

# The Bobby Girls

*Book One in the Bobby Girls Series*

JOHANNA BELL

  
HODDER

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1

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Dear readers,

I hope you enjoy this first book in the Bobby Girls series. Although I've been a journalist and writer for more than fifteen years, this is the first book I have ever written – and I'm so excited to share it with you.

My fascination with the great wars started when I was young. I loved hearing my granddad's World War Two stories. He didn't talk about his experiences with the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers a lot, which made our chats about them all the more special. He ignited my passion for learning about what the soldiers went through, as well as unlocking a curiosity about what life was like for everybody left behind at home.

When my cousin Adam joined the Royal Marines as a member of 42 Commando, my interest in it all deepened. He was fifteen years older than me and I had always looked up to him, but this achievement knocked my socks off – especially when I learned about how extreme the training was. I sat and played cards with Adam on his bed during his final visit home before he was killed on duty in Northern Ireland. He was just twenty-one years old when we lost him. When my granddad passed at the ripe old age of ninety-one, many years later, he was still heartbroken by Adam's death.

After losing both these incredible men I became even more passionate about learning as much as I could about how war affects not only those on the front line but their families and communities. That's why researching for *The Bobby Girls* was such a delight for me. It was refreshing to delve into the lives of some of the strongest,

feistiest women I've ever heard of. The negativity and backlash the first recruits came up against was astounding but they kept on going – determined to get what they had set out for.

I was shocked to learn about how unfairly women were treated at the time. My editor also found it hard to believe that the reality was so awful – so much so that she questioned many of the details, and was staggered when I produced my sources! The establishment of the WPV was a real turning point for women's liberation and I've got great respect for everyone involved.

I thoroughly enjoyed developing the characters in this book – especially Maggie, Annie and Irene. I hope you grow to love them as much as I do. As a journalist I'm so used to writing about facts that it felt quite liberating to be able to build my own stories around the historical facts and what I discovered about the WPV in London during World War One. I can't wait to come up with more adventures for the girls and I'd love for you all to join me on the journey.

THE VOTE,  
June 19, 1914.  
ONE PENNY.

**ARREST OF OUR HON. TREASURER.**

# THE VOTE

**THE ORGAN OF THE WOMEN'S FREEDOM LEAGUE.**

VOL. X. NO. 243.

*[Registered at the General Post Office as a Newspaper.]*

FRIDAY, JUNE 19, 1914.

20 PAGES.

Edited by C. DESPARD.

FOUR PAGES EXTRA.

OBJECTS: To secure for Women the Parliamentary vote as it is or may be granted to men :  
to use the power thus obtained to establish equality of rights and opportunities between  
the sexes, and to promote the social and industrial well-being of the community.

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# *Prologue*

August 1914

## *Sarah*

As Sarah put the finishing touches to her article, the sound of excited chatter made its way across the offices of *The Vote* towards her desk. She had been working at the paper for the last year. Normally there was a sense of calm and relief as everyone met the final deadline and relaxed before the latest edition went to press. But today was different.

She pulled her work out of the typewriter and left it at the end of her desk to be picked up, before making her way to the crowd that had gathered around Nina. Peering over a few shoulders, Sarah could just manage to see the page proof that had everyone so giddy. It was there, in big, bold letters: *RECRUITING*. Squinting her eyes, she strained to make out the small print underneath. She could read enough to work out that a corps of female volunteer police was being put together.

‘Finally!’ she exclaimed, as Nina grinned at her through the small crowd. Nina, *The Vote*’s political secretary, had been campaigning for women to be allowed to become special constables for a long time. She had written about it in the paper and had even started recruiting a few months ago, before the Chief Commissioner of Police gave her permission to form the group. The paper had run a big

front-page call-to-arms back in June, along with an article outlining all the reasons why women police were needed. Sarah had been outraged when Nina told her what the commissioner had said in response to her ideas: ‘You will get yourselves knocked on the head, and you surely don’t expect me to look after a lot of women.’ It was just typical of men – why couldn’t they see that women could look after themselves perfectly well?

‘The commissioner finally gave in,’ smiled Nina. ‘It seems all his manpower is off to fight so he has no choice but to draft in female help. Now we can start enrolling the women who have already come forward, and begin officially recruiting.’

Sarah felt a sudden rush of adrenaline as the enormity of the news sunk in. ‘This is our chance to show everyone what we can do,’ she said to her friend Daisy as they made their way back to their desks.

‘Will you be signing up, then?’ Daisy asked, nervously.

‘Of course,’ Sarah said. ‘Why on earth wouldn’t I?’ At twenty-one, Sarah was the youngest writer at the paper. Her age along with her short and slight frame led people to assume she was shy and meek. They were always surprised to discover that, though she was small, her personality was big.

‘It’s just . . . well . . .’ stammered Daisy, avoiding eye contact and staring uncomfortably at the floor. ‘I know this is what we’ve been fighting for for so long . . . but now it’s actually happening, I think I would be a little too scared to sign up.’

‘Are you pulling my leg?’ Sarah scoffed. ‘This is it, Daisy – *this* is what all the hard work has been about! Female bobbies! All the campaigning has worked! This is our opportunity to show the men we can do just as good a job as them!’ Sarah’s eyes watered as emotion took over. She paused before continuing.

‘This is our chance to protect all those poor women getting dragged through the court system by male police officers, male solicitors, male court staff and male judges – whether they’ve done something that deserves justice or been a victim. We need to do this for them!’

Sarah could feel all eyes on her as her voice increased in volume, as it tended to do when she got going on this topic. She couldn’t help it – she was just so passionate about it. She had been devastated when her beloved suffragettes had ceased hostilities at the outbreak of the war earlier that month. Yes, she agreed everyone needed to work together to help win the war – but she had been worried it would be at the sacrifice of all the progress that had been made.

Lowering her voice, she added, ‘Now that Nina has permission to go ahead, I’ll be drawing up my application. You should really think about doing the same thing, Daisy. We need to stick together and show everyone we can do this.’

As she sat back down at her desk, Sarah’s thoughts turned to what life in the police could be like, and how it would feel to walk the streets of London acting as a protector for vulnerable women. She was desperate to do her bit for the women’s lib movement, and if she could help those being let down by the all-male justice system – well, she could really make a difference.

As Sarah left the offices that evening, the latest issue of *The Vote* was going to press. She smiled to herself as she thought about it landing on doormats and desks in the morning, delivering all the hope and promise she had felt herself when she had first laid eyes on that groundbreaking cover.

### *Maggie*

Sitting down with her morning cup of tea, Maggie froze when she saw the newspaper lying at the other end of the



kitchen table, the words ‘The Vote’ emblazoned across the front. She looked around furtively to make absolutely sure she was alone, then grabbed the corner and pulled it towards her.

Her heart thumped hard in her chest as she flicked through. Her eyes were drawn to a section about Women Police Volunteers. She had to take a moment to process the news that the women behind the campaign had been given permission to start recruiting. After taking a deep breath, she drank in the words, every single one of them making her feel braver and more empowered.

She knew that the suffragettes had been campaigning for this for years, but it just hadn’t seemed like something that could ever become a reality. Now they had the backing of the police commissioner, her tummy flipped as she dared herself to dream of getting involved in something so exciting.

*I’d love to join these women, but Daddy would never let me,* she thought sadly. At that moment, she heard her father’s footsteps coming down the stairs, and her heart pounded faster. Quick as a flash, she closed the paper, put it back facing the way it had been before she had touched it, and stared innocently into her cup of tea.

‘Good morning, Margaret,’ her father said stiffly as he walked into the room. Her father insisted on calling her Margaret even though she had begged to be known as Maggie for as long as she could remember. Her father was the strictest she had ever heard of. She lived with him, her mother and her brother Eddie in a big house in Kensington. She often thought that it was a good job the house was so big, as she was hardly ever allowed to go out and do anything on her own. She regularly wandered up and down the long corridors, pretending she was out in the fresh air for a stroll. The vast space also meant there were plenty of hiding places. Maggie had squeezed herself into many a secret spot over the years

to avoid her father when he was in one of his moods. She had learned at a very young age that it was best to stay out of his way when he lost his temper, and she was now an expert at spotting the warning signs, and making a quick escape.

At eighteen, Maggie was desperate to get out into the world and start living her life, but her father was convinced she would do something shameful before he had a chance to present her at a Debutante Ball and find her a suitor. Maggie found it hard to keep friendships going when she'd only ever been allowed out of the house on her own to attend school. The few friends she had were always trying to convince her to sneak out, but she never dared to. No amount of fun was worth the punishment her father would dish out if he discovered her defiance. Her friends had no idea about his treatment of her, and the secret meant she found it hard to get close to anyone. Then there were all the bruises she had been forced to explain away over the years. How could she form proper friendships with these girls when they didn't know the real her?

Maggie couldn't think of anything worse than being married off young. She would rather go out and live her life how she wanted – and maybe find herself a husband along the way. She most certainly didn't want to spend the rest of her days answering to a tyrant, like her mother had to. But her father's work in politics and his affluent upbringing meant he was strongly against women's liberation. The one time Maggie had mentioned the suffragettes in front of him, you'd have thought she had said a swear word. He only got *The Vote* to keep abreast of the opposition, and she didn't normally get even a sniff of it. All her information about the women's movement came from her few friends and sometimes from their cook, Florence – when her father was safely out of the house.

Maggie breathed a sigh of relief when her father walked past the paper on the table without seeming to notice it had been disturbed.

‘I trust you will be putting a jacket on before leaving the house today,’ he said, without even looking at her. ‘We don’t want to give out the wrong impression.’ He had a thing about women showing off their arms. Maggie had known she was taking a risk putting on a short-sleeved dress this morning – but it was so hot outside.

It was bad enough her parents tried to dictate her every move – but her clothes? ‘Oh, Daddy!’ In her frustration, the words came out before she could stop them, and she braced herself. The outburst seemed to have shocked her father so much he had stopped dead in his tracks. Maggie couldn’t ever remember a time when he had been lost for words like this.

She knew she had only moments to prevent a full-scale row. ‘What I meant to say was, it’s really very hot to be wearing long sleeves or a jacket, and it doesn’t matter anyhow as there aren’t any eligible young men around to notice.’ She held her breath as she waited for his response. She didn’t often answer him back. The few times she had done, he had become so angry that she’d instantly regretted it. He didn’t hit her regularly, but he always made it clear that he was considering it. It was normally enough to make her think twice before standing up to him, so she wasn’t sure what had come over her this morning.

She flinched when he stepped closer to her and raised his hand in the air, a menacing look on his face. As he towered over her, he spoke in a snarl, his teeth and jaw clenched in anger as she cowered in her chair.

‘Keep talking back to me, Margaret Smyth, and I will have no choice but to make you see the error of your ways,’ he spat furiously. Instinctively, Maggie put a hand up to cover

her face. She wasn't sure why – he had never struck her face before, always opting for parts of her body that were easier to hide with clothes.

The only time he had slipped up was when her mother had stepped in to protect her a few years before. He'd caught her mother's cheek and sent her flying into the corner of a table. She had nearly lost her sight as a result and now suffered regular migraines. Maggie wasn't sure if her mother actually got migraines as often as she claimed – she suspected she used them as an excuse to take to her bed and stay out of her father's way. She didn't blame her. Her poor mother was normally his first port of call for a beating when he was feeling angry.

Suddenly, footsteps rang out on the stairs and her father moved back and dropped his hand. Maggie breathed a sigh of relief and silently thanked whoever it was who had unknowingly saved her.

'We've spoken about that dress and it is not to be worn out of the house,' Mr Smyth said firmly, his voice calm now, as though he hadn't just threatened to hurt her. The way he could change moods within a heartbeat made her shiver. 'Go and get changed before I send a maid up to your room to dress you in something I have picked out myself.' Before she had a chance to say anything, he turned on his heel and left the room, leaving her alone once again with the newspaper. Maggie breathed a second sigh of relief before looking up to see her brother walking into the room.

'Hey kiddo,' he beamed, ruffling her blonde hair and kissing her on the forehead. Maggie quickly rearranged her hair. She always wore it long so that it covered her ears, and she hated it when Eddie messed it up. They both had ears that stuck out slightly, but while Maggie was self-conscious about hers, Eddie couldn't give a hoot about his. He took a step back to study Maggie's face. She realised then that she was shaking.

‘What’s wrong? You’re white as a ghost,’ he said, his voice full of concern.

‘Oh, Eddie, it’s just the usual,’ Maggie muttered, shrugging her shoulders and sighing. He scowled and put his arm around her, giving her a comforting squeeze. They both knew there was nothing he could say to make it better. They stayed in the embrace for a minute or so before Eddie pulled away to sit down and pour himself a cup of tea from the pot on the table.

‘One day he’ll get what’s coming to him,’ he muttered, staring angrily at the brown liquid in his cup. He took a deep breath and sighed before continuing. ‘He’s a bully, and bullies never win – not in the end.’ They sat in silence for a few minutes before Eddie rose abruptly.

‘We’re better than this life, Mags,’ he said, sounding positive now. ‘We’ll find a way to leave this all behind. But let’s bide our time and try not to antagonise Father in the meantime, eh?’ he added encouragingly, giving Maggie’s hair another ruffle before leaving her on her own once more.

Maggie angrily brought the newspaper around to face her again. She turned back to the section about Women Police Volunteers and stared at the words on the page. *I’ll show Daddy who I can really be*, she thought, smiling grimly as she imagined the look on his face as she revealed a year or so down the line that she had been doing a ‘man’s job’. It was enough to make her want to post off an application there and then.

Suddenly, she remembered Eddie’s words about not antagonising their father, and she groaned in frustration. But then, wouldn’t this be a superb way of giving the man his comeuppance? Eddie would be so proud of her! She found herself imagining what it would be like to gain enough independence that she could leave this house and make something of her life all by herself.

Maggie had grown up watching her mother walk on eggshells around this man. She knew that didn't always work for her – she had heard the cries and seen the bruises. They never spoke about it, of course, even after the table incident, which Maggie had seen for herself. She knew the hell her mother was living in. What if she could escape and build enough of a life that she could rescue her mother, too? And maybe even her brother?

Hearing footsteps coming back towards the kitchen, Maggie hurriedly placed the paper back in its original position.

### *Annie*

As Annie worked fastidiously on her balaclava, she tried to block out the chorus of knitting needles and chatter in the room around her. She didn't really enjoy these gatherings – she would rather knit for the troops in the quiet of her own home – but she went along regularly with her mum out of a sense of duty. Since war had broken out she had felt so helpless. At least this way she knew she was directly helping those poor men fighting on the front line. Annie had had to rush from her job as a typist to get to tonight's meet-up. As she worked away in her usual silence, she wondered whether the balaclava helmet she was knitting would be the one to finally reach her fiancé, Richard.

Ever since joining the group, she had been putting a little mark inside each balaclava she completed. She had let Richard know to look out for them when she'd written to him soon after finishing her first one, but she hadn't heard back yet. She knew it was silly, but it helped her feel that little bit closer to him. Perhaps it would help him, too, if he knew he was wearing something she had made with her own loving hands. After all, he was all she thought about as she knitted away. The chance to keep him warm and a little more

protected made her smile through the pain of being without him and the constant worry about whether or not he would make it home safely.

Annie drifted off as she remembered the night she had met Richard at a local dance. It was a year ago now. She nearly didn't make it that night, but she had persuaded her parents it would be mostly girls there and definitely no funny business. She grinned as the rush of excitement she'd felt when Richard had introduced himself came flooding back to her. His easy charm had overcome her usual shyness, and they had clicked straight away. They were courting seriously within weeks.

Richard was a bank clerk and Annie's parents had been delighted when she had brought him home to meet them. It was a relief as they could be sniffy when it came to potential suitors for their little girl, even if she was now in her twenties. Annie knew they were just looking out for her, though. She'd had a modest upbringing and she had always been aware of the fact her father wished he could have provided more for her and her siblings. It upset her as they were all so happy – they had so much love from their parents, how could they possibly want for anything more? But her father was obsessed with her marrying into at least a little bit of money. She had heard him commenting on Richard's 'healthy earnings' and the fact he was a good match for her when she'd been seeing him out after dinner.

'No prizes for guessing what you're thinking about, my girl – or should I say, who?' Annie's mum's friend June interrupted her musings. As Annie blushed furiously, June shoved a newspaper under her nose. 'Look at this,' June said eagerly. Annie could see straight away it was a copy of *The Vote*. She had been following the women's lib movement closely over the last few years, although she had never plucked up the courage to get involved. The thought was exciting to

her – but at the same time terrifying for someone so timid. She didn't think her parents would approve, and she was quite sure Richard would have something to say, too. She didn't like upsetting people and going against their expectations of her.

'They've finally got the go-ahead for female bobbies,' June added as Annie's eyes devoured the recruitment call.

'Oh gosh, I never thought it would actually happen,' Annie whispered, putting down her needles and picking the paper up for a closer look. It said that they were looking for '*healthy, self-reliant and reliable, punctual and regular, and not under-sized*' women to join the corps.

'I can't see it working myself,' June sniffed, turning her nose up and continuing with her knitting. 'Can you see any man taking orders from a woman, even if she *is* in a fancy uniform? It's just not the way the world works, is it?'

Annie pondered this for a moment. She couldn't imagine any man taking orders from *her*, that was for sure. She wouldn't dream of trying to boss a man around, let alone a stranger who was disobedient enough to be breaking the law. But with more and more men heading off to fight, she'd heard the female police would be focused on protecting the naïve young women who kept flocking to the army camps to be around the soldiers. Cara at work told her they often got carried away with it all. Annie hadn't been sure what she had meant, and had been shocked when Cara explained that many of the girls ended up falling into prostitution.

'They're worried the Contagious Diseases Act will be brought back in, and they want to protect the women who are carrying on with the soldiers,' Annie said, suddenly finding her voice.

'No, no, no,' June shook her head with her eyes closed, still knitting away at a rate of knots. Annie didn't know how she could work so fast, all the while barely glancing at what



she was doing. 'I'm all for women's liberation, my dear, but this is a step too far,' she said firmly.

'Yes, I suppose you're right,' Annie agreed, backing down and nodding quickly. In truth, she thought it was a brilliant idea, and she wished she was brave enough to get involved. She didn't have the confidence to say that to June, though. When June, her eyes still closed, started humming to herself, Annie's mum, who had been sitting on her other side, quietly reached over, picked up the newspaper and slipped it into Annie's bag.

'What are you doing?' Annie whispered in confusion.

'You'd be perfect,' her mum smiled, placing her hand lovingly on Annie's arm.

Annie stared at her, completely taken aback. 'But what about—'

'Don't worry about your father,' she said in a hushed voice, 'I'll deal with him. You need to do your bit and I'll make him see this is the best way. You can't be his little girl forever.'

'But I have a job,' Annie said in confusion. She only worked in the mornings and the pay was just a bit of pocket money, really – but she insisted on contributing a little towards the household costs and took pride in the fact she did so.

'If you need to give up work in order to volunteer then I'm sure we can make do without your help for a little while,' her mum reasoned.

'But who's going to listen to me?' Annie argued quietly, fear coursing through her at just the thought of having to approach a stranger in the street, let alone tell them what to do or reprimand them. With her loose, mousey curls and fresh, round face, she had always looked younger than her twenty-two years.

'You'd be in uniform, love. Just think of the status and confidence that would give you! And you would look so grown up,' her mother beamed. 'I'd be proud to see my

daughter out there standing up for what's right and protecting other women. I think Richard would love to be able to tell his comrades you were getting stuck in, too.' Annie knew her mum was also desperate for her to come out of herself a little instead of always being so shy and timid – although she had never said as much to her face.

'You have to remember that your future is by no means certain any more,' her mum added with a tinge of sadness in her voice. 'Richard is at *war*. I know it's supposed to be over by Christmas – but anything could happen. It wouldn't hurt for you to build up some skills and confidence, now, would it? Just in case.' She gently squeezed Annie's hand, and Annie knew what her mum was getting at. A possible outcome she had cried herself to sleep thinking about countless times since she had seen Richard off on the train.

'I'll think about it,' Annie agreed, going back to her knitting in silence.

As they walked home that evening, her mother's words were all Annie could think about. *Would something like this really make my family proud?* It was a terrifying thought. But she did feel that she ought to be doing something more to show her support for her country and all the men fighting for it.

*There's no harm applying,* she finally concluded later that evening as she lay in bed. *They wouldn't accept someone like me anyway, but at least I can say I tried, and mother will be happy.*

### **Irene**

Footsteps approached and Irene heard hushed giggling. She took her hands out of the bin, straightened her back and tried to act naturally. She didn't care if people laughed at her for rifling through rubbish in the street, but she refused to act as a sideshow for those who found her desperation entertaining.

Two young girls walked past, whispering and glancing back at her.

‘Evening!’ Irene called, making a point of flashing a sarcastic grin and waving at them. Both girls put their heads down, folded their arms and picked up their speed. Once they were out of sight, Irene reached back into the bin and pulled out the copy of *The Vote* she’d had her eye on before she was disturbed. She was desperate to keep up to date with the progress of the war, but she couldn’t afford a paper every day. Her work at the local rag factory meant she could just about pay for her rented room. It only had a single bed and a chest of drawers, the wallpaper was flaking, there was no kitchen or bathroom and she had to share an outside toilet with three families, but after years in a children’s home she was just happy to be able to shut herself away from everyone else at the end of the day. She loved having a space that was hers and hers alone. If you didn’t count the rat.

Making her way home, Irene glanced down at the newspaper. It was folded over and she could see the words ‘Women Police Volunteers’ written in bold letters. She took a closer look and when she read that enrolment had begun, she started to feel warm inside despite the evening chill. Perhaps this could be her chance to finally make something of herself.

Of course, it was only volunteering, but what a title to tell her aunt about – and it would definitely make her factory work more bearable. She had recently managed to save a little bit of money every month by doing things like ‘borrowing’ newspapers from rubbish bins and eating just enough to keep hunger at bay. Her tall, already skinny frame was suffering as a result, but she liked the feeling of having some money put aside. She had enough that it meant she wouldn’t have to panic about not being able to pay her rent if she got sick and couldn’t make it into work for a couple of weeks. Her landlord was ruthless – he didn’t care if you were on

death's door, if you couldn't make your rent then you were out on your ear.

Now she wondered if she could use that money to help her fund her way through WPV training. She would need to keep saving until she joined, and even then she'd need to keep as many shifts at the factory as possible alongside the police work. She could ask her boss about night shifts. She would be exhausted but it would be worth it. She had heard the plan was to make the women fully fledged members of the force once the war was over, so perhaps this might lead to a proper, paid job – one that she would actually want to get out of bed for.

If she could become a real police officer she could finally afford to support her aunt Ruth and her cousins the way she had always wanted to. Ruth was the only one who had been there for Irene when her parents died. She'd been desperate to take her in but already had too much to cope with looking after her own children. Ruth had helped Irene through her darkest days in the children's home, and Irene had always dreamed of paying back her kindness one day. Maybe this could help her do just that.