

LILY and the
ROCKETS



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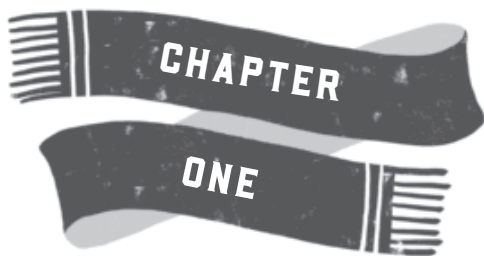
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performed by my friend Tony Haase.
I'd like to thank him for letting me use his
original idea for my story.

PART ONE

Woolwich, South London
Summer 1917





CHAPTER
ONE

Oh, I remember that day. Me and Amy May, Amy May and me, lying in the grass on Plumstead Marshes, the sun on our faces and the world at our feet. We'd left school that afternoon, finished for ever, and we felt that anything was possible.

We were fourteen and we'd been best friends since time began.

'What would you do, Lily Dodd,' Amy May was saying, 'if you could have any job in the world?'

That was easy.

'Goalkeeper,' I said.

'That's not a job,' said Amy. 'Playing football. It's a hobby. Something you do with your dad in the park after school. You don't get paid for it.'

‘Dad used to get paid,’ I said. ‘Playing for the works’ team.’

‘How much?’

‘I don’t know! It was before I was born, when him and Mum were courting. She used to go and watch him, down at the old Manor Ground. He said she liked looking at his legs.’

Mum had died when I was little, so I didn’t know much about her. Only what Dad told me and what I could imagine from looking at the oval photograph that hung above the piano in the front room, with her sitting on a velvet chair with a sort of painted ruin behind her, looking like she was trying not to laugh.

‘It’s different though, Lil,’ said Amy. ‘Your dad ... well ... *he’s a man.*’

‘That is true,’ I said, sitting up and flaring my nostrils like Miss Hogweed, our teacher at school. ‘A lot of people are men, Amy May. Half the human race, in fact. Stupid!’

For some reason, this made us laugh and laugh. And when we’d stopped laughing, Amy said, ‘And you’re a girl.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I am a girl. A very tall girl who is

very good at football. And you, Amy May,' I said, doing the teacher voice again, 'are a very silly girl with a very bad attitude.'

She gave me a little slap. 'Ha!' she said. 'No more Miss Hogweed for us! No nay never! No nay never no mooooooore...'

I joined in and we both sang at the top of our voices: 'Will I play the wild rover, no never, no more!'

'No more lessons, no more learning, won't be long before we're earning!' added Amy.

I flopped back on to the grass. 'You did say I could choose any job in the world.'

'True.'

'So, I choose goalkeeper.' I knew it couldn't happen, of course. Girls couldn't be goalkeepers, not professional ones. They could hardly even play football in the park without boys shouting things at them and old ladies shaking their heads. I just liked saying it, so I said it again. 'I want. To be. A goalkeeper.'

'Why?'

Most people grow out of saying 'Why?' all the time when they're three years old. Amy May never

did. Some people said she was a nosy parker, but I thought it was nice. She just wanted to know about everything, which is a good thing in my opinion.

‘Because it’s the best,’ I said. ‘Best position on the pitch, Dad says. It’s all quiet at first and lonely. You stand in your goal, watching the game, willing your boys to score, waiting, waiting. Then all of a sudden, when you least expect it, they lose the ball, the other team’s coming towards your goal, your boys chasing them, but they won’t catch up, you know it, they know it, you’re their last chance, the man with the ball gets past your defenders, you look him in the eye, you know he’s going to shoot, he hesitates for one second – one second only – he kicks, he shoots, the ball comes at you, whoaaahhhhhh . . . and you save it. And you, you are the hero, Amy May. You.’

Amy had stopped listening. When I said she was interested in everything that wasn’t quite true. She always turned off when I started talking about football.

‘What about you?’ I said. ‘If you could have any job in the world, what would you do?’

Amy thought for a second. 'A singer,' she said. 'In a travelling theatre troupe, going all round the world, making people cry with the loveliness of my voice. When the war's over, obviously. They don't want to do any more crying at the moment. Or a dancer in pink tights.' She gasped suddenly, as if she'd been stung. 'A woman with a flower shop! That'd be a lovely job! Or a comedienne, like that whatsername we saw at the Hippodrome with your dad.'

'Vesta Tilley.'

'Yeah. She was funny.' Amy lay back and smiled at the sky. 'Perhaps I'll just be a queen . . .'

'Being a queen is not a job.'

'It's as much a job as being a goalkeeper.'

'It is not! Being a queen is just being married to a king. Which isn't a job either, by the way.'

'I don't see why. He gets paid enough.'

I picked a feathery bit of grass and chewed the end. 'My dad hates the King,' I said.

Amy was a lot more interested in that sort of thing than in football. 'Why?' she said.

'Don't know really. He hates all the royals. Leeches and spongers, he calls them. Living off the

working man—’

‘And woman.’

‘German too, of course, all of them, German.’

‘That’s not their fault, poor dears.’

‘True.’

‘Any more than it’s your fault you’re daft.’

‘Who are you calling daft? You’re the one who wants to be a queen.’

‘And you’re the one who wants to be a goal-keeper.’

I didn’t say anything, just leant over and tickled the inside of her nostril with the feathery bit of grass.

‘Argh! Get off!’ Amy flapped about with her hands, trying to grab the grass. And then, as we rolled about on the ground laughing, a shadow fell between us and the sun and we looked up to see a boy. A boy with spiky hair and a football under his arm, grinning down at us. Amy sniffed.

‘What are you looking at, Billy Cracken?’

‘Not you, Amy May. Want to play, Lily? You can be in goal.’

I looked at Amy. She rolled her eyes. ‘Shove off, freckles,’ she said. ‘She doesn’t want to play with you.’

I did actually, but I was scared someone might

see us out there on the marshes. Other boys from school, men going home from work at the Arsenal. They might stop and laugh, say things about girls playing football, lanky legs, stuff like that.

Amy poked Billy's leg with the toe of her boot. 'Go on, Bill. Scram!'

I liked the way she talked to boys, so funny and easy. Amy had seven brothers – three fighting in France, three working in the Arsenal making the bombs and bullets to send to the ones in France, and one younger than her, who was still at school, not making anything except trouble, her mum used to say. So she was used to it, Amy was, talking to boys. It wasn't like that for me. Since Mum died there was just me and Dad at home, though I still heard her singing round the house sometimes, at least I think it was her:

'She's my lady love, she is my dove, my baby love...'

Dad heard it too, I know he did, though he never said anything. His eyes would go all misty and he'd look up at something that wasn't there, hanging in the air in front of his face, and then he'd shake out his newspaper with a big loud crackle and start talking about football or get up and make

a cup of tea. So anyway, I couldn't talk to boys, not like Amy.

I could tell Billy Cracken didn't know what to say either, so he lobbed his football down towards the ground beside our heads, trying to make us jump and scream like girls do sometimes. Quick as a flash I stuck out my arm and caught the ball with one hand before it hit the ground. I've got big hands – goalkeeper's hands, Dad always says – and right from where I was lying, I threw Billy Cracken's heavy old football way up over his head and into the brambles at the other side of the path that led down to the river.

'Oi! My ball!'

I laughed and Amy joined in. 'Go get it then, Bill!'

'Yeah, Bill! Off you go!'

As Billy Cracken struggled off grumbling into the brambles to get his ball, Amy May stopped laughing and rolled over to look me in the eye.

'Really, though, Lil. What are we going to do? We've got to find a way to earn money.'

'I don't know. Dad doesn't want me to go into service and I don't either. I can't think of anything

worse, having to leave Dad and go and live in some big house over the river, up at dawn, scrubbing floors, laying fires, all that.'

'People telling you what to do all the time. Worse than school.'

'Yeah.'

For a minute we lay there, listening to the slap of the water against the riverbank as a barge drifted past, and the constant grind and roar of the machines in the Arsenal. Then Amy said, 'We could be munitionettes!'

'What?'

'You know. Apply to work at the Arsenal.'

'I know what munitionettes are, Amy.'

'They're crying out for more women workers, my brother said. With so many men gone and that.'

'We're not women, Amy,' I said. 'We're girls. You've got to be eighteen to work in munitions. We're not old enough.'

'You look old enough. Tall enough, anyhow.'

'You don't. You look about twelve.'

'Yes, but I am a very good liar.' Amy's eyes danced at me. She had the funniest eyes in the world, Amy May: one blue and one brown, like

certain types of dogs. One from each parent, Amy used to say. She hated them, or pretended to, but I thought they were pretty. So did lots of people. Especially boys.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘Let’s do it.’

Amy laughed. Then she stopped laughing and looked at me. ‘Do you mean it?’ she said.

I stood up and held out a hand to pull her up. ‘I do,’ I said.

She took a deep breath. We looked at each other.

‘Tomorrow, then?’ she said. ‘We go down the Labour Exchange? Make them give us a job?’

‘Tomorrow.’

Amy reached up and patted my cheek, then poked me in the ribs and ran off, fair hair flying out behind her, away from the river, back towards the streets. I stayed where I was, watching the boats. The river was the colour of milky tea.

It was the end of something, that hot afternoon in 1917, our last day as schoolgirls. But the start of something too, I thought. Something new.

And that’s when I heard the scream.