

# WHERE THE HEART BREAKS

The book cover features a woman with short, wavy brown hair, wearing a red trench coat over a grey shirt. She is looking off to the right with a somber expression, holding a small notebook and a pen. The background is a dramatic, fiery orange and yellow sky, suggesting a war-torn landscape. Several biplanes are flying in the sky. Bare, dark trees are visible in the foreground and background, some with flames at their bases. The overall mood is one of tragedy and conflict.

A NOVEL

ERIC GEORGET

Éric Georget

## Where the Heart Breaks

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This book is not a direct translation, but an English adaptation of the author's French novel *Ce que la guerre fait aux cœurs*, rewritten for an international audience.

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# 1

## A New Beginning

### Mount Holyoke College, Massachusetts

*November 1915*

The first signs of winter had already settled across the Mount Holyoke College campus, just days before the eagerly awaited Thanksgiving break. A fine mist clung to the lawns, and sharp gusts of wind rushed through the bare trees, scattering the last golden leaves of fall. In the fading light of the afternoon, three young women hurried across the campus toward Mary Wilder Hall, coats pulled tight, cheeks flushed from the cold.

Marthe walked briskly between her two close friends, Myrtle and Margaret, returning from a long afternoon in the chilly experimental science labs, where they had spent hours immersed in the mysteries of organic chemistry. Their routine was always the same: from the science building to their dormitory, eager for a little warmth – and a well-deserved hot drink.

It had been a busy year. Midterm exams loomed ahead, and much of October had been devoted to welcoming the incoming Freshmen. At Mount Holyoke, initiation wasn't just a formality – it was a tradition of festivities, performances, and songs. Marthe had thrown herself into it as wholeheartedly as everyone else.

Founded in 1837 by Mary Lyon, Mount Holyoke was the first institution of higher education for women in the United States. At a time when the very idea of women pursuing college degrees made conservatives bristle, this visionary woman had turned her dream into reality. Over the decades, the college had earned a reputation for academic excellence that reached far beyond the borders



of Massachusetts.

Marthe had been just nineteen when she arrived in South Hadley with her parents, Armand and Adèle Hartmann. They had crossed the Atlantic aboard the *France II*, and traveled by rail across the country to reach this small university town. Her coming to Mount Holyoke was no accident.

Back then, she had arrived with a mixture of awe and fear, carrying more than just luggage – carrying the burden of being the daughter of a lineage torn between silence and revolt. There had always been expectations whispered around her: to be dignified like her mother, sharp like her father, and brave like the dead. But Marthe didn't feel brave. Not yet. She had hoped that Mount Holyoke would give her the freedom to become something entirely her own – someone untethered by blood or duty. And for a while, it had.

In New York, they had been welcomed by her aunt Walburge – Armand's sister – who had emigrated to America over forty years earlier, shortly after Alsace's annexation by Germany in 1871. Walburge and her husband had settled in Holyoke, a few miles from the college, where they built a successful paper business.

Marthe now lived alone in her spacious room at Wilder Hall, ever since Sigrid – her closest friend and a German student – had been forced to return to Bavaria at the start of the war, under pressure from her family. Their room, tucked under the dormitory's gabled roof, usually offered a splendid view over the Connecticut Valley and Mount Holyoke itself. But tonight, the windows were veiled in mist.

Before heading upstairs, the three friends stopped at the small campus mailroom, as they did every evening. Marthe's heart jumped when she saw two letters waiting for her. One envelope, a faded blue, was addressed in her mother's familiar handwriting. She slipped it into the pocket of her coat without hesitation. Letters from Paris had become rare – and precious. Since the summer of 1914, European mail took weeks to arrive, and the silence surrounding her brother Jean had long since hardened from worry into fear.

In the quiet of her room, Marthe sat on the edge of her bed, tugged off her gloves, and carefully opened her mother's letter. It took only a few lines for her entire body to tense.

*“My dearest Marthe,*

*Your father and I hesitated long before writing to you. You will understand why. The news we have received about Jean has left us devastated...”*

Thus began the letter, penned in black ink on thin, crinkled paper. Her mother’s voice echoed through the words: calm, trembling, yet dignified. Jean, assigned to Escadrille N12, had gone missing in early October during a special mission over the front lines. His plane had been spotted crash-landing in open country, beyond enemy lines. He was wounded but had survived the landing.

Marthe's eyes skimmed down to the bottom of the page, her fingers trembling. Slowly, she leaned back until she lay flat across the bed, the letter still clutched in her hand.

Jean was missing.

Or rather, he had been wounded and captured, now held somewhere in Germany under circumstances that remained unclear. Witnesses had last seen him northeast of Reims, attempting to deliver an agent behind enemy lines when his Nieuport suffered a mechanical failure and crashed. A second French plane had spotted the crash and identified Jean’s aircraft.

The following days had confirmed their worst fears. After a brief stay at the Lazaret Saint-Clément hospital in Metz, Jean had been transferred to Fort Prinz Karl in Ingolstadt – a camp reserved for high-risk prisoners, those deemed most likely to escape. Wounded, but alive, the letter said. But for how long? And in what conditions?

Marthe lay still for a long while, eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. Memories rushed in: childhood summers, long afternoons spent reading together, whispered dreams, a shared loyalty to Alsace – the land they had visited each year to see their grandmother. She thought of Strasbourg, of the family legacy crushed by war, of her grandfather, executed for refusing to pledge allegiance to the German Empire. She thought of her father, still carrying the scars of Paris besieged during the Franco-Prussian War. She felt it then, surging within her: the weight of an injured, stubborn lineage she was bound to honor.

A knock at the door. Myrtle and Margaret.

Marthe rose mechanically and opened it. One look at her pale, stricken face

and her friends understood everything. Without a word, she handed them the letter. They read it in silence. Then Myrtle and Margaret wrapped their arms around her, murmuring reassurances: Jean was alive. He was away from the front. Maybe they could send him a package. Maybe he would be exchanged...

But Marthe barely heard them. She sat down in the armchair, pulling her knees to her chest.

And yet, as the warmth of her friends' embrace faded, Marthe felt a cold clarity settle in her chest. For weeks – months – she had tried to live as though the war belonged to another world. But now it had followed her here, into the last quiet corners of her life. She could no longer be the girl with papers and dreams. Jean's name had pulled her out of the life she had built – and back into the one she had tried to forget. She didn't know how. But she knew she would not remain still.

Then, without warning:

*"I have to go back to France. I have to get him out of there."*

Margaret let out a nervous laugh. Myrtle, more perceptive, frowned.

*"Marthe... You can't be serious?"*

*"He's in Bavaria. Near Sigrid's home. I need to find a map. I need to figure out a way."*

The two friends exchanged a glance of incredulity.

That night, a decision was made. Silent. Irrevocable.

And somewhere across the ocean, a brother waited in silence, not knowing that his sister had already begun to cross the war to find him.



## 2

# The Decision

*December 1915*

Snow had begun to fall over South Hadley, coating the lawns and stone paths of Mount Holyoke College in a soft white blanket. The air smelled of woodsmoke and ice, and the last of the autumn leaves clung stubbornly to the bare branches. In the quiet halls of Wilder Hall, the usual chatter of students had faded, replaced by the low murmur of exam cramming and final papers.

Marthe sat by the window in her room, a heavy woolen shawl draped around her shoulders. Outside, the quad was deserted, the lamps casting halos through the falling snow. She pressed her forehead against the cold glass, letting the chill seep into her skin, hoping it would dull the restless storm inside her.

For a moment, Marthe let herself drift back – to her first day at Mount Holyoke. The crisp autumn air, the eager chatter of students, the promise of a life filled with books and ideas and possibilities. She remembered walking those same paths with Sigrid, laughing over trivial things, dreaming aloud of futures as bright as the New England sun.

How far away that life felt now. How small.

The world beyond these peaceful walls had shattered, and it was calling her back.

She closed her eyes for a moment, pressing her forehead lightly against the cool glass.

She had come here to build a future. But now that future felt hollow – as if every book, every lecture, every warm fire in the commons was part of a world

that no longer had a place for her. She didn't resent it. She only wondered whether she had ever truly belonged in that safe life to begin with. Perhaps it had always been borrowed time. Her real life, the one written in blood and loyalty, was calling her back across the sea

Tomorrow, she would begin her real journey.

It had been three weeks since her mother's letter arrived.

Three weeks of sleepless nights, of going through every possible plan, every possible path. Jean was alive. Captured, wounded, imprisoned – but alive. And every day she remained here, going about her studies, felt like a betrayal.

She couldn't stay. She had known that from the moment she read the letter. But how to leave? How to cross an ocean ravaged by war, and then reach her brother hidden deep within enemy territory?

A soft knock broke her thoughts. Myrtle peeked in, her face framed by a thick scarf.

— *Marthe, are you coming to the commons? They're serving cocoa tonight. You should eat something.*"

Marthe shook her head with a small, grateful smile.

— *Not hungry. Thanks, Myrtle.*"

Her friend hesitated, then nodded and pulled the door shut.

Marthe turned back to her desk, where papers were scattered: maps, timetables, a half-written letter to her aunt Walburge in Holyoke. She had drafted and redrafted it a dozen times, trying to find the right words. Walburge had connections. She might help secure passage. Or at least offer advice.

She picked up another letter, this one addressed to Professor Adams, head of the history department. He had always encouraged her writing and might have contacts in the publishing world. Maybe, just maybe, she could pose as a journalist, obtain a letter of assignment that would allow her to travel as a war correspondent.

Marthe closed her eyes, feeling the magnitude of what she was planning settle heavily on her shoulders. She would have to leave everything behind: her