Prologue

Richmond, London

*15th December, 1968*

Life is forever changed without her; without the sense of her somewhere near. Empty hours wander by as I listen for the soft tread of her footfall on the stair and wait for her laughter to cheer these lifeless rooms. When I close my eyes I can conjure her; the scent of her perfume, the feather-touch of her finger­tips against my cheek, those intense blue eyes looking back at me. But it is all illusion. Smoke and mirrors that conceal the truth of her absence.

I push myself up wearily from the chair, clutching my cane like an extra limb as I hobble to the window. Snow sprinkles from a soft grey sky, gathering in pockets along the river, quick to find shelter from the hungry waters of the Thames that flood the inlet behind the house. A skiff bobs to the gentle rhythm of the tide. It reminds me of how I rowed with such vigour as a young man, desperate to impress. I see her there still, sitting on the riverbank, skirt tucked behind her knees, laughing as she launches a stone and watches it sail higher and farther than the others, looping in a great arc and splashing me with its per­fectly aimed descent into the water.

I see her everywhere. In everything. How can she not be here?

I feel for the necklace in my pocket, and remember how she loved to quote Miss Brontë’s words. *I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will.*

What a fool I was.

“Mr. Harding?” Margaret perches in the doorway. Her pris­tine nurse’s uniform takes me back over the years to the noise and smell of field hospitals and clearing stations, and all that once was. “It’s time, Thomas. The car is here.”

Taking a laboured breath I rest my face against the window, savouring the icy chill of the glass against my skin. My gaze wanders over the neighbouring houses, the moody old Thames, and the view beyond the hill towards London. I, alone, know it is the last time I will look upon these places I hold most dear. The doctors tell me I don’t have long. It is a reality I have made my peace with, a reality I hide from those who would only fuss if they knew the full extent of my illness—my nurse included.

“Are my letters packed, Margaret?” I ask.

“They’re in your suitcase as you requested.”

“All of them? The sealed letter as well?” I can’t bring myself to say, “the last one.”

“Yes, Thomas. All of them.”

I nod. How many were there in the end? Dozens, and more. So much fear and hope captured in our words, so much long­ing and loss—and love. She always said her war was fought in words; her pen and prose the only weapons she, as a woman, could wield. She felt it was important to keep a record of all the correspondence, curating the memories of those years with as much determination and care as any exhibition at the British Museum. That a fragile bundle of paper sentiments survived the war when so many people were lost has always angered me, but now I am glad of them. Now, I am ready to relive those days, read through our letters one last time in Paris, as was her dying wish. I think about the sealed letter: *To be opened in Paris on Christmas Eve.* I wonder what more she might have to say.

Margaret waits patiently as I make my way across the room. She knows I am a stubborn old fool and that I will only grouse if she offers me her assistance. She glances at the window, and frowns.

“Are you sure Paris is a good idea, Mr. Harding? The snow is really coming down.”

I wave her concern away. “Paris is always a good idea,” I reply, my breathing heavy as I reach the door. “Especially at Christmas.” I falter at my words. Words which were once hers. “And because I promised.”

“I’ve never been.” Margaret smiles brightly. “I hope we’ll see the Eiffel Tower.”

I mutter under my breath that it is difficult to miss and turn to take one final look at the room, moments and memories hid­den beneath the dust sheets that have always turned our Lon­don home into a temporary mausoleum at this time of year. “If ever a city was made for snow, Paris is it.”

She nods and holds out a tentative arm. “To Paris then, Mr. Harding? And don’t spare the horses!”

Her youthful enthusiasm reminds me of an old friend and I smile as I loop my arm through hers. “To Paris,” I say. “I hope she is as beautiful as I remember.”

Margaret closes the door behind us and I say a silent farewell to all those I have loved and lost, and to all the precious gifts that life has given me. If I have understood things correctly, Paris may yet have one final gift in store.

But first, I must go back to the beginning of our story, back to the beginning of a war none of us wanted, a war they said would be over by Christmas.

I keep the first bundle of letters in my pocket and as the plane taxis down the runway, I untie the red ribbon, and start to read . . .

PART ONE

1914

“They were summoned from the hillside They were called in from the glen, And the country found them ready At the stirring call for men.”

*—Ivor Novello, “Keep the Home Fires Burning”*

*From Thomas Harding to his father*

*10th September, 1914*

Oxford, England

Dear Father,

I write to you from the Officers’ Training Corps at Ox­ford. I’ve done it—I’ve joined the army—so I might serve our country in these great times and prove myself an honourable citizen, just as you did during the South African War. You re­turned as a hero, and I wish to live up to your legacy, at least in this way. There is a real sense of adventure here, a feeling that enlisting is the right thing to do. So many men have applied for a commission with the old Bugshooters that they’ve had to speed up the application process. No more aiming at flies on Christ Church Meadow! This is serious business now.

I am troubled by how we left things the last time I saw you. Two grown men, especially family, shouldn’t shout at each other to settle things. I know you want me to take the helm at the newspaper, but we are different people, Father. I hope one day you will understand my passion for scholarship. To become a professor at one of the most prestigious universities in the world is nothing to scoff at, though I know you disagree. At least by taking an active role in the war I won’t disappoint you. War makes equals of us all. Isn’t that what you once said?

Will Elliott signed up as well. In fact, we’ll be in the same regiment. I thought you would be glad to see me placed with my closest friend. All believe the war will come to a speedy end, so you might expect me home by Christmas, and we can talk again then. I’m certainly looking forward to a swift victory and yuletide cheer.

Sending good wishes, Father. I will be thinking of you in battle.

Your son,

Thomas

*From Evelyn Elliott to Will Elliott*

*12th September, 1914*

Richmond, England

Dearest Will,

Mama told me about your enlisting. I expected nothing less, and wanted to send a few lines to let you know how incred­ibly proud we all are. The British Army will be lucky to have you. Finally, you’ll have a chance to bring back some medals of your own to add to the family collection. Papa is all puffed up with pride, as I’m sure you can imagine, although I’m afraid he doesn’t expect you to see much action. He expects it will be over before you’ve even got to your training camp. While I know you will be eager to do your bit, I hope Papa is right.

I hear Tom Harding also enlisted. You two always were in­separable, and if you must go to war then I am glad to know that your greatest friend will be with you. If this were a battle of wits and intellect, the British Army could not wish for two finer recruits, although I can hardly imagine Tom Harding rushing into battle with a rifle and bayonet. I suspect he would far rather write a thesis about it than participate in it. Keep an eye on him. You know how stubborn he can be at times.

Papa is still livid about the suspension of the last two matches of the County cricket championships, especially with Surrey on course to win again. He says September without cricket is like December without snow—it just doesn’t feel right. Poor Papa. I think he feels rather left behind with all the younger men heading off to war.

Write a few lines now and again, would you? You know how Mama fusses.

Your sister,

Evie

X

*From Will Elliott to Evelyn Elliott*

*15th September, 1914*

Oxford, England

Dear Evie,

Many thanks for the vote of confidence—Tom and I are bristling with something like excitement, though that isn’t quite the word. Josh and Dean are here, too, and Bill Spry; the whole College almost, off to vanquish the enemy. The bloody Krauts won’t know what hit them.

Be good to Mama and Papa while I’m away. None of that mischief you’re so fond of stirring up, do you hear me? I won’t be there to bail you out.

With all good wishes,

Will

*From Evelyn Elliott to Thomas Harding*

*1st October, 1914*

Richmond, England

Dear Thomas Archibald Harding,

(I’m sorry—I couldn’t resist the opportunity to poke a little more fun at your recently discovered middle name. How on earth did you keep that a secret all these years?)

I am really quite hopeless. You, Will, and the rest of the boys are gone less than an hour and already I find myself bored and restless. So much so that I am at Will’s writing desk, penning my first letter to you. After all, I did promise to write soon, and you know how much I hate to break a promise (you may yet regret complaining of having no female relations to write to you). You know I have a dreadful tendency for overenthusi­asm and I’m afraid this war may bring out my very worst best intentions. Can you ever forgive me for sending you into the Cherwell with my overzealous punting? If I catch the post this afternoon, it is entirely possible my letter will arrive at your training camp before you do (and I give you full permission to claim it is from your sweetheart and be the envy of everyone there).

You won’t be surprised to know that I envy you and Will, heading off on your grand adventure, just as I envied you when you returned to Oxford after the long vacation. It seems I must always be the one to wave you off and stay behind but I live in hope that one day I’ll be the one heading off somewhere excit­ing. I suppose a girl can dream.

It was a lovely crowd to see you off, wasn’t it? Some of the women were inconsolable, but I retained my composure, as did Mama. We are terribly proud of you all and can’t wait for you to return as heroes—although, in all honesty, you looked more like a group of nervous bachelors heading to their first tea dance than a troop of soldiers heading to war. No doubt you’ll look the part once you have a rifle in your hand. Send a pho­tograph if you can. I should like to see what Thomas *Archibald* Harding looks like as a proper soldier.

Alice says I’ll have to find a way to divert myself while you’re gone. I have a mind to take up a new hobby. Golf, perhaps. Or maybe I’ll dust off Will’s bicycle and join the local ladies’ bicycling club. In any event, they say the war will be over by Christmas and then all I’ll have to worry about is how to sur­vive another weary afternoon of cribbage with Mama and her friends.

If you have time to respond between drills and polishing your boots, it would be nice to know where you are and what you are doing. If I cannot go with you both to France, you will

have to transport me there with your words.

Your friend,

Evelyn Maria Constance Elliott

*From Evelyn to Will*

*1st October, 1914*

Richmond, England

Dear Will,

I have just written five pages to Tom Harding—four more than I’d intended—and now I am running out of ink and words, so please forgive me if this is rather brief.

I’m sitting at your writing desk, and it wishes to inform you that it is much happier with its new occupant. Far less banging of fists and gnashing of teeth and spilt ink. You’re not gone two hours and I must say that I already feel very much at home here in your room. The view over the garden is lovely. How funny that I never really appreciated it before. I can idle here now, you see, absorb the view at leisure with no mean big brother to chase me out. I might even sleep in your bed, Will. I might have a good old rummage through your drawers. I wonder what terrible secrets I might unearth!

I hope your training camp is comfortable, although no doubt a far cry from your London clubs. Don’t worry. You’ll be dining and dancing at The Savoy again before the year is out. Don’t do anything foolish, Will, I know how impetuous you can be, and please send word as soon as you can—if not to me then at least to Mama. Spare me the misery of her in­evitable fretting. Please. I will forgive you your most terrible secrets if you can just write a short letter home every now and again.

Do your duty and hurry home.

Wishing you well, and safe onward travels.

Evie

X

*From Thomas Harding to Evelyn*

*5th October, 1914*

Surrey, England

Dear Evie,

I laughed when I received your letter, just as we arrived. I suppose the postal service is faster than we think it is. And for your information, yes, I am an Archibald, and I’d happily lob an ice cream at you if you were here. Make fun, Evelyn Maria Constance Elliott, but don’t forget the tree house or the horse manure and your little rag doll. I may be a proper soldier now, but I’m not above pranks and retribution!

It looks as if we’ll train and learn the drill here at camp in Mytchett for four weeks, then ship off to the Front. The regiment is all enthusiasm and energy; we are all looking for­ward to seeing the real action. Already I’ve learned marching orders, basic first aid, and face-to-face combat. Your brother and I decided the training isn’t so different from wrestling with Robbie Banks. That bullheaded fellow was always look­ing for a brawl at the pub. I’m anxious to get to the more interesting bits. Will is brimming with eagerness. You know how he can be.

You asked for a picture of what it’s like at camp, so here goes. At reveille the bugle drives us out of bed at the start of the day. I say “day,” but it’s so early we’re up hours before dawn when it’s black as pitch. Still, no one grumbles about a lost hour or two of sleep, not when we’re headed to war. We dress, eat, and do some variation of training until noon when we break for a short lunch, after which we have more training until four or five in the afternoon. We’re free to head into town then if we wish, though not every day. Most often we hang around the billiards hall or play rounds of cards, smoke, etc. Being a lieutenant, I try to avoid getting mixed up in any mischief with the privates. Well, not too often anyway. I spend a lot of time in my bunk alone, in fact. Looking back at Oxford—and this is difficult to admit—I’m thankful for my time in the Officers’ Train­ing Corps. (Don’t tell Will. He’ll give me hell.) Some train­ing, though little, was certainly better than none. Anyway, the privates really are the last rung, poor chaps. They will bear the brunt of the attacks. If I were among them, I would work like the devil so I could move up in the world.

That’s all for now. Getting called to the card table.

Sincerely yours,

Lieutenant Thomas *Archibald* Harding

*From Evie to Thomas*

*15th October, 1914*

Richmond, England

Dear Thomas Archibald,

You replied! How jolly to see your letter among the morning post. It made for a very pleasant change from polite invitations to tea, and the rather less polite rejection of my latest attempt to have a piece published in the *Times*. Perhaps I should submit my next under a male pseudonym. If it’s good enough for the lady novelist who writes as George Eliot then it’s good enough for me. Evan Elliott has a rather nice ring to it, don’t you think?

Joking aside, I do sometimes wish I were a boy so I could see more of the world. Even the prospect of the battlefield is more appealing right now than sitting here waiting for a marriage pro­posal. “Boys go to college and war. Girls marry well.” This, from Papa when I complained of it being unfair earlier today.

Speaking of marriage, Mama checks the casualty lists daily for news of Charlie Gilbert. She clings desperately to the hope of my receiving a proposal from him when he returns, while I, meanwhile, hope he will fall in love with a beautiful French girl and forget all about his infatuation with me (which, as you know, I have always enthusiastically discouraged). Poor, dull Charlie. He’s not a bad sort, but you know how he is—and how I am. Marrying Charlie would be rather like marrying a broken carriage clock. How the hours would drag.

Your training sounds much like dorm life at school. Didn’t they wake you with a bugle there, too? Or was it a gong? I for­get. I imagine you and Will having great larks with the other chaps. You certainly sound in very good spirits and ready for the off. I expect the waiting is terribly frustrating. Like waiting for Christmas—all the anticipation, and yet still no snow and still no parcels under the tree.

Talking of Christmas, do you think it silly of me to still hope we might manage that trip to Paris we all became rather excited about after a few too many sherries? Papa says the city is full of refugees and that despite the allied victory at the Marne, it may still come under German attack again. If we do make it, Alice Cuthbert will come to make a foursome. She’s terrific fun, and you know how fond she is of Will. (Remind him, would you. It would make me so happy to see the two of them together.) They say Paris is impossibly pretty at Christmastime, and it will be just the tonic after months of fighting for you and months of boredom for Alice and me. Let’s say we’ll go if we can. *Ça va être merveilleux!* All those hours hunched over my French textbooks may prove to be of use after all.

In quite exciting news, I am now a member of the Richmond Lady Cyclist’s Club. I mostly fall off so far, but the ladies assure me they all struggled to control their bicycles at first, and that I must keep practicing. I would far rather ride an unbroken horse to be honest, but I shall persist and try again tomorrow (you know how stubborn I can be!). If I ever do master the art of bicycling, I have plans to ride all the way to Brighton to visit Alice. I recently read about Tessie Reynolds’s exploits in *The Lady* and find myself having grand notions about dashing around the country on two wheels. Don’t tell Will.

I hope this reaches you before you head off. Papa says you won’t be able to tell us where you are once you leave Mytch­ett in order to prevent information from falling into enemy hands. He says all letters from the Front will be censored be­fore they reach home, so be careful of spilling any secrets or you’ll be court martialed before you’ve pulled the trigger once.

Is there anything I can send before you ship out? Mama said you would probably be grateful for some decent tobacco. She is convinced you are all living in squalor. I’ve included the best Virginia I could find, just in case.

Yours in friendship,

Evie

*From Will Elliott to Evie*

*20th October, 1914*

Surrey, England

Dear Writing Desk,

Do not be fooled by Evie’s charms. She is untidy and presses too hard with her pen. She will have you ruined in weeks. Please pass on my thanks for her letter (albeit half the length of the one she sent to my friend Tom) and reassure everyone at home that I am in the best of health.

Not much to report from training camp, except that we are keen to get to the Front, see an end to this and return home as swiftly as possible to reclaim what is rightfully ours, writing

desks included.

Behave, Evelyn.

Yours, in ink,

Will

*From Thomas to Evie*

*25th October, 1914*

Surrey, England

Dear Evelyn Elliott,

I assure you, you look much better as a woman than a man. I can see it now, Evan Elliott in heels and skirt, riding a bicycle like a banshee from hell. Gave myself a good laugh over that one. But in all seriousness, you should keep submitting your articles. You’re quite the writer. Don’t let them make you be­lieve otherwise.

Camp life is going swimmingly. Glad to be here and so proud to march on, even if it means leaving my father’s strug­gling newspaper business behind. More on that another time.

I’m glad of your letters. Though I’m just one of a bunch of chaps playing poker at the moment, and not exactly a heroic representative of our country, I suspect at some point I’ll be desperately glad to have news from home. And you’re just the girl to deliver it, so thank you.

Speaking of home, are your horses spirited away somewhere?

Will worries about Shylock and Hamlet. We’ve seen the ship­ments go out—hundreds of them, or thousands, really. We’ve been told they’re confiscating all the horses and sending them to the Front. Your brother will commit treason if his are taken. You know how he loves them. If they were to go to battle . . . Well, let’s not speak of it. Do what you can.

I’m sure you’ve heard the Allies are holding the lines, keeping Paris relatively safe for now? The government is taking pre­cautions, though, and moved south to Bordeaux. So it would seem, my friend, that Christmas in Paris might still be a fine idea, even without half a bottle of sherry in my stomach. We might have joked when we talked about it at first, but there’s no time like the present, I say. Besides, I welcome a diversion at that time of year. Since my mother passed, I’ve never felt the same about the “jolliest” season, and all that. The last Christ­mas I spent with her was in Edinburgh when I was twelve. It snowed and we had a grand party with the rest of the family. Father never let me go to Scotland for Christmas again after that. He was so hurt and angry when she left him, and angrier still that I enjoyed spending time with the other half of my family. I suppose I should be grateful I spent so many summers there before she died. I’m planning to visit after this is all over. Scotland has always felt like my other home, you know?

Damn it, Evie. Now isn’t the time for such thoughts, is it? I should have nothing but honour on my mind.

For now, I send you a hurrah for the kingdom (!) and a friendly salute (I may have had one stout too many).

Sincerely,

Lieutenant Thomas Archibald Harding

*From Evie to Thomas*

*31st October, 1914*

Richmond, England

Dear Lieutenant Thomas Archibald Harding,

(I presume formal address is a requirement now?)

Thank you for your letter. It’s curious how a few lines can cheer one so greatly over a cup of tea and a slice of toast. I hope my letters are as eagerly received. It’s a wonder they ever find you among so many men there at the camp. And thank you for your kind words about my writing. You are quite right. I must persevere. I suppose there will be plenty to write about with so much going on in the world.

Charlie Gilbert sent a letter last week (I won’t trouble you with the romantic details). He is somewhere in France and sounds dreadfully glum, although Charlie always tends to ex­aggerate so I take his words with a pinch of salt, especially since the newspapers are all talk of victory and the men being in high spirits. He says they are all encouraged by the news about successful recruitment campaigns and they are eager for the latest troops to arrive.

Will sent a short note as well. He complained of the typhoid vaccination, which has left him feeling a bit green around the gills. He also enclosed a photograph of your regiment. I must say you both look terribly smart in your uniforms. The photo­graph has pride of place on the mantelpiece. We are immensely proud.

You ask what news from home? Not much, I’m afraid, other than to tell you that my bicycling has improved. There’s a won­derful freedom in hurtling along the lanes with the wind in my hair. I don’t know why I didn’t learn to do it sooner. I found a wonderful little volume in Papa’s library called *Handbook for Lady Cyclists*. The author, Lillias Campbell Davidson, gives the following advice on appropriate attire for cycling tours: “Wear as few petticoats as possible and have your gown made neatly and plainly of flannel without loose ends or drapery to catch in your bicycle.” I’d rather wear a pair of men’s trousers, but Mama would never speak to me again.

Other than swotting up on cycling tours, there’s an awful fuss among next season’s debutantes and their mothers who are worried sick about a lack of eligible escorts for the spring season. Please make sure to send some decent sorts back home. You are in charge, are you not? I will hold you entirely responsible for the dashed hopes of an entire generation of young women and their dressmakers if you fail in your duties.

In other news, the horses. Oh, Tom. It’s really quite awful. The army have indeed requisitioned any animal that isn’t al­ready lame and Shylock and Hamlet are both gone to serve as war horses. I did my very best to plead their case, insisting they were both ruined by too much love and sugar lumps and not at all cut out for battle, but my protests fell on deaf ears. Papa says we must all do our bit—even the animals. I don’t know how to tell Will. He’ll be heartbroken. Perhaps you could tell him? It would be far kinder for him to hear it from a friend than in a few rotten words in a letter. Mama has organised a fund-raiser for the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Fund for Sick and Wounded Horses at the Front. I am only too happy to help. At least it is a small way to feel useful.

I imagine you will be heading off soon to join those already fighting. I’m sure with such vast numbers of reinforcements we’ll see an end to it all. The recruiting offices are inundated. It makes one extraordinarily proud to see.

Do write whenever you can, and ask Will to do the same.

Your friend,

Evie

P.S. I am sorry to hear that you have been thinking of your mother and Scotland. I suppose the prospect of war is bound to set your thoughts tumbling back to the things you have loved and lost. I’ve never been to Edinburgh. I hear the castle is rather impressive, but the haggis rather less so.

*From Thomas to Evie*

*1st November, 1914*

Surrey, England

Dear Evie,

I don’t have much time because we’re shoving off! We head to France tomorrow at first light. I’m not sure how long it will take us to get settled on the continent, but the men are in great spirits. Our grand adventure is beginning at last!

Will sends a sharp pinch and a pat on the head. (He’s your big brother after all, isn’t he.) I suggest you wear glasses when you ride that bicycle of yours. There’s nothing worse than an eyeful of dead bugs.

Wish us luck.

Sincerely yours,

Thomas

*From Thomas to his father*

*1st November, 1914*

Surrey, England

Dear Father,

Though I haven’t received a reply from you, I wanted to let you know we are heading to France tomorrow. We’ll disembark at Brest and train in from there. We were warned not to share any specifics of our location since the French intelligence will strike out any information they consider a risk to our security. I’ll write again from France. I hope you’ll put our differences in the past and support me, Father.

As for training, you know me, I’m bringing cheer to the troops when I can. But I admit—to you, only—I’m worried about what we will face at the Front. It’s easy to be swept up in the camaraderie and tales of courage before we’ve faced loaded artillery and the barrel of a gun. I suppose you know this all too well. At times I still feel like the little boy on your knee, wishing he were all grown up. I suspect I’ll do a lot of growing up soon.

Your son,

Thomas

*From Evie to Alice Cuthbert*

*5th November, 1914*

Richmond, England

Dear Alice,

A few lines to say hello to my dearest friend and to tell you how miserable I am.

I’m sorry to be glum, but you are the only one I can tell. To everyone else I must be all cheer and chin up but, you see, the boys left their training camp and shipped out to the Front a few days ago and a silly part of me worries terribly for them. I know I shouldn’t, and that the newspapers are full of encouraging news of all our wonderful victories and our brave soldiers, but Charlie Gilbert wrote recently and his words troubled me (he didn’t propose, in case you were wondering). He says war is very different to what he thought it would be and there is very little chivalry or heroism about it at all, re­gardless of what the newspapers report. He says the men are as cheery as can be expected but they all pray for conscription to come into force as they are in desperate need of reinforce­ments. I can’t help worrying that things are not going as well over there as the newspapers would have us believe. The ca­sualty lists take up more column inches every day. Am I silly to worry? Please tell me I am. And if I am silly to worry, then you mustn’t either. I know how you were hoping for a dance with Will at Mama’s Christmas Ball so we must trust that it will still happen.

The problem is I have too much time to dwell on things. I can’t picture what war looks like, or where the boys are. When they were at Oxford it was different. I knew the dreaming spires and the Bodleian Library. I spent lazy summer after­noons punting on the Cherwell. Now, it feels as though they have gone to the ends of the earth—to some undiscovered land I know nothing about. And I can’t help feeling terribly afraid.

I can’t even go out for a decent hack to take my mind off things because the horses have been shipped out, too. I’ve asked Mama to give me permission to volunteer in some capacity—I hear women are getting involved in all sorts of ways: working on the omnibuses, serving as War Office clerks, delivering the post—but she won’t hear of it. She says the best thing I can do to help is join her knitting circle. I can think of nothing worse. You know how useless I am with knitting needles. Perhaps if I have someone’s eye out, she’ll be happy to let me work on the omnibuses instead.

Anyway, I’m sure—as they say—it will all be over soon and we can get back to thinking about happier things. Christmas, for one. I still love the idea of Paris and hope you were serious when you said you would come. Everything is always much more fun when you’re there, Alice.

Write soon. Cheer me up. Send me something wonderful or shocking to read. Tell me about the latest unfortunate young fellow to have fallen head over heels in love with you.

Much love,

Evie

X

P.S. I am now a lady cyclist. Terrific fun. You must try it.

*From Evie to Charlie Gilbert*

*10th November, 1914*

Richmond, England

Dear Charlie,

A few lines to thank you for your latest letter. You sound a little blue. It must be terribly difficult for you there, but every­one back home is full of hope that we will see an end to it very soon.

Don’t worry about writing so often. I know it must be hard to find the time, or the words. You must concentrate on staying fit and healthy and leading your men to victory.

We are all very proud, and send good cheer to the troops.

Sincerely yours,

Evelyn

*From Thomas to Evie*

*20th November, 1914*

Somewhere in France

Dear Evie,

I’m in France now, and I think we’re settled for a while so I can write again with our latest address. Things turned rather hectic after my last letter. They needed our regiment overseas immediately and cut our training short, though it continues here. They’ve got me set to be a machine gunner and Will is being trained as a grenadier. I must say, for the first time I feel like a man. No more boyish Oxford days. I have responsibilities to my troops, and I enjoy being in charge.

I still haven’t worked up the courage to tell Will about the horses. I’m guessing he already knows, deep down. As for Charlie Gilbert, I assume he’s still sweet on you? I think you’re a little hard on him. He’s a decent fellow and you could do a lot worse. If this war sees an end to us all, you might not have much choice in the matter anyway. I know he’s your mother’s first choice for a “suitable” fiancé, though I am the last to listen to my father so I suppose I can’t very well com­ment on following parental advice, can I?

Things are tense here at , but that’s to be expected. We’re no longer playing at war, it’s the real thing. My toes are thoroughly drenched and aching, but my spirits are high. All is going swiftly now. There’s still hope this will end by Christmas, and we can indulge in our Parisian plans for *vin chaud* and

*boeuf bourguignon*.

Sincerely yours,

Lieutenant Thomas Harding

*From Evie to Thomas*

*25th November, 1914*

Richmond, England

Dear Thomas,

*Bonjour, mon ami!* What a relief to hear from you—and Will, whose note arrived on the same day (perhaps just use one envelope?). I hope the crossing wasn’t too choppy. Will feels seasick on the Thames, let alone the English Channel.

Get the job done and come back soon, would you. All the reports in the newspapers are very positive and full of allied victories and good news. The censors struck out a few lines from your last letter, but I got the sense of most of it and I’m glad to hear you are all in good cheer.

I’ve enclosed a knitted scarf. It’s my first attempt, so please for­give the rather unusual shape. If it can’t keep you warm it might at least make you laugh. I’m attempting socks next, so prepare yourself!

Stay safe.

*Bonne chance!*

Your friend,

Evelyn