Cupcake

ANNA MAINWARING



Chapter 1

Invisible Rule № 1: Sometimes being a girl sucks.
And blows. All at the same time.

‘We’ve only got an hour,’ Hannah whimpers, grabbing the hair straighteners.

‘Actually, it’s 57 minutes and 39 seconds.’ Izzie peers at her phone. ‘38. 37. 36.’ Her bottom lip quivers and I think she’s going to cry. ‘I don’t think I can take the stress.’

‘I know,’ Hannah says. ‘Let’s all phone in sick. Or pretend we’ve been abducted by aliens.’

‘Stop panicking,’ I suggest. ‘I mean, all we’ve got to do is get ready to go to school.’

They both stare at me as if I’ve suddenly just grown an extra head.

‘Jess. Not now. Don’t start the whole “clothes are just clothes” thing. You may be right but surely even you can see that this is the worst day of the year.’ Hannah is now desperate, going through a pile of clothes on the sofa. We’re in the cellar of her house, where we all hang out, normally a happy place full of music, food, and a very strong wifi connection.

Not so happy today.

Today is Own Clothes Day, the most unimaginably nerve-wracking day of the year.

Izzie is in front of the mirror, putting on her fourth coat of mascara. She's going for the wicked-fairy-who's-fallen-on-hard-times look, but amazingly, she seems to pull it off. She looks like someone out of an advert – quirky yet glamorous all at the same time.

'You'd never guess you were a Manchester City fan until three months ago,' I say.

Izzie humphs. She doesn't like to be reminded that she's made the bizarre transition from football fan to white witch. Not quite like Jadis in Narnia – we're short of polar bears and sleds round here – but she does think she can do magic. Worse still, most of our school believes her. But this means that she can go for the emo look and no one will hate her for it.

Next to her, with the dark red hair and pale complexion – that's Hannah. She's more conventionally dressed in a series of cunning layers that bring her in at the right places, and out and up at the right places. With her big eyes and ringlets, she looks a bit like a Disney princess. But whereas Disney princesses are never famous for having much going on between their ears, Hannah is on course for eleven A*s in her GCSEs. Clearly not just a pretty face...

Hannah turns around and stares at her backside.

'Do my slag lines show?' she asks.

I look closely, as only a best friend can at another friend's behind, to see if her panties are visible. 'Nope,' I say, 'you pass the slag test.'

She smiles contentedly and goes back to work on her eyebrows. I'm saying nothing, but in a few minutes, it'll look like two slugs are sitting on top of her eyes. For an intelligent girl, she clearly doesn't mind drawing on fake eyebrows that make her look – well, TBH – a bit stupid.

Then there's me. Jesobel – Jess for short. I sort of like my name cos it sounds pretty. But older people always look shocked when they're introduced to me. Apparently, the original Jezebel was some woman from the Bible who got executed for doing magic and then her dead body was fed to the dogs. Not really a lifestyle to aspire to.

But maybe it's my name that's marked me out as a bit different. Because whilst these two are in crisis, I'm just sitting here reading the latest post on my favourite blog: Fat Girl with Attitude.

That is until Izzie says, 'And what are you wearing today?'

I look at her, bemused. 'Er, this?' I wave a hand in the general direction of my body.

'You're Year Eleven! That's what Year Nine will be wearing!' Hannah cries.

I look down at my so-called skinny jeans and Hollister top. She has a point – I have been wearing the same outfit for the last two years. (Don't worry, it has been washed. I don't mean LITERALLY wearing it for two years – that would be gross.)

Izzie grabs my bag. 'Let's see what else you've got. Did you bring the leggings?' She rummages through it, tossing one garment aside and then grabbing the next with glee. 'Yes!' she

cries, and I'm sent to the corner to change clothes. Apparently, layered T-shirts, short skirt and leggings are so much better than what I had on before. With a sigh, I add my prefect badge to my new and improved outfit. I get to stalk the corridors at lunchtime and report any bad behaviour.

'That is so much better,' Hannah reports back. I stare at myself in the mirror. A girl rather larger than Hannah stares back. But she's smiling, so that's okay. Some might say she's fat, and on a bad day, I'd agree with them. I'm not a whale, mind, just, you know, curvy. And curves are good, aren't they? I've read many blog posts telling me that, but then the photos of curvy women that go alongside them show women that have clearly never eaten ice-cream or even thought about a chip. My idea of curves is having boobs that actually wobble when you run upstairs.

I digress. You might be wondering why there's so much fuss over what we're wearing, and you know, I'm kind of with you on this one. But then again ... let's think it over for a minute.

Take an all-girls' school and stick it in a reasonably posh area – South Manchester – stuffed full of football players (and their perma-tanned wives), doctors, dentists, lawyers, TV presenters, and artists, who all want their darling daughters to be the BEST. It's like *The Hunger Games* without the bows and arrows – a fight to the death to be the cleverest, thinnest, prettiest, most popular girl in the school.

So, it's bad enough on a normal day when we have to wear regulation uniform – grey skirt, grey blazer, grey socks. (I think they want our souls to be grey.) Own Clothes Day is worse,

much worse. Every detail of what we wear will be noted, analysed and posted online within seconds of us arriving at school, accompanied by mean comments if we've got it wrong. This is why Hannah and Izzie are freaking out. But even though I know all of this, I'm still not that bothered. I mean, there are more important things in the world than clothes, aren't there?

And by that I mean food. Now that I'm dressed, I'm feeling a bit hungry and thinking that food might lighten the mood.

'I know what will make things just tickety-boo,' I say. (I know it's an old-fashioned word. I was brought up mostly by my grandmother. This shows from time to time.) I pick up the plastic container that I have carefully carried from my house, a few streets away, and tease open the lid.

Izzie and Hannah simultaneously sigh as if they have both just seen the most beautiful sight in the world. Which they have, if I do say so myself.

I know what you're thinking – we're girls and food is bad because food makes us fat. That's the invisible rule, isn't it? If you're a teenage girl, you should hate your body, hate food and hate yourself.

Well, I don't think like that.

I don't get why food is the enemy. Have you noticed that people are often nicer when they're sitting around eating and talking, rather than not eating and being miserable? Yes, Cat, if you ever get around to reading this, I do mean you.

And also food never lets me down. And there aren't too many things you can say that about.

Cakes eaten and clothes sorted, it's on to hair and make-up. Within seconds, the cellar is full of the familiar smells of teenage girls: scorched hair, body spray and scented lip gloss.

Finally, Hannah stops looking terrified. 'Okay, we're fine for time and we all look great. Result.'

We stare at our reflections in the mottled mirror that hangs on the wall of the cellar. Three cool but different girls smile back.

'Come on, time to go,' Izzie says, and that's that. Let the games begin...

Chapter 2

Invisible Rule № 2: If a girl has curly hair, she wants it straight. If she's short, she wants to be tall. If she's got no boobs, she wants huge ones. You're never allowed to be happy with what you've got.

We head down the high street as slowly as possible. No one wants to look too keen, and the walk to school is the best opportunity, today of all days, to see who's wearing what and whether anyone is really way out there. Like the year Sonia Fitzherbert came wearing her mum's wedding dress and full white body make-up. Apparently, she was being some weirdo from a book by Dickens who never got over not getting married. Online dating didn't exist back in the dark ages.

As a team, Hannah, Izzie and I attempt to check out Ruth Mulholland and Sara Ejaz, also from our year, who walk parallel to us on the other side of the road. They look at us, we look at them. We're wearing the same kind of stuff. But not exactly the same. That would be the Worst Thing That Could Happen.

We wave at each other and give thumbs up. We try to be nice, whereas we know that some other girls will just do THE LOOK. You know, where they scan you up and down with a

pinched face like they've got a mouthful of sour sweets and you know they're doing a checklist of your faults.

Recipe for the Perfect Girl (according to fashion shoots and celebrity sites):

1. Legs – thigh gap required. Also absolutely NO suggestion that hair ever grows on these babies at all. Ever.
2. Boobs – need to look like small firm jellies that point up, absolutely NO hint of nipples.
3. Skin – airbrushed perfection.
4. Hair – must look natural in a way that only three hours before a mirror and twenty products can create.
5. Stomach – flat and hard enough to roll pastry on.

I could go on – but I can't bear to. Far more interesting are two boys from the boys' school who are our FRIENDS but not our BOYFRIENDS. We are invited over by those most romantic words, 'Hey, wenches.'

Dominic Hall and Fred Cormack are lounging on a bench. We've known each other for years. In fact, I married Dom in the playhouse one lunchtime back in Year Two, so I'll assume that the 'wench' comment is ironic. We do mess around at parties if there's no one else we fancy. I like him, but he doesn't make my heart race.

'Looking good, girls,' Dom says as he checks us out, up and down, apparently appreciating all our efforts.

'Of course,' Hannah says with a well-practised flick of her hair, 'we always look good.'

Which is weird. Even with our friends-who-happen-to-be-boys, Hannah has suddenly changed from a normal person into a smirking robot.

‘So, did you hear about...’ Fred leans in with the latest news. Boys may say they don’t gossip, but they’re just as bad as us.

While I’m half listening to what Girl B might have done or not done to Boy A, I can’t help thinking about all the time we three have put into our appearance this morning (the clothes, the hair, the make-up), when Dom and Fred have clearly just squirted on the Lynx and they’re good to go. I don’t think Fred has even brushed his hair – this year – and Dom has spots. A girl would struggle to leave the house without twenty layers of concealer on them, but Dom clearly still loves himself. If reincarnation does exist, I want to come back as a boy. At least then, when I fart in public, everyone will find it funny.

Then I notice how Dom stares at my boobs. There are a variety of ways to look at this.

- a) I’m getting male attention. In public, for all to see. Which is good and makes me look good in the eyes of all the girls walking past, who WILL be taking notice.

Or

- b) How rude – there is more to me than my mammary glands. But given that I am, you know, on the large side, some girls would think that I’m lucky to get any guy to

notice me. Weirdly, it's girls who give me grief for being fat, not boys.

'You can look at my face, you know,' I say to him.

He laughs and hits me on the arm.

'Sorry,' he says, 'but I'm a boy. I'm just a testosterone machine, hard-wired to look at breasts. And yours are just amazing. Are you sure that you've not had a boob job this year?'

I sigh and then I blush more than just a bit, not sure how to take this. I mean, this is good, isn't it? But do I want to be liked just for some random genetic factor that means I've not seen my feet for the last year?

'How many times do I have to tell you? I haven't had a boob job – all my hormones just kicked in at once!'

'Well, my hormones like what your hormones are doing to your body,' he says cheerfully, punching me on the arm again to show that this is just joking and not flirting. I think. Or am I missing something? I could just do with my arm being punched less.

As he turns back to the others, I carefully glance around to see if a certain boy is there. A boy who makes my heart, face and other parts of my anatomy tingle if I see him. You see, I have a bit of a secret crush on this guy called Matt Paige. Who, unfortunately, is not in sight.

I do mean secret. I would actually rather die than tell anyone. And I do mean crush because the amount of times I think about him puts me into the category of Scary Stalker Girl.

And this is how it happened. How I fell ridiculously head over heels for him. It only took a second.

He lives near me. About a year ago, he was walking home and I was in my room, doing my homework in a distracted sort of way – well, I was just looking out of the window. And I looked down at him. He looked up at me.

And he smiled.

At me.

That was it. That was all it took.

All of a sudden, I realised that under that mad mop of hair, he was fit. With a good smile. And I sort of glowed inside. It was one of the first times ever that a boy actually looked at me and smiled. As if I was pretty. It was lovely!

Of course, reality kicked in later and I realised that I'd been sitting down and so all he saw was my face. And if you just see my face, I don't look fat. If you just see my face, I look a bit like my mum. But I can't just be a face. The rest of me is attached. I can't push myself to school sitting on a wheelie chair with a desk in front of me to disguise the rest.

But for months now, he's been all I can think about. He's in Year Twelve at the boys' school, so he's an older man! You can tell a lot from a boy's A-level choices, and his are: Psychology (in touch with his feelings), English Literature (you have to be a real man to do English at the boys' school – imagine the piss-taking), French (swoon) and, wait for it – Art (double swoon). What a combination – perfect or what? He's interested in human nature; he's creative, bilingual and actually confesses to reading books! I know all this because Hannah's elder brother,

Alex, is in his year and she found all this out for me. It took me ages to ask all the right questions so that she told me everything without realising that I fancied him.

Even though I'm fine about – well, the way I look – I'm also a realist. I'm me and he's him and there's very little chance of anything happening. There might be if I looked a bit more like that girl over there – a vision of female perfection, lounging on a low wall, surrounded by tall, fit boys. All of our group are suddenly staring at her.

She's the girl that every girl wants to be, and every boy wants to have. She's thin, she's pretty, and she has those huge eyes that look too big for her face. She's wearing shiny leggings and manages that winning combination of sexy and vulnerable. The boys competing for her attention are perfect. Tall, hot, old, but not too old. And guess what? They look her in the eye. Because somehow, being attractive means that boys make more effort with you. You're worth it.

Her tinkling laugh chimes out and, for a split second, her dark eyes break away from the group and scan lightly over us. I have a strange feeling when I watch her. Since I was little, I've watched all the films, happy in the knowledge that all I have to do is to be myself and I will be loved. Except, in films, 'being yourself' also means being impossibly thin, with ridiculously large eyes and perfect hair.

A bit like that girl on the wall.

Dom sighs deeply. He looks back at me and shakes his head, polite enough for once not to say what I've heard so many times: 'How can you two be sisters?'

‘Yeah, yeah, yeah,’ I say. ‘But Cat’s out of your league.’

‘Not in my head, she’s not.’ He grins wickedly and winks, and I’m not sure whether to be shocked or to laugh. I laugh – it’s generally the best way to handle anything.

According to the big clock over the row of shops, we have seven minutes to get to school. If we move up a gear from dawdle to walk, we’ll get there in time. The boys drift off, casting longing looks at Cat. She doesn’t look at me again. She pretty much ignores me all the time. This has been going on for about a year, since around the time she stopped eating. This was about the time she left St Ethelreda’s and went to sixth-form college. With boys. St Ethelreda’s is only for girls, because apparently, we can’t be trusted around the opposite sex.

Hannah catches my eye and I shrug. We’ve talked about Cat so many times that there’s nothing more to say. But as we stroll up the hill to school, I do fantasize about force-feeding her a whole plate of my very best cupcakes until she balloons to – OMG – my size. Would boys still look past me to her the way they do now?

As I’m about to enter the school gates, Hannah puts a warning hand on my arm. It’s Mrs Brown, Assistant Head with Special Responsibility for Child Intimidation, standing by the main entrance. She can normally be found striding down corridors like the Snow Queen, sucking the life-spirit out of all who cross her path. I swear even teachers hide behind corners to get away from her.

I’m not usually so horrible, but she is the nastiest person who ever lived. It’s not just that she’s mean, but that she seems to

enjoy being mean. The more the Year Sevens cry when she screams at them for forgetting to button up their blazers (I know, what a terrible crime – an undone button!!!), the more she smiles. And there are no rules against a teacher who's a bully.

So there she is standing guard at the gate, nostrils flared, looking for trouble, sniffing out anything that's visible that shouldn't be. Cos that's one of the many things that drives her crazy – female flesh on show. Just behind her, her latest victims stand cowed. Their crimes are easy to guess. Quivering Amy Dutton? Too much cleavage. Snivelling Julie Macdonald? Midriff visible. Defiant Catherine Temple? Skirt like a belt. Likely punishment for dressing like this? Well, at the end of the school year, we have a Leavers' Ball. It's the highlight of the year where we all celebrate the fact that we can finally leave this fascist institution. But these girls – they can kiss goodbye to going to Leavers'. And that means that their social lives have just died.

Just as we get close, one of the younger teachers walks past. Mrs Brown's eyes rake her like a laser, taking in the pencil skirt, the high heels and the fitted cardigan. I see her eyes narrow. 'Miss Farrow. See me after registration,' Brown bellows.

Poor Miss Farrow bites her ruby lips and looks petrified. We sigh for her. She'll learn. Even female teachers have to avoid any suggestion that they might be attractive. Not that I really want to go there – I mean, they're teachers, after all. As we rush past Mrs Brown, we hear an intake of breath as she looks at Izzie, but we're saved. A scream and a whimper break out behind us.

‘Charlotte Harrison, are those FISHNET tights? FISHNETS? Get yourself over here.’

And another is sacrificed so we can go free.

Izzie sighs. ‘She’d prefer it if we all wore burkas and then nothing would be on show.’

‘We wouldn’t even be safe then,’ I reply. ‘Remember Safia Iman? Brown got rid of her just coz her headscarf wasn’t in school colours.’

So it’s 8.49 a.m. and we seem to have survived so far.

But I speak too soon because as we climb up the stairs to our form room, Izzie spots danger ahead. ‘Oh no,’ she says, ‘here they come.’

And the next trial begins.

So, we’ve just got past the psychopath teacher. Now meet the students who are most like her. Just a bit prettier.

Meet Zara, Tara, Lara, Tilly and Tiff.

I could try to describe their individual characteristics but they all get confused in my head. Just imagine a many-headed Hydra from a horror film, each snake’s head with perfect make-up and straightened hair. Once upon a time, I was quite friendly with Lara. But this was before she discovered Tara and Zara, and their personalities merged, and all Lara’s nice bits got lost in the mix.

Let me sum them up:

1. They stalk through the corridors as if on a catwalk, trailing perfume, money and attitude as they pout and pose, making lesser girls leap out of their way.

2. They talk loudly so everyone has to overhear the precise details of their interactions with boys, all designed to make you feel inferior if your last close encounter with a member of the opposite sex was buying a skinny hot chocolate in Starbucks.
3. They tease you if you haven't had sex #virgin.
4. They tease you if you have had sex #slut.
5. They don't like anyone. I don't think they even like themselves.

They file past us on the stairs, sniggering.

'Nice look, Izzie,' Tara simpers. 'You'll need a love potion to get anyone to fancy you in that get up.'

Hannah they merely ignore.

Zara checks me up and down with a deliberate stare. 'My oh my, we all know you like your sweets, Jess, but it's really starting to show.'

'Wow,' I say, and as they walk on, giggling, I shout, 'Oh, by the way, you should ask Tilly what she was doing with Jamie in the park last night.' (You have to use whatever ammunition comes your way.)

Zara spins around, her eyes like a snake, while poor Tilly begins to shake.

Then Zara lightly runs down a few steps and stands, staring, over me. 'You fat cow,' she says, sneering/hissing. I laugh in her face and turn away from her. Then I'm not quite sure what happens. Does she push me? Does someone push her into me? All I know is that I'm flying backwards and I land hard on my backside.

‘At least you have a soft landing,’ Zara purrs. As she turns, she flicks a glance back over me. ‘As I said, it’s starting to show.’

I look down and see that my leggings have ripped at the seam, from halfway down my thigh to my calf, revealing a huge expanse of white flesh. Zara stares at me in triumph and waltzes off. At least waxing my legs last night was a good idea.

Even so: Bullies – 1, Jess – 0.

First published in 2020
by Firefly Press
25 Gabalfa Road, Llandaff North, Cardiff, CF14 2JJ
www.fireflypress.co.uk

Copyright © Anna Mainwaring 2020

The author has asserted her moral right to be identified as author in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act, 1988.

All rights reserved.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form, binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-913102-27-2
ISBN (ebook) 978-1-913102-28-9

This book has been published with the support
of the Welsh Books Council.

Typeset by Elaine Sharples

Printed by Pulsio SARL