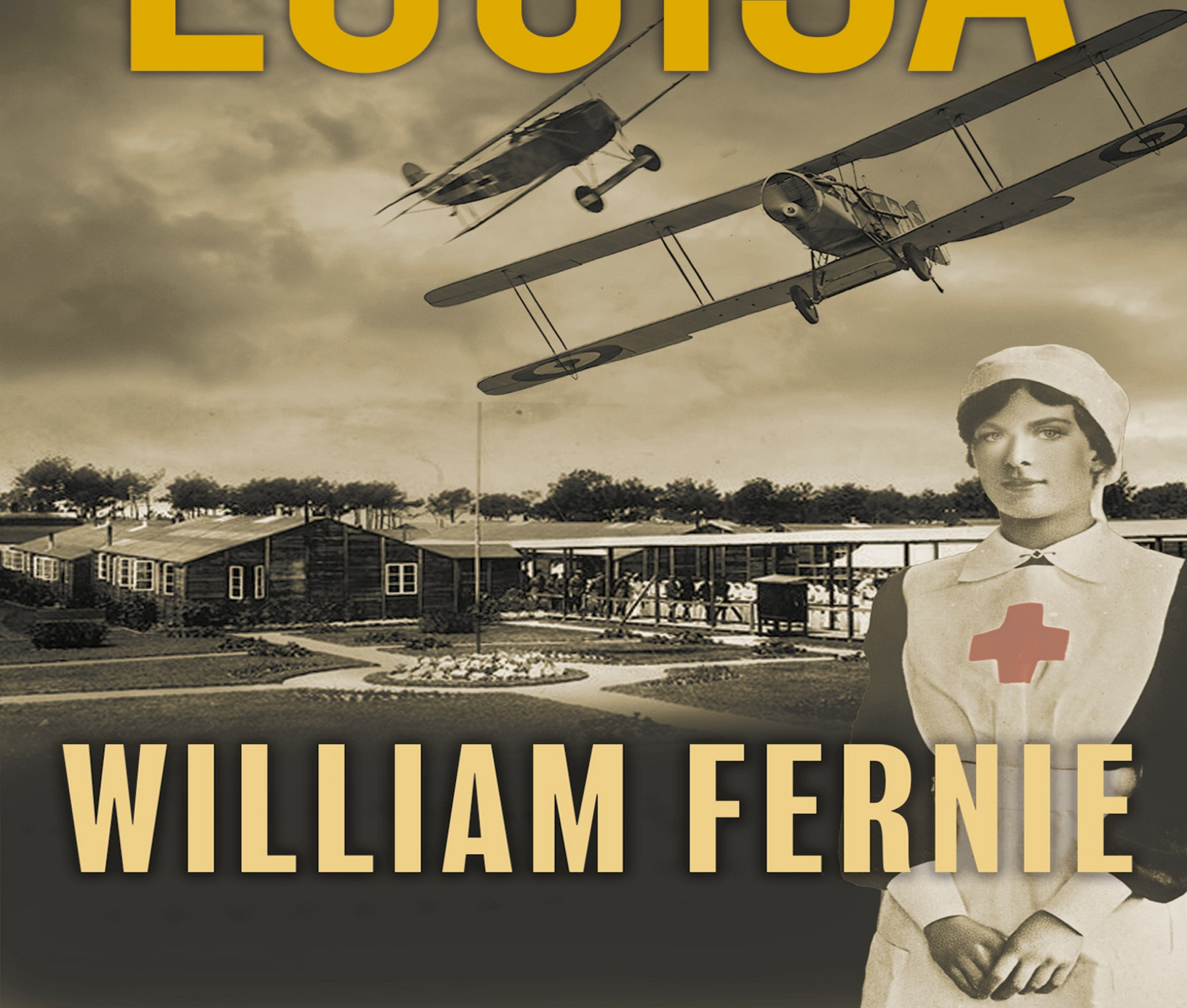


A NOVELLA FROM THE AUTHOR OF DARK TREATY

LETTERS TO LOUISA



WILLIAM FERNIE



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**LETTERS_{TO}
LOUISA**

WILLIAM FERNIE

Letters To Louisa by William Fernie

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In wartime, military personnel were encouraged to write home, and this mail was delivered by the British Army Postal Service. Many of the letters were heavily censored, particularly when a major operation was imminent. This fictional story features correspondence from Flying Officer Tom Munro whilst he served as a pilot on a Bristol Fighter squadron in the final months of the war in 1918. To provide a realistic and complete account of a pilot's experience at this time, the author has left these fictional letters as if they were "uncensored". Although dramatic at times, many of Tom's and Louisa's exploits are inspired by real events.



DEDICATIONS

“Letters to Louisa” is a prequel to my novel, “Dark Treaty” and is dedicated to the men and women of the St John Ambulance Brigade and the Royal Air Force Bristol Fighter squadrons who served courageously in Europe during World War I.



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CHAPTER 1

Tom had never seen his mother move so quickly. She shot out of her seat like a greyhound out of the traps as an enthusiastic knock echoed in their hallway. ‘That’s them!’ she cried as she rushed off to the front door.

Tom was less eager and lingered, contemplating how he should handle the introductions. He took a quick look in the mirror, straightening his tie and tidying his hair. His mother had invited a close friend and local businessman, Sir George Foster, for afternoon tea at their small townhouse in Salisbury. She had talked endlessly to Tom about Sir George’s daughter Louisa, and he was about to meet her for the first time. ‘She’s a very pretty young lady; she’s just right for you, Tom,’ his mother had said disingenuously with wide eyes and a nod which was her way of encouraging agreement. Tom was not so sure. Considering his plans, romantic relationships were not foremost in his mind. Besides, he had led a relatively monastic existence whilst studying at Imperial College in London, a male-dominated world where his enthusiasm for rugby and boxing took up the bulk of his spare time.

Tom stood tall and walked a little hesitantly into the hall to meet Sir George for the first time, a very large gentleman who nearly filled the narrow passageway. Louisa was nowhere to be seen. Immediately he felt a surge of disappointment, or was it relief? Before he could decide, Sir George spotted him and thrust out his hand. ‘You must be Tom?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Tom replied, taken aback by Sir George’s crushing handshake. Tom did his best to respond in kind and felt some relief when his mother intervened.

‘Come along. This way, George,’ she said.

And then, as Sir George followed Mary into the front room, there she was, the lovely Louisa, looking very windblown and flustered by the effects of her drive in her father’s open-top Morris. She peered into the hallstand mirror

and repeatedly smoothed her face as though she were trying to forcibly erase the goggle marks on her otherwise perfect complexion. He watched for a few seconds, which felt like minutes. He was finding the silence unbearable. 'You must be Louisa?' he said with his best smile.

She turned and looked at him for the first time - witheringly, Tom felt. 'Well, that must be perfectly obvious,' she said before resuming the work on her appearance, the hair this time which was drawn back from her face into a loose chignon.

Tom helped with her khaki trench coat and goggles and hung them on the hallstand. He picked his moment to try again. 'Open-top cars are not ideal, eh?'

'You're right there. I wanted father to bring the other car,' she grumbled, still wearing a scornful look and glancing sideways into the mirror. 'A lady likes to look her best, you know.'

Tom felt the mood lightening just a little. The ice lady was starting to thaw. 'Come on in,'

'Hmm,' said Louisa as she surveyed the Munro's front room at Endless Street. Its centrepiece was a small Edwardian fireplace with green tile surrounds, the fire flickering its welcome under a narrow mantelpiece crowded with precious curios and a ticking mantel clock in a walnut case. The red flocked wallpaper would have dominated the room, except that there was little wall space left between the profusion of pictures and paintings and the ubiquitous gold-framed mirror reflecting the fireplace. Two corner tables at the French windows into the back garden seemed to catch Louisa's eye, and she stooped to survey the display of family photographs.

Tom followed her, watching her every move. 'That's my father there.'

Louisa glanced up at Tom with a hint of a smile then returned her gaze to the photographs. 'I can see the likeness.'

That smile had a marked effect on Tom; he found her looks beguiling. He had to make a determined effort to avoid staring. 'He wanted me to follow him to Oxford; I don't really remember him that well...'

'Do take a seat, everyone,' said Mary, directing Sir George to the settee

opposite the fireplace.

Tom frowned at the interruption just as he was managing to strike up a conversation with Louisa. He sat on one of the red wing-back chairs, which were positioned by the fireplace, his mother mirroring him on the other side. Sir George and Louisa perched on the matching two-seat settee facing the fire, which sparked and crackled its presence in the little room. Sir George spoke with a cultured accent, which sounded a little contrived to Tom, but this didn't detract from his jaunty demeanour.

'Sir George owns an engineering factory near Wilton,' said Mary proudly.

'I know it, Fosters Engineering. What do you make?' said Tom.

'I won't bore you with the details in front of the ladies, but we make parts for motor cars and aeroplanes.'

Tom's eyes widened. 'Really?' he exclaimed, breaking into a smile. 'Do you make complete aeroplanes?'

'Well, as the war has progressed, we've made bigger parts and now make complete wings, fuselage parts, control surfaces and so on. We mainly supply Sopwith's, and the British and Colonial Aeroplane Company in Bristol. We're hoping to do some work for Vickers at Brooklands too. Are you interested in aeroplanes, Tom?'

'As a matter of fact, I'm thinking...'

'Let's enjoy our afternoon tea without too much technical talk,' said Mary as Vera, her daily help, pushed the tea trolley into the room. It was loaded with a variety of neatly cut sandwiches and a large jam sponge, all set out on Mary's precious Wedgwood crockery.

Tom was famished as usual. He beamed and stood to take a short tour around the trolley. 'What a marvellous spread Mother.'

'Tom, help our guests.'

'Of course,' said Tom, handing the plates around.

Although the weather was reasonably warm, Mary had set a fire as she liked the pleasing effect it provided. Sir George and Louisa had dressed for the journey in their open-top motor car, and Mary spotted Sir George pushing his fingers under his shirt collar.

‘I’ll take your jacket, George,’ said Mary.

Tom admired Louisa’s colourful presence. Her vivid blue dress was drawn in at the waist, which accentuated her neat figure and rose up to a fashionable V-neck with two loops of pearls. He was quite taken with her sparkling, blue eyes, but there was something formidable and frosty about her – the determined set of her mouth maybe. Her expression was quick to change, and he noticed that she left no one in doubt about her mood or views. He liked her smart black ankle boots but suspected that his mother would disapprove of her raised hemline. She would probably describe it as immodest. This was not a view that Tom shared, but he felt that Louisa was well aware of her allure and was a little pretentious as a result. He had never been able to guess a girl’s age but plumped for early twenties.

During their tea, Louisa leant towards Tom as Mary and George chatted enthusiastically; she whispered carefully, touching his hand. ‘They smile a lot and seem easy and relaxed with each other.’ She glanced and nodded discreetly at Mary and George. ‘Do you see?’

Tom followed her gaze. ‘What do you mean?’ he said, blushing at her proximity.

‘Well, I think they’re rather fond of each other,’ she said, glancing heavenwards. ‘You don’t notice these things, do you?’

Tom was taken aback by her rebuke. ‘Emm, I suppose I don’t; more important things to consider.’

‘Do you know how they got to know each other?’

‘I think they’ve been involved in fundraising for Salisbury Infirmary, a new ambulance or something.’

‘Right, that explains it. I know that my father contributed some money from the company. I hear that you’ve just finished your degree?’

‘Yes, Mechanical Engineering at Imperial.’

‘I know, in London. You must be very clever.’

Tom shrugged his shoulders. ‘Not really. Had to work jolly hard. I wanted to join up in 1914, but I was persuaded to finish my degree.’

‘Very wise. You might not be here today. I want to do something useful

now,' said Louisa. She was about to say something else, but her father beat her to it.

'And what are your plans, Tom?'

Tom hesitated, noticing Mary's raised, confrontational eyebrow. 'I'm going to try for the Royal Flying Corps. I want to be a pilot.' He glanced at his mother once again and waited for the inevitable reaction, her usual performance.

Mary glanced at Sir George and quickly turned back. 'Tom, we've spoken about this at length. You should be thinking about doing something useful with your degree.'

Tom jerked his head back. 'Mother, there's a war on. I can't walk away from my responsibilities. I'll be conscripted in any case now, and yes, we have spoken about this before.'

'It's very dangerous,' Louisa added.

Tom glanced at Louisa with a furrowed brow, an expression his mother described as his "angry look".

Mary butted in. 'Don't give me that "there's a war on" nonsense,' said Mary. 'That's perfectly obvious to me. I hear it every week at the Guild: Mrs Hudson's son, killed at Neuve Chapelle. Mrs Fitzpatrick's son missing. Mrs Bowman's husband and God knows how many more killed at Ypres. I've read reports of terrible RFC losses this year.'

Tom shook his head. 'Mother, I thought you might be proud of your son.'

'Proud? How can I be proud to hear that you want to kill yourself in some awful flying contraption?'

Tom raised his hands in frustration, then dropped them to his knees with a slap. He tried to ignore his mother's rant and turned to Louisa with a smirk. 'Well, I can see that *my* plans aren't too popular. What are you going to do, Louisa?'

Louisa smiled more convincingly. 'I'm planning to be a VAD. They're looking for volunteers at Longford Castle; it's an auxiliary hospital.'

'What, an ambulance driver?' said Tom with a chuckle.

Louisa cocked her head to one side and had to force her smile this time.

‘No, a nurse.’

Sir George rolled his eyes.

‘I wish you wouldn’t do that, Father.’

‘Well, you know that I don’t feel that nursing would suit you. Jolly hard work and very unpleasant in wartime.’

‘I’m aware of that, but I’m fed up with my charitable work. I know it’s necessary, but I want to do something really useful. You are always encouraging me to find some direction in life. Well, I want to try nursing.’

Sir George shook his head. ‘You have hardly had the best preparation for nursing, Louisa.’

‘It won’t be very pleasant,’ said Tom, happy to have the parental spotlight off him for a second.

‘What age are you, Tom?’ said Sir George in a clear attempt to change the subject.

‘Twenty-one, Sir.’

‘There must be an alternative to fighting with your qualifications,’ said Louisa. ‘You have some young men working at the factory, Father. How do they avoid conscription?’

‘They don’t avoid conscription; they’re in reserved occupations.’

Mary sat forward in her seat. ‘There, you could do that, Tom - a reserved occupation that is.’

‘I don’t want to avoid conscription. I’m not going to be a “conchie”. I want to do my duty at the Front Line. If I’m going to join up, flying has got to be better than drowning in some god-awful muddy trench. And flying has got a future after the war.’ He was irritated by Louisa’s support for this “reserved occupation”. ‘You could work in your father’s business too, Louisa.’

‘Not my sort of thing.’

Mary stood abruptly, looking flustered. ‘Duty, duty, duty. Why are young men so determined to get killed for duty?’

Sir George stood too and clasped Mary’s hands in his. ‘Tom, don’t discount the possibility of a reserved occupation. Listen, how would you like to see my factory and have a go in my motor car? Have you driven before?’

This suggestion tempered Tom's "angry face", and his easy grin returned. 'I'd like that, and no, I haven't driven a car.'

'Splendid. How does next Saturday sound to you?' said Sir George as he helped Mary to her seat once again.

Mary's persistent scowl didn't encourage easy conversation, and shortly after, Sir George took the initiative. 'Thank you, Mary and Tom, for a most enjoyable afternoon. I'm so pleased we managed to meet.'

Louisa stood and hooked onto her father's arm. 'Yes, we've had a lovely afternoon, Mrs Munro and Tom. You have a splendid little house. I'm sure that Tom will give careful thought to his future.'

Sir George kissed Mary on the cheek and collected his hat, goggles and gauntlets from the hall stand.

'Speak to him, George, for goodness' sake,' Mary pronounced in a stage whisper with a glance at Tom.

Louisa pushed gently past Tom. 'You should talk to your mother.'

Tom crafted his sarcastic smirk again. 'I'm glad you like our splendid little house.' He regretted his remark almost immediately, and feeling a little foolish, he stepped forward as Louisa took her seat in the car. 'Can I write to you?' he said with surprising spontaneity. 'You know, when we both join up?'

Louisa seemed taken aback as she tied on her bonnet and secured her goggles. 'We hardly know each other.'

'We'll get to know each other when we write. What do you say? We'll have plenty to talk about, I'm sure. My flying, your nursing.'

'All aboard,' Sir George shouted, looking quite proud of himself when the engine fired up with the first turn on the starter handle. Tom beamed a smile of appreciation as he watched Sir George pat the polished radiator cowl with obvious affection and climb aboard. Louisa was used to this moment and held tight as the little car lurched in response to Sir George's weight.

Tom re-joined his mother in waving to their guests as the car chugged off down the road in a light blue haze, their rattling progress echoing off the street walls. He smiled at the way that Louisa leant over to make space for

her father in the little putty-coloured Bullnose Morris.

The car was about to disappear around the corner and into Blue Boar Row when it squealed to a halt. Tom and his mother looked at each other. With a crunching of gears, it whined its way back up the street in reverse, juddering to a halt within a few yards of the Munros. Louisa turned around and yelled in a voice that a fishwife would be proud of, 'You can write to me at Fairview. Your mother knows the address.'

CHAPTER 2

*Endless Street
Salisbury
Miss Louisa Foster
Longford Castle Auxiliary Hospital
Bodenham, Salisbury.
April 1917*

I hope this letter finds you and finds you well too. Your father gave me the address so I thought I would write to you at work!! I hope you can read my writing. Mother has given me a very expensive Waterman's Ideal safety pen and a large bottle of ink. She must think that I am going to be away for a very long time. I think she is finally coming to terms with the fact that I will be leaving home and going to war. Or maybe she is just encouraging me to write.

Your father collected me from Endless Street, and I had a go in the Morris. It was such fun, and I think I mastered it quite quickly. You will have to ask your father. I was impressed with the factory and enjoyed a guided tour with Mr Fellows, the foreman. Initially, I was surprised at the number of women in the workshops, but, of course, most of the men are away.

Your father then sat me down in his office and tried, once again, to persuade me to take a job at his factory, the "reserved occupation" he talked about. I felt like I was in a headmaster's study! But, although I am very grateful for the offer, I must get into the fight. Very dramatic, I know, but I must do my bit and fly too. I think you understand, as it's not too different from your nursing ambitions. Also, I think you know that he plans to get engaged to my mother! What do you think about that? I'm happy, but we will be brother and sister???

I've been to the Guildhall for an initial interview. They tried to get me into the army, but I insisted on the RFC. It worked, and I await more of the same

in London, but it is supposed to be quite tough. I'll let you know how it goes. Wish me luck and do write. I hope to have more news soon.

*Yours truly,
Tom Munro (RFC, hopefully)*

From Louisa to Tom

*Longford Castle
Auxiliary Hospital
Bodenham,
Salisbury
April 1917*

*Hello Tom,
I'm saving my news, such as it is, for my visit home to Fairview. You can visit if you wish. All's well here.*

Louisa (VAD Nurse, hopefully)

The bus dropped Tom by the entrance gates to Fairview, and once the bus had left, he stood for a few moments looking up the drive to the grand Edwardian house. He crossed over and started up the long meandering rise with a tightly trimmed yew hedge on the left and, on the right, a fashionable, open expanse of lawn. Fairview House sat centrally behind several formal flower beds, surrounded by immaculate box hedges, the sweet smell of new-mown grass thick in the air. Mother would love this, he thought.

He assumed he would see Louisa again and was surprised that he felt nervous. As he plodded up the drive, he wondered why. He didn't get nervous at exams, sporting events, or when meeting new people, so why now? Perhaps nervous wasn't the right word, he decided. Excited perhaps or butterflies, just like he felt when running ran onto the rugby field? Perhaps he got excited when he had little control over the outcome. Or, maybe he simply hoped that Louisa would get to like him. Her behaviour at his home

had been distinctly cool and disinterested. His mind wandered onto the real motives for his visit. Did he want Sir George to relent in some way and accept his flying ambitions? Probably, but being candid, he knew he simply wanted to see Louisa. As he was halfway up to the house, a loud horn provoked an ungainly leap onto the grassy bank. His mouth dropped as a magnificent vehicle skidded to a halt beside him, leaving an untidy mark in the gravel.

‘Afternoon, Tom,’ said Sir George over the sumptuous purr of the engine. ‘Jump in.’

At the top of the rise, Sir George parked the Silver Ghost beside the Bullnose Morris, which looked like a toy in comparison. Tom had never seen such a luxurious motor car up close, and he seemed reluctant to leave his seat as he looked around in disbelief. The padded upholstery, the smell of leather, the instruments, the walnut trim, the controls - such quality. He opened and closed the door a few times just to hear the expensive click of the mechanism. He stepped down, entirely overcome by such a magnificent vehicle. It was bigger than his bedroom.

‘I suppose you’d like to have a go?’ said Sir George as they walked around the front of the house. Tom trailed behind, still feeling compelled to glance back at the Rolls. The door opened just as they walked up the steps, and a smart housekeeper took their hats and coats.

‘We’ll have tea in the drawing room Mrs Truelove. This is Mr Munro, Mary’s son, and I’ll have my usual. Thank you.’

Sir George led the way. ‘Welcome to Fairview House, Tom; take a seat. Louisa will join us shortly. She’s off to Longford Castle again tomorrow, so I’ll be on my own for a while.’ He spoke quietly for a moment. ‘I’m still not too happy with her nursing. What do you think?’

‘I think it’s a splendid idea, Sir. If she’s keen and enthusiastic about it, then we should support her. I think it could be the direction she talked about.’

‘You really think so?’

‘Yes, I do, Sir.’

‘Oh, very well. I’ll let her tell you about her first few days; she’s on

probation, apparently.'

Tom's heart took a little leap; that excitement again. He took in his new surroundings: the large generous rooms and high ceilings, the floor tiles in the echoing hallway, the elaborate upholstery and the curtain fabrics with a distinctly William Morris influence. The tea arrived on a large silver tray, and Mrs Truelove placed it carefully on a table by the window.

'Oh, Mrs Truelove, would you fetch the paper from the back seat of the Rolls? I quite forgot it. And can you let Miss Louisa know that Mr Munro has arrived? Thank you.'

Sir George took a sip of his whisky. 'So, Tom, I hear that you are not taking my advice?'

'I'm sorry. I don't mean any disrespect, but I must get into flying somehow. Now that I've got these interviews in London, I could do with some advice, Sir George.'

'Oh, I expect so and do call me George.'

Tom grilled Sir George on how he should handle his interview. He was not quite finished with his questions when Louisa appeared at the door. She leaned casually against the door jamb. 'Hello, Tom, congratulations. Off to war then?'

Tom stood smartly and felt his cheeks warming. 'Aah, well, not quite. I still have to pass interviews and medical tests in London. You should see all the paperwork. It looks very serious.'

'Well, it *is* serious, Tom,' said Louisa in an admonishing tone. 'The RFC won't accept just anybody. I'd expect them to take the trouble to ensure their pilots are the right type.'

'What's the "right" type?' said Tom, sitting again.

'Don't ask me, Tom.'

Sir George took his cue. 'I expect the "right type" will be a fit young man who's positive and confident about the job - being a pilot, that is. So make sure you present yourself as a confident and positive chap at the interviews. Take some time to learn as much as you can about the war, the RFC and so on so that you're prepared for questions.' Sir George paused to take the paper

from Mrs Truelove, who glided in and out silently. ‘Look, take this; it’s “The Aeroplane”. I’m told it’s the best paper for keeping you updated on aeronautics. There’s also another paper called, strangely enough, “Flight”. They’ll ask questions about all sorts. I imagine that they’ll take an interest in your background and sports and hobbies, so you should emphasise anything that shows you’re a fit and intelligent young man. Tell them about driving my car if you get the opportunity. No, in fact, make sure you tell them. They will want to hear about any experience you have of handling machines.’ George paused for a few moments, and Louisa looked quizzically at Tom. ‘That’s all I can think of – just do your best. The medical will take care of itself. You’re either going to be fit or not, so there’s not much you can do about that other than keeping up with your exercise.’

‘How are you getting on at Longford Castle, Louisa?’ said Tom.

‘I’ve been there for a week’s probation, initially. See if I’m up to it. The right type, I suppose. I’m amazed that I received your letter. The system works.’

Tom smiled. ‘I’m sure you’ll be fine. I just hope it’s not too upsetting for you. Looking after all the injured soldiers and so on.’

‘And what happens next, Thomas Munro?’

Tom didn’t generally like being called Thomas, but Louisa had a way of saying it. ‘I’ve had the interviews at the Guildhall in Salisbury, and now I’m waiting for a letter from the War Office for more interviews and a medical.’

Louisa couldn’t resist more advice. ‘I expect it will be more challenging, more intensive this time.’

‘Oh. Louisa, don’t put the chap off,’ Sir George pleaded.

‘She won’t put me off, Sir.’

‘Good man. The best of luck.’

Louisa frowned. ‘And are you going to wish me luck too, Father? I’m also embarking on a new venture.’

Sir George took a deep breath. ‘You are, indeed. An interesting profession, my dear, so the best of luck to you too.’

From Tom to Louisa

*Endless Street
Salisbury
May 1917*

I hope that you are settling in at Longford Castle. I thought that you might be interested in my visit to the War Office and the RFC Central Hospital for my medical.

My interviews went quite well, except that they tried to persuade me to be an Observer. Can you imagine me sitting behind the pilot, watching him enjoying himself? Not for me, and I said as much. I thought I had botched it. They kept asking questions, and I didn't know the results until the end of the interview. Imagine my joy when they said, "You need to get yourself to Mount Vernon tomorrow for your medical board. Can you do that?"

I didn't know where Mount Vernon was, but I would have said yes even if it was Timbuktu.

Well, it's called a "Special Medical Air Board", which sounds rather terrifying, and by all accounts, not many people pass it, so I was pretty nervous. It didn't help that I was awfully late for my appointment. Even after an early start with a 7am train from Marylebone station, I reached Rickmansworth nearly an hour late. I found that the buses to Northwood, where Mount Vernon is, were in great demand, and I tried to convince my fellow passengers that my need for transport was urgent. I got little sympathy. I nearly had a fight with a bossy sergeant!

When I got to the hospital, I was a bit confused by the corridors, and there was no mention of the RFC Central Hospital on the many signs. I must have looked ridiculous, spinning around like a dog chasing his tail! I was rescued by a helpful old gentleman who showed me the way.

Imagine my embarrassment when, later on, this "old gentleman" turned out to be the doctor who did my medical. What did he think of this future flyer

who couldn't even find his way around the hospital?

I was subjected to the usual examinations: poking, prodding and questions, but they were more thorough than those at the Guildhall. The eyesight and hearing tests were devilish strict, and the doctor seemed to spend a long time listening to my heart and lungs. Also, he took much interest in my "personal habits". I found this term amusing: things like smoking, drinking and so on.

Then I was subjected to my doctor's new tests for pilots. He tested my reactions with a machine called a d'Arsonval Chronometer, and he seemed to enjoy making me very dizzy on a rotating seat called a Bárány Chair. It's supposed to show us some of the physical sensations we can feel in flight. Apparently, the balance organs in our ears can trigger strange feelings when we manoeuvre our aeroplanes; spinning and rolling, for example. I suppose I will find out, but at least I am prepared. Anyway, after all that, I passed – hoorah.

So, I now await my "Marching Orders". My mother remains less than enthusiastic about my future. I hope your father has come to terms with my decision – and you, too, of course. I will let you know all about my first days in the RFC but do write and tell me about your work at Longford Castle. I hope it's not too hard or upsetting. It must be difficult dealing with injured men. I hope we can meet again before long. I'm sure we will have many stories to tell.

Yours truly,
Thomas x

CHAPTER 3

From Louisa to Tom

June 1917

Thank you for your letter, and at last, I have a little time to drop you a short line. Note that I have reverted to “Tom”; it’s probably more appropriate for an RFC pilot type, Ha, Ha. I have sent this to your home address, so I hope you get it.

We are kept so busy, and I’m pretty exhausted when I finish my shift. You know that I work at Longford Castle, which is a very grand building. But the work is not very grand.

I started off simply sweeping and dusting the ward. This was nasty work, and it meant pulling each bed out from the wall and running over the rails and the wall behind the bed with a feather duster. I also had to clean the glass shelves on the trolleys with methylated spirit. I hate the smell of the stuff; it makes me gag. I don’t suppose I will ever smell meths again without remembering this dusty castle. The smell of carbolic soap is not much better!!! With all this cleaning, it feels like we are treated a bit like slaves, but one of the more experienced girls told me that it’s normal to see if we are up to the job. That “right type” again!

I help the sister with the dressings, and my job is to carry the bowls and then clean and empty the ghastly contents of bandages soaked in gore and pus – horrible but necessary. I was left to do a few dressings on my own eventually. At first, I felt very nervous. The wounds were often extensive, and I had to be on the lookout for suppuration and infection that can smell ghastly. But we can’t react in front of the patient; screw my face up and so on. That took a bit of practice and self-control, I can tell you!

We rise to a bell at a quarter to six for breakfast at six thirty, and we’re on duty at seven. We have a break for a mug of tea at eight-thirty and then go back to our bedrooms to do our own tidying. We’re back on our wards at

nine fifteen till a lunch of sorts at one fifteen. Then we have about three hours till five when we can get out in the fresh air. But at Longford, there isn't anywhere to go except the lovely gardens, but they are beautiful at this time of the year. Finally, we work from five till we finish at about nine-fifteen, exhausted! Not as exciting as your work, I suppose, but I'm sure I'll get used to it and become more useful.

I have to tell you about Mr Morgan, the surgeon from Salisbury Infirmary. I expect you will encounter the equivalent in your RFC. He breezed in the other night with matron and sister like the proverbial whirlwind. When I heard they were coming, I imagined an overweight, blustering surgeon type. As it happens, he was tall and skinny with black hair, a very pale complexion and little interest in talking to his patients. He carried himself with a pompous air of self-importance which made me determined to resist any comments which I expected. In fact, I told him that I would like to be a doctor and went on to ask if I could work in the theatre. Matron was not pleased, and I got a severe dressing down for my "cheek". Anyway, all is well here. I have just been off for two days and visited Foster Engineering with your mother. Working conditions are not good there. We must encourage Father to put things right. He was a bit short-tempered with me, particularly after a few whiskies. He keeps a bottle in his desk drawer. Not good. Must dash as I am about to return to the hospital – probably in the Rolls — embarrassing!

Louisa

PS I'm serious about training to be a doctor. What do you think?

PPS I have just heard that my application to go to France has been accepted. I'm very surprised but thrilled. Don't tell Father or your mother. They will just worry. Don't you think it's rather exciting? I need something exciting too. It's Étapes if that means anything to you!

When Tom arrived at Hastings station, he noticed that a number of other fellows seemed to have the same purpose in life. They wore that recognisably

tense, uneasy expression; “the lost boys,” he thought. They exchanged pleasantries on the journey from the station in an ancient motor bus, and within 30 minutes, they were deposited at a large seafront hotel and issued with two low trestles, three wide boards, four blankets and one very thin pillow. ‘All you need for a great night’s sleep,’ said the storeman with a smirk.

Looking a little stunned, they lugged their sleeping equipment and bags to a draughty top-floor room, and Tom and his three room-mates arranged their bedding as best they could. The room was totally bare, without any furniture or carpet, and it smelt damp. The wallpaper was faded, and a single, bare electric lightbulb swung in the draught and made a miserable job of illuminating the dingy room. The only positive feature was a small dormer window which provided a sea view. Their common predicament drew them together; there was a sense of relief that they had arrived in the Royal Flying Corps at last and that their adventure had begun. ‘I don’t think we’re expected,’ quipped one fellow. They looked at each other and burst out laughing.

In the following weeks, Tom and most of his fellow cadets managed to withstand the “controlled abuse” from the NCOs with a good heart, and together, they provided the necessary mutual support when times were difficult. Free time was at a premium, but Tom still managed to write to Louisa.

From Tom to Louisa

*D Flight
No 5 Squadron
1 Cadet Wing
St Leonards on Sea
July 1917.*

I hope all is well with you and thanks for your letter. Well, here I am in the

RFC! You will have noticed my address, and yes, we are billeted in a seaside hotel! A hotel in name only, however. For the first few nights, we slept on boards with a few blankets!!! We've got proper beds now and a little more furniture to store our kit, but it's still not too comfortable.

The discipline is tough, and we Drill on the road outside the hotel. It feels a little ridiculous, but we have to put up with it. I'm sure you know, but, Drill is marching, which we do in large groups of twenty or thirty men, and we need to keep in step and maintain very precise lines. Soon we will have to Drill with our rifles. This is not easy, so gives our sergeants plenty of excuses to shout at us. The funny thing is the way the local children mimic us with much laughter. I don't suppose I will ever forget this particular stretch of road, as it's where we suffer under the hands (and voices) of our drill instructors. I have made some good pals: Jack, James and Michael, my roommates, and I met up with Ferris again, that fellow I met at the War Office. The food is good, and there is plenty of it. But still, I am starving half the time from the endless marching. Also, for more exercise, we charge along the stony beach in great gaggles, egged on by our PT corporals. Exhausting!

Still, I quite enjoy the Drill as I seem to pick it up quickly, but some people just seem to have two left feet. They can't even swing their arms in the right time – we call it tick-tocking! It's funny to see, but I feel sorry for the “tick-tocks” as they get bawled at mercilessly by the sergeants.

We have been issued with all manner of things, including eight books on: military law, king's regulations, field service rules, map reading, drill and engineering. We need to learn all this stuff as we are examined continuously during our time here.

This is the first week of eight, and it seems like a long journey ahead. But I suppose it will go quickly. I can't wait to get to Reading or Oxford, which are the Schools of Aeronautics. We cover the more interesting subjects there, so fingers crossed that I pass this basic course. Do write and tell me all about your adventures at Longford Castle. Have you managed to see an operation yet? My address is on the back of my envelope.

Oh, I nearly forgot. When are you off to Étamples? As you say, it sounds

exciting. I won't say a word until it's official. We could be quite close to each other.

Cheerio, for now,

Tom x

CHAPTER 4

From Tom to Louisa

*Cadet T Munro
RFC College of Aeronautics
Wantage Hall Field Camp
Reading
October 1917*

I'm at Reading now, and guess what? We're in tents, and it's freezing. All designed to toughen us up, I suppose. The subjects are much more interesting, aside from the ongoing Drill and PT. Our studies include: engines, guns, bombs, instruments, photography, wireless, Morse code, rigging, theory of flight and aerial observation. Ferris and I are together again, and we both agree that our favourite lecture is with Sergeant Angus Forbes on engines. His broad Scottish accent gets full marks for entertainment; 'If yoo canna un'erstand what ahm say'n, stick your hons up.'

One particular session stands out; his lecture on rotary engines. I'll try my best at his accent. 'Now young gen'lemen, I want to talk this mornin' aboot yer ro'ary engines cos I suppose youse all want tae fly the Camel?'

This raised a smile of agreement from us all as, to a man, we all hope to be single-seat, Scout pilots and fly the Sopwith Camel.

He continued. 'Well, gen'lemen, ro'aries can be a bit tricky, so it's important to understan' em. In partic'lar, how they're lubrica'ed and how the fuel's controlled.'

You need to appreciate that rotary engines are light and simple, and the lubrication system is no exception. It's a total loss system which means that once the oil has done its job, it's ejected with the waste combustion gases through the exhaust valves. This foul mixture is ejected into the slipstream, and the oily draught conveniently flies back over our hero in the cockpit.

Now our lubricant is castor oil, which has a particular effect on young pilots if they don't cover-up. Sgt Forbes went on to ask us what effect castor oil might have, and I suppose you would know, being a nurse, but we didn't. He went on to explain with great glee as follows.

'Well, gen'lmen – its diarrhoea! And I don't need to tell you that the last thing you need when you're fighting the Hun is a dose of "Di-Horia-Hi-Hay" cos the Hun will do a pretty good job of geeing you that anyway.'

This had the class in roars of laughter, and we have spent the last few days using our favourite new expression Di-Horia-Hi-Hay, whenever possible. To be serious, we are told that if we get too much castor oil on our skin, it gets absorbed into the system – hence Di-Horia-Hi-Hay, so we need to cover up with goggles, scarves etc., and keep our skin clear of oil. I hear that some people also smear horrible greases, like whale oil, onto their faces! I'll tell you if it's true when I get to fly. I wrote a similar letter to my mother as she likes a bit of humour in my letters.

If we pass our exams, we have been promised a spot of leave before we get to know where we will do our flying. I can't wait. Maybe you will be able to get home too, and we can meet up. Swap stories etc. Anyway, I hope you are well and best regards to your father when you see him.

Tom x

Tom managed some leave and had a very elaborate Christmas dinner with his mother at Fairview. Despite Sir George's best efforts, it didn't feel right without Louisa, who had to work through the festive period. Sir George had clearly made a big effort, the staff waiting at the table outnumbering the places at dinner. Key customers and senior staff from Foster Engineering made up the party, and Tom counted eighteen at the table. Despite the presence of important guests, Sir George spent much time chatting and laughing with Mary. He seemed so comfortable with her that Tom had little doubt that a wedding could be in the offing. Tom sat next to a senior engineer

from the Sopwith company, and he couldn't resist describing the Sopwith Camel as his "dream aeroplane". Despite the illustrious company, Tom felt truly disappointed that Louisa was absent. They were getting to know each other, and from the tone of Louisa's letters, her previous disinterest seemed to be evaporating. By the time the turkey was fully digested and the decorations were heading for their boxes, Tom was eager to take the next step in his training at Castle Magna.

Tom arrived at RFC Castle Magna in the early afternoon, and he and 3 other RFC cadets were collected from the station in a draughty truck. There was always a draughty truck. 'Are you doing your flying training then?' said one of his travelling companions.

'Just about to start,' Tom replied.

'Good for you. My name's Archie; I've been here for about a month with this pair. We've all got just over 20 hours on our course.' They just managed to shake hands as the truck bucked and rolled its way onto the airfield.

'I'm Tom. Good to meet you. Would you mind giving me a few tips?' Tom said, eagerly pulling his papers from his greatcoat pocket. 'I'm to report to Harefield House. What should I be expecting?'

'That's the officers' mess. It's also used for briefings and ground lectures. It was a racecourse building before the war; hardly ideal but quite bright and airy.'

Just then, as the truck lumbered through the grounds of Castle Magna, Tom spotted Avro 504s parked outside the hangars, one with the engine running. 'I bet you can't wait to get airborne eh?' said Archie when he noticed Tom leaning forward for a better view.

Harefield House was quite warm and inviting. A noisy chattering and a smoky haze drifted into the reception area from the bar, where a gaggle of cadets and junior officers were gesticulating enthusiastically. While the noise and the smell of cigarettes may have leaked through, these two rooms were distinctly different. The reception hall was panelled in oak and clearly designed for a more distinguished clientele. Numerous oil paintings of

racehorses adorned the walls giving clear evidence of the land's recent use as a racecourse. A wide stairway turned left and right on a half landing and continued towards the first floor, with a heavy banister surround and glass-panelled rooms facing outwards onto the racecourse, now an airfield.

A corporal appeared from a small office off the hallway. 'No 22 Course, I assume, sir?'

'Yes, that's correct,' said Tom taking in his surroundings.

'You can leave your bags just here, sir. I'll have them taken to your billet?'

'Thank you. Do you know where I'm supposed to report corporal?'

'In the anteroom in the corner, sir.'

As he turned towards the anteroom, Tom spotted a familiar face. 'I just can't escape you,' he said. Ferris looked up from the front of the room with a smile, his grin widening as Tom walked towards him with his hand outstretched. The two quickly tried to catch up, but their conversation was interrupted when the squadron commander, followed by his instructors, marched into the room and lined up at the end, looking very stern. The group of about 15 cadets sprang to their feet.

From Tom to Louisa

*Flight Cadet T Munro
74 Reserve Squadron
RFC Castle Magna
January 1918*

I've sent this letter to "Fairview" and asked your father to forward it to you in France. I think you said you were going to Étapes, but I don't suppose you're known locally yet, ha, ha.

Well, here I am at the start of my flying training. I'm in 74 Reserve/Training Squadron at Castle Magna, an old racecourse near Birmingham which has been appropriated for wartime flying. I've met lots of chaps already, and Ferris is with me again. I can't shake him off! We've had

a briefing from “God”, that’s Major Hilborough, and my instructor is a rather queer fellow called Lieutenant Davidson. I’m told he is on a “resting posting” and it’s probably because his nerves are gone. I know what that means from stories I’ve read about the RFC, but he is very strange. We’re billeted in cosy huts with a central stove and a long black chimney which disappears through the roof. There is plenty of coal, so we keep it stoked up. The latrines are another matter – freezing cold, probably to ensure we don’t spend too much time there!

We dine in the officer’s mess, Harefield House, which is quite splendid. Grand but ancient-looking walnut furniture, white tablecloths, silver cutlery, and smart crockery. And, we’re served our meals at the table by pretty WAACs that’s the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps. The food is wonderful; super fry-ups at breakfast, a light lunch of cold meats and cheese, (if we have the time) and roast dinners of chicken, beef or pork. I can’t believe we are at war.

The most important news is that I had my first-ever flight today with my instructor, Lt. Davidson in the Avro 504K. It’s a small training biplane with a rotary engine.

The feeling of leaving the ground is quite amazing. First, the noise of the engine as it increases to full power, then a slight push in the back as the machine accelerates, the grass blurring with the speed, the wind in my face more like a gale and then the ground seems to just slip away. Seeing the airfield, the buildings and roads from above, a bird’s eye view, is quite the thrill I expected. People are barely perceptible and as the machine banks it is like the world is tilting. I quickly got used to it, particularly when we were up amongst the clouds. I want to reach out and touch them; they are magnificent, beautiful. Big glistening puffs of vapour so solid looking that I want to get out and take a stroll amongst the towering columns and hills and valleys.

As you can tell, I loved it, but Davidson said almost nothing despite having the new Gosport system, which allows us to talk between cockpits. I felt that he just wanted to make me sick with all sorts of weird manoeuvres. Loops and

rolls and spins and so on. I took a while to get used to the draught and the buffeting, but by the end of the flight, I didn't notice it. I imagine I will at height or in the winter. I spoke to others afterwards about Davidson, and unlike the silence from my instructor, they enjoyed a full commentary on their flights. I've been told by other students to put up with it for now or the major might think I'm not up to it. Anyway, the race is now on to see who goes solo first.

Write soon.

Love

Tom x

Louisa was leaning on the rail of the little cross-channel ferry, her mind much engaged with her new life at the St John Ambulance hospital in Étaples. A good-looking young army officer interrupted her thoughts. 'Going far then?'

A silly question, Louisa thought, but she didn't want to be rude. 'No, not really. And you?'

'Back to my regiment at the front. Been home for a spot of leave. What's a pretty girl doing on this old tub heading for France? Nurse perhaps?'

'As a matter of fact, yes. A VAD, a volunteer.'

'Yes, I know. A "very attractive darling", as they say.'

Louisa did not take to this expression. 'I'd rather you didn't use that term. Rather demeaning, don't you think?'

'I do apologise, just making conversation.'

They chatted about the usual wartime pleasantries, and Louisa welcomed the interaction as she found him quite attractive; it also passed the time until the coastline appeared out of the haze. The crossing had been smooth, and the escort vessels provided some entertainment as they ploughed their way around their ferry as if playing a game of tag.

'My name's Robert, by the way. Are you being met at Boulogne? I might be able to get you a lift.'

‘My papers tell me that I’ll need to take the train. I’ll be met. Need to watch out for a notice for Étapes.’

The controlled rush to disembark meant that their polite conversation ended abruptly.

She stood at the top of the gangplank and peered nervously down at the packed quayside. A visceral reluctance to descend into the throng was broken by a shove, and she grabbed cautiously at both handrails as if balancing on a tightrope.

‘Come on, love,’ said a rough voice from behind. ‘They won’t bite ya.’

Louisa didn’t need an excuse to chastise the rude or objectionable, and the comment re-established her spirit. ‘Take your time. I’m sure the war will wait for you,’ she retorted as she took slow, careful steps down the gangplank. Once on the quayside, she found that it was impossible to see further than the back of the soldiers, sailors and airmen in front, and she had no idea where her trunk would be. Eventually, after shuffling along with the crowds for ten minutes or so, more commotion ahead suggested that her errant trunk might be revealed. She was encouraged by the pile of cases, trunks, packages, boxes, and bicycles. However, people were grabbing at the mound like hungry animals with little care for anything that did not resemble their particular item of interest. Everything else was cast aside for the next hunting frenzy. Louisa found this chaos intolerable. ‘For goodness sake, have a care. Can we have some consideration for others,’ she shrieked, surprised by the hush that followed. ‘Let’s take our time, please!’

Another voice broke the silence; it was Robert. ‘Quite right, let’s form an orderly queue here,’ he instructed with calm authority, gently pushing people into line.

As calm was restored and a semblance of order achieved, baggage was collected with more restraint, and Louisa found her trunk. As she was thanking Robert for taking control, she spotted her sign, a white St John Ambulance signboard with ÉTAPLES in large letters. She waved gratefully in response and pointed out her trunk.

The train was less than full, and she chose a window seat to view the coast. A voice from the other side of the carriage interrupted her thoughts. ‘You must be the other VAD I was told about?’

Louisa turned to see an older girl beaming with a friendly smile. ‘Well, I’m certainly a VAD, but I’m not sure if I’m “the other VAD”. Where are you going?’

‘St John Ambulance Hospital. Are you?’

‘I must be the other VAD then. Yes, St John as well. I’m Louisa Foster.’

‘And I’m Bethany Bain-Dyke, from Manchester.’

‘Well, Bethany, can I call you Beth? What an adventure. Have you been a VAD for long?’

‘I’ve been working in Manchester for about a year, but I’ve always wanted to get over to France. Strange, really, as I don’t suppose it will be much fun. Beth’s fine, by the way. Can I join you?’

‘Of course,’ said Louisa patting the seat next to her. ‘I’m glad we’ve met before getting to Étapes. Moral support, and so on. I’m sure we’ll need it,’

The stop/start lurching movement of the train suggested that the relatively short journey from Bologne to Le Touquet could take some time ‘I’m not sure this train can get any slower,’ said Louisa.

‘Time to get to know each other then. Have you always wanted to be a nurse?’

‘That’s a good starting point, and no, not really. I’ve been a bit lost, really. Not knowing what I want to do. The war has forced some decisions on me, and I fell into VAD nursing by accident. Well, not an accident. I wanted to do something useful rather than charitable chores.’

Louisa was not proud of her privileged upbringing and her finishing school experience in France, which had been interrupted by the war. Her VAD work was beginning to signpost the way ahead; the ideas which were forming were refreshing, stimulating, and exciting despite the nature of her nursing duties.

‘Sounds so similar to my situation,’ said Beth as the train stopped abruptly at a short out-of-the-way station. Bandaged heads and stooped injured soldiers passed the window. Shocked and troubled expressions predominated;

many had bandaged eyes and were led by the arm.

‘Looks like gas casualties,’ said Louisa, not wanting to stare.

‘We need to be prepared, Louisa. It’s not going to be a pleasant experience.’

‘Yes, no holiday, but we’re here to help. I’ve been surprised at how I have taken to nursing. At least what we are allowed to do. The cleaning and “slave labour” is a little tedious, but it all helps.’

The walking wounded slowly filled the train, which put paid to their easy conversation and the familiar railway coach smells were quickly overwhelmed by the odours of tired, filthy troops and disinfectants. Louisa was not sure what she preferred when the air turned blue with dense cigarette smoke, the little saviours being handed around like some form of medicine. The girls offered to stand to let the soldiers sit down, but they would have none of it. Eventually, Louisa insisted. ‘Come on, Beth, let them sit,’ she said, rising and moving into the corridor and almost forcing the men to take their seats. Close proximity to an open window had its advantages.

The tired, dirty faces stared at the clean, smart nurses with a look akin to the starving when setting eyes on food for the first time. The girls smiled and chatted to the men for the remainder of the journey and talked about their mothers, fathers, wives and sweethearts; anything except the Front or the trenches or lost friends or their fears.

From Louisa to Tom

*St John Ambulance Hospital
Étaple
France
January 1918*

Here I am at my final destination after a rather tiring journey from Salisbury. We shared our railway carriage from Bologne with the wounded coming from the Front. It was a sobering experience, but preparation for the

work ahead, I suppose. I'm at the St John Ambulance Hospital in Étapes. This place is huge, with 750 patients and 80 nurses, including the usual intimidating matron. But luckily, I've made a friend already called Beth, who is in the same boat as me.

Our accommodation in huts is adequate, with narrow beds, a little bedside cabinet and a wardrobe of sorts. We are ten or so to a hut with two sinks and outside toilets. There is row upon row of wooden huts and our boarded mess room is decorated with the gaudiest chintz curtains. We have been introduced to Sister Fallows, a perfectly starched and pressed professional, who is charged with introducing us to our duties. I think it will be just as I experienced at Longford Castle, but I hear that the wounded can arrive in droves. I can't say I am looking forward to that.

I was shocked to hear about mutinies in the ranks of local soldiers. Étapes is a very large holding base for troops, and apparently, they have railed against the harsh training they are getting at what is locally known as the "Bull Ring". I haven't been there yet, but I am told that Étapes is a dirty little town and quite a contrast to Le Touquet across the river Canche which is, in effect, officer territory. Pickets at the bridge enforce the separation of the officers from other ranks.

Heavy-handed policing of the troops by "Red Caps", that's the military police, resulted in confrontations which ended in the death of a Gordon Highlander last year. That sparked off further confrontations, which were eventually quelled by force of numbers and a corporal was charged with "attempted mutiny". He was executed by firing squad, and many others were sentenced to imprisonment and hard labour. All seems to be quiet now, but there is a strange tension about the place. We have been warned to avoid going out at night and only in groups during the day. Not that we'll have much time off, I suspect.

Sister Fallows seems particularly focused on preparing us for the gruesome condition of our patients and their frequent deaths. She mentioned compound leg and arm fractures, blast and gunshot wounds and, more recently, gas poisoning. She told us that we had replaced two VADs who weren't up to the

job!

I suppose we'll find out soon enough if we're any different. Have you flown on your own yet? I look forward to hearing from you. I'm sure I'll have stories of my own in due course.

Love

Louisa

Nurse Louisa Foster !!!

CHAPTER 5

Tom was holding court in the Castle Magna officer's mess on his favourite subject. He had to shout to make himself heard amongst the other cadets jostling at the bar as they bellowed at a hard-pressed airman on bar duty. Cigarettes glowed in the subdued lighting, and Tom waved a hand to clear the blue fog wafting about the room. 'Just think about it. An aeroplane travels at 85 mph, and if you imagine a flight from London to Paris, the aeroplane might take two to three hours. How long would it take by train and boat?'

Ferris was more interested in his whisky, and others made a big display of lighting their cigarettes or, in one case, stoking his pipe. Ferris could see that Tom was getting irritated. He understood Tom's passion and decided to indulge him. 'Oh, about six to eight hours, if the ferry meets the London train and the Paris train meets the ferry. How does that sound?'

'Precisely,' said Tom looking pleased with himself. 'Much quicker by air. We've got big aeroplanes like the HP 0/100 carrying several thousand pounds of bombs. The Huns have their Gotha. That could be passengers and cargo, not bombs.'

Ferris liked to be contrary. 'That's all very well, but Mother Nature can be rebellious at the most inconvenient moment. How many times have we had flights cancelled or postponed due to weather or sick aeroplanes? Paying passengers would not be best pleased. I assume the passengers are paying.'

'Of course,' said Tom. 'Weather could be a problem if some kind of regular flights were planned.'

'Could be a problem?' said Ferris looking particularly dubious. 'It *will* be a problem.'

'So, you don't think it's a good idea then?' said Tom to his sceptical audience.

'Just not sure that it would work reliably,' said George. 'How could

passengers rely on your optimistic timetable?’

Tom continued to be positive. ‘Perhaps we could do something to cope with bad weather. Better aeroplanes and aerodromes. Some way of navigating and flying in bad visibility and in cloud. Markings on the ground, perhaps.’

‘What, big white lines painted across the countryside with an arrow pointing in the right direction and big letters saying “Paris This Way”,’ said Ferris elbowing George mockingly.

‘Now you’re being flippant, Ferris,’ said Tom.

‘I prefer frivolous,’ said Ferris.

‘Maybe that’s not as silly as it sounds,’ said George. ‘The occasional sign on a roof at key points on the route might work. Lights at the aerodromes as well.’

‘I have just another minor cogitation,’ said Ferris.

Tom continued their word games. ‘Well, please elucidate Ferris.’

‘I can’t imagine that the average member of your great British public will be happy to climb aboard these rickety machines to set off, bumping along over the open sea, hoping that they’ll get to the other side in one piece. Some audacious types maybe, but not the typical British traveller.’

Tom looked increasingly agitated. ‘I imagine we’ll have to make things more comfortable and maybe cover the cockpit or passenger cabin.

‘Perhaps special fur-lined goggles and heated helmets too,’ said Ferris.

Henry stepped in before Tom got too irate. ‘Anyone for another drink? Your turn Tommy.’

From Tom to Louisa,

RFC Castle Magna

February 1918

Guess what? I’ve been solo. I’m ecstatic and just had to tell someone. And that someone is you. Most of us were getting close. I’d had a good trip with my instructor, Davidson, and I was about to get out of the Avro, (our Avro

504 trainer), when he said, 'Stay where you are. Time to do it on your own.'

He then walked away calmly, and I felt a sudden solitude, and a chill ran down my back. The tangy smell of castor oil and grass filled the air with increased intensity and mechanics, and others drifted around, looking safe and comfortable with life. I felt awfully alone, and for a moment, I wished I could be a carefree bystander, but this was not to be. I realised my hands were already going about the familiar starting routine. 'Contact,' I replied to the mechanic and the engine fired up immediately, prompting a quick adjustment of the controls. I could see Davidson standing nearby, watching casually with his arms akimbo. The engine buzzed impatiently, and being reluctant to delay the moment any longer, I waved the chocks away, applied full power and sped off down the aerodrome feeling a little detached from reality. It didn't last long, but I felt like I was watching myself for an instant, in a dream.

But this time I was in charge. On my own. Solo. I noticed the increased rate of acceleration and rate of climb without Davidson's weight, and being keen to keep sight of the aerodrome, I turned right into the circuit just beyond the familiar chimney and cement factory. At a 1000 feet, I turned downwind, my eyes glued intently on the aerodrome, and I felt that feeling of isolation again. Not just isolated but totally responsible for getting the Avro and myself back on the ground. I swallowed hard, pushed these worrying thoughts away, and shuffled in my seat to feel like part of the aeroplane. The air was more turbulent now, so I had to work harder to keep the machine under control. I was keen to keep the circuit tidy, maintain the circuit height and, above all, keep sight of the airfield. I was aware now that there was no helpful instructor barking in my ears. No 'I have control' if things went wrong. No rude abuse through my helmet, only the constant blare of the rotary engine and the buffeting slipstream.

I started to enjoy the flight. The nerves had gone, but I still had to land the Avro. The aerodrome rapidly passed my right shoulder, and I remembered the familiar instruction: 'Turn onto the base leg when the aerodrome passes over your shoulder.' So, turn I did, and I could see two other aeroplanes

drifting along in front as I peered with watery eyes through my goggles. Now, the all-important landing. I murmured to myself, repeating my instructor's words. 'Speed 65mph. Check your speed around the final turn. Maintain 65, 100 feet, don't look at the altimeter; use your judgement.'

The boundary hedge slipped past underneath. The grass airfield rushed up to meet me, and I started to talk to myself again. 'Raise the nose, look to the left, hold off, blip the engine, hold off, hold off, keep the wings level, hold off.'

With a reassuring "caluump" my machine settled onto the airfield, and the wheels rumbled encouragingly; I was down and we stayed down. No bounces at all. My heart was thumping in my chest like a steam engine. As my Avro slowed, one of the waiting mechanics dismounted from his Cowley truck and rushed over to grab a wing tip. I could see Davidson watching outside the hangar; he still had his hands on his hips. I smiled a big broad grin, feeling that my landing was pretty good. As I neared the line of parked aeroplanes, I swung the Avro around into position with help from my man on the wingtip and switched off. The engine coughed and chuffed as if reluctant to stop. Perhaps it liked my flying. All was quiet for the first time in an hour or so, and I leant back in my seat and raised my goggles as a wave of relief swept over me.

'Good landing, Munro. Well done,' Davidson said, and that is a hell of a compliment from that man, I can tell you.

So that was my first solo, and I hope you don't mind me spelling it out like that. It's often said that you never forget your first solo, well I won't, as I've written it all down. Are you still awake, Louisa? Ha, ha.

More soon, and do tell me all about your time in Étaple. I should be heading your way soon. Wouldn't it be super if I could pop in to see you? There must be a landing strip nearby. Must dash as we're off to the bar to celebrate. Three of us went solo today. I hope you are well and coping with your work there. It can't be easy. Tell me all about it if it helps.

Love

Thomas x (x)

Flight Cadet Thomas Munro, solo RFC Pilot

Louisa was astounded, shocked and stunned by the piles of exhausted men covering every square foot of available hospital space. She had worked her day duty from 7am until 8pm and she was back on the ward at 11pm to help with the recent intake from the Front. She had been at the Étaples hospital for a month and had adjusted to the stark and cruel surroundings of a hospital near the Front Line. Now this wave of human misery lay in excruciating pain, balanced between life and death, and she had to cope. If she didn't, someone else would have to step in. She was determined that this would not happen. The bodies of the men lay mutilated, blasted apart by relentless artillery and machine gun fire, their uniforms in shreds, their limbs blown away or shattered to pieces. She looked across at Beth, their eyes connected in grief. They locked their gazes for a few moments then nodded their determination and returned to their work.

Louisa could not miss the look in the eyes of their patients: soulless, desperate and pleading. Amongst the ever-extending carpets of blood, the nurses and VADs worked endlessly in this living hell. There was no distinction between day and night duty now. Everyone worked to the point of exhaustion.

From Louisa to Tom

*Étaples,
France
February 1918*

Well done, Tom. I got your letter, obviously. It was a smashing story about your first solo flight. It must have been so exciting. I read it out to some of my friends in my hut. They loved it. You should send more stories like that.

Things are very different here. This evening we had a big intake of

casualties from the casualty clearing stations, CCS for short, and we're all exhausted. They were in a terrible state. There's been a big push up the lines, and the CCSs couldn't cope. So, we're getting our chaps almost straight off the Front Line. All sorts of terrible wounds and dreadfully shocked to boot. We VADs don't normally go to the CCSs or dressing stations, but we've been told that we might be needed to help transport casualties to our base hospital.

I'm quite affected by the state of these poor souls. It's quite distressing, but the sisters tell us to buck our ideas up if we show any sign of wilting. I hope you don't mind me telling you these things as you are about to join the fight, but it helps me. I won't be too specific.

I had a young chap pass away in front of me yesterday. The matron obviously knew. She asked me to hold his hand. 'Just chat to him,' she said. He just quietly stopped breathing. Just stopped! Other nurses stepped in, pushed me away and tried to revive him, but he had gone. I wanted to help, to do my job as a nurse. I nearly had a fight with one of the nurses. Stupid, but I wanted to save the poor chap. I felt a connection with him at that moment, like a brother or something. In my quiet time, I realise that we cannot afford to get too personally involved. That's what the proper nurses say. It's true, of course. I'm getting tearful just thinking about it. I suppose I was more prepared today when a doomed twenty-year-old, a beautiful lad despite his sallow complexion and agonised biting of his lip, asked me in a courteous whisper how long he had to wait until he died. The screens were around his bed by evening.

These are hard times for me, Tom so let's have more of your jolly flying tales. We're looking forward to warmer weather and enjoying a dip at the Le Touquet beaches. It will be a welcome change from the punishing routines here.

I (we) look forward to hearing more stories. Beth loves them.

Love.

Louisa x

PS My address here is:

VAD Nurse Louisa Foster

Hut 42

St John Ambulance Hospital

Étaples, France

CHAPTER 6

From Tom to Louisa

*RFC Castle Magna
March 1918*

Hello Louisa,

Your storyteller is a very disappointed chap today. I passed my course on the Avro, and I have been told unofficially that I did very well. I'm feeling much more at ease in the air now, so I was hoping for my dream posting to a Sopwith Camel squadron. I had an interview with the CO, Major Ferguson, who announced that I would be posted to a two-seat Bristol Fighter squadron. I probably looked quite shocked and told him about my determination to fly the Camel, but he would have none of it. He said something like, "the RFC is not here for your entertainment, Munro; you'll do as your told." I'm very disappointed, but the good news is that I now have my wings and the glorious rank of 2nd Lieutenant.

I have had a few hours in the Bristol Fighter now and have met a fellow called Harry Price. He's an experienced pilot, and together we've to fly a new machine to Planques to join No.62 Squadron. It's about 30 miles to the east of you in Étapes. Maybe we could meet up?

The Brisfit is a much bigger machine than the little Avro 504, but I got used to it quite quickly. I should tell you more about it so you can imagine me when I'm flying. To be strictly accurate, it's a Bristol F2B Fighter, and it's powered by a massive Rolls Royce Falcon III engine of 280 hp. It's a big biplane with the pilot sitting in front and an observer/gunner behind. We are very close so we can shout to each other.

The engine and propeller are so big that it takes three men, with their arms linked together, to start. There is talk of a new machine on the drawing board which will do the starting, but I don't suppose we'll see that for a while. I

have a single Vickers machine gun firing through the propeller, and my gunner has a Lewis machine gun firing to the rear. I am told that we use the "Brisfit" (that's its nickname), like a fighter, so that suits me. Also, the gunner can protect us from attacks from the rear. Sounds like a jolly good combination to me. Finally, we can carry 25lb Cooper bombs so we can have a go at the Huns on the ground.

We've planned our flight to Planques via Dover when the weather settles. It's blowing a gale here at the moment. You will probably get this letter when I have reached Planque. I wonder if will be possible to meet up.

Keep writing, but I suppose it will be better to wait until you get my new address. You never know, I might even be able to call you on the telephone, if that is allowed.

Tom x (x)

By eleven, they had sufficient visibility to get airborne from Dover. Tom tucked himself into the rear seat as it was Harry's turn to fly. They started, taxied out and took off into a hazy late morning sun, making visibility to the east almost impossible. They climbed to 4000 feet, where the visibility was crystal clear, before setting off across the 20-mile stretch of water to Cape Griz-Nez. As with all flights across large expanses of water with one engine, they paid particular attention to the engine note; even a slight misfire would send their hearts racing. A subconscious tension was always present, which meant they could never truly relax. The shape of the French coast and Cap Gris-Nez was just visible after about fifteen minutes and, as planned, they flew south down the coast past Boulogne as far as Paris Plage or Le Touquet. Harry peered over the side, then turned and shouted his concerns to Tom. 'The visibility is getting bad again. I was hoping that the railway line from Paris Plage to Hesdin and Planques would be clearly visible, but I can't make it out. We need to see what it's like lower down.'

When they had descended, Harry shook his head. 'We're not going to get to Planques in this. I'm going to look for somewhere to land,' he shouted. The

Canche River occasionally sparkled as the sun pierced the low mist, and they circled around over Étapes, where they expected to find a landing site. After searching the misty landscape for nearly ten minutes, Harry shouted over his shoulder. 'We've got to go down. I'll feel our way, keep a good lookout and tell me if you see a big field.'

Tom felt that the ground was close. He felt his stomach tense up but could only wait for Harry to do his best. They could fly into a building or a tree or a hill. It would be terrible to end up in a pile of wreckage before even firing a shot in anger. He tightened his lap strap and was waiting for the worst when they both saw a sudden flash of green as something brushed the underside of the Brisfit. Tom heard the engine note fall to idle and their machine pitch up suddenly as if Harry was avoiding something. It was abrupt. Tom cringed and put his hands over his head. The wait seemed endless when the Brisfit emitted its characteristic rumble as it touched down firmly in a surprisingly good landing.

Harry brought the machine to a halt and rested his head back before turning to Tom. 'That was much too close for comfort.'

'But we're down and in one piece. I'd say that's a pretty good result, Harry. Bloody well done. But where are we?'

'I haven't a clue. I can barely see beyond the wingtips. We'd better shut down and take a wander.'

'Hang on, Harry, we've got company,' said Tom as he made out a number of running figures emerging from the gloom. One of them pointed to the left, and Harry responded by taxiing gingerly through the mist. Eventually, ghostly grey shapes of parked aeroplanes appeared.

The Brisfit dripped with moisture as they turned alongside the other machines. 'They're French Spads,' Harry shouted as the engine shuddered to a halt.

'Bonjour Messieurs. Welcome to Étapes. Capitaine Joubard at your service. We heard you passing overhead and wondered if you had seen the airfield.'

Harry and Tom climbed down. 'I'm Harry Price, and this is Tom Munro.'

We are very glad to be down safely.'

'Is this Étapes? said Tom. 'Is there a hospital nearby?'

Capitaine Joubard gestured into the mist. 'Yes, but you can't see it in this. It's a big military hospital by the coast; you'll see it soon when the mist clears. You don't want to go there; there's an outbreak of, how do you say, influenza? We have been ordered to wait here until we know where our new base will be. Everything is very confused at the moment.'

Tom's eyes widened. 'I think Louisa's here. At least somewhere in Étapes, a hospital.'

'There are many hospitals here; do you know which one?' said Capt. Joubard.

'St John Ambulance Hospital,' said Tom, hoping to see Louisa.

Harry recovered his composure. 'We're trying to get to Planques. Do you know it?'

'Oh yes. I've seen your Bristol Fighters there. It's not far once this fog clears.'

CHAPTER 7

When trekking from her hut to the ward, Louisa's mood had changed markedly. The early dreamy notions she embraced when setting off for France had long since dispersed into the malodorous air which hung over Etaples' hospital city. She didn't even notice the distant booming of the artillery barrages anymore. Being away from home and independent was a tonic, at least, but the incessant daily grind was a challenge. Fortunately, Beth, her "comrade in arms", was a good listener, and they took solace from their frequent chats.

Louisa noticed that a particular nurse had taken a set against her, probably because she was popular amongst the patients. Nurse Pendleton often tasked Louisa with washing the men when they arrived from the Front. They were often filthy, infested with lice and hadn't seen a decent wash in weeks. Many were unconscious and had fouled themselves, a pitiful sight, but Louisa took strength from the fact that she could comfort and clean these poor souls so that they looked human again. "There now, all spick and span" was her stock phrase. Beth often volunteered to help with Louisa's tasks but was firmly rebuffed and redirected to less unpleasant work.

The VADs became very familiar with the male anatomy, and on one occasion, a young man was aroused by Louisa's attentions. She shrieked and stood back in mild horror. Nurse P found this particularly amusing. A more sympathetic nurse took Beth and Louisa aside to teach them a few tricks for cooling the untimely ardour of their male patients. Often these patients were barely conscious and could be excused for their unintentional arousal. Others were plain cheeky, and, in these cases, cold water was particularly effective. 'Could be useful in the future,' Beth decided, and they both giggled, appreciating the opportunity for a little fun.

Sister Fallows kept a watchful eye on her VADs, but day-to-day contact was with the qualified nurses. Most were pleasant enough, even Nurse P, but

there was always a barrier between these nurses and the VADs. Louisa kept her medical ambitions to herself but confided in Beth.

One of the young surgeons took a liking to Louisa and asked her to take some time off for a walk along the beach in Le Touquet. She felt that he was tense and troubled. She asked him about his work in the theatre, but he was reluctant to talk about it. She wondered if he was a little under-confident or had difficulties with the people he worked with. She never found out as one day he was gone, posted home to lighter duties, no doubt.

‘He couldn’t cope with the brutal nature of the work,’ said Nurse Pendleton with a sneer.

The surgical procedures were often rapid and almost inhuman with useless, shattered limbs removed in seconds as the medical staff worked furiously to keep up with the flow of casualties. Quick judgements had to be made to achieve the maximum benefit as broken and torn bodies were carried unceremoniously into the makeshift operating theatres in an endless stream. News of some new battle meant another influx of patients in a day or two. The German spring offensive took a terrible toll, Louisa and Beth spent some time assisting with the casualties as they were unloaded from the trains and taken to the reception block for assessment. Sometimes this was done beside the railway line and in the dead of night. This could be a distressing duty as some men didn’t survive long enough to reach the hospital. Initially, Louisa and Beth, like most new VADs, felt tempted to shy away from the awful physical appearance of the wounds. Eventually, they became inured to the suffering and death which surrounded them and worked tirelessly until their work was done or they were relieved by the next shift.

Some time off was granted at quieter times, and Beth and a few VADs from other wards took to the beach at Le Touquet if the sun made an appearance. Any absence from the hospital had to be approved by their matron, and if male friends accompanied them, they had to be chaperoned. The water was still icy cold in the spring of 1918, but once braved, it was immensely refreshing. Louisa described it as another world. The shock, the zesty cold on her skin, transported her back to happy holidays in Salcombe. The girls

splashed and shrieked like children. Louisa sat on her towel, watching the frolics. 'We must look mad.'

'We probably are,' said Beth, half asleep in the warming sun.

Concert parties visited the hospitals on a regular basis and some staff put on ward concerts for those more seriously injured. Beth, a great fan of Gilbert & Sullivan operettas, was a natural and often performed songs from *The Mikado* and *The Gondoliers*. Louisa was particularly affected by one of these occasions when she sat by a young red-haired fellow who moaned his way through the concert. She held his cold hand and sang along to the music, assuming that he was trying to sing along too.

'Is that one of your favourites?' she said. He didn't hear; he had died during that concert.

A number of RFC pilots arrived in Louisa's ward, and she was popular with these young lads, particularly as she showed an interest in their flying. 'My... friend has just finished his pilot training, and he's coming out to France soon, I think,' she said proudly. As she spoke a loud aeroplane noise boomed throughout the ward as the machine flew very low over the hospital.

'Well I'm damned,' said one of the RFC lads. 'That's a Brisfit. I'd know that sound anywhere.'

'Not a very good day to be in the air,' said another.

'Do you mean a Bristol Fighter?' said Louisa.

'Yip, I'm sure it is, but not sure what he's doing here.'

Louisa glanced out the window. 'I have the most extraordinary feeling. That could be Tom; he mentioned the Bristol Fighter. I'm going to see. Beth, you know where the French are. Do you want to come after our shift – my chaperone?'

'I suppose so. Not much else to do.'

'I know it's silly, but I feel that it could be Tom. Don't ask me why?'

They trudged across a muddy field and started to regret their expedition. Their uniforms developed a muddy ring around the hem, and their neat black boots became encrusted with clods of dark, sticky earth.

‘Nurse Pendleton would just love to see me like this,’ said Louisa.

Just as they reached the airfield fence, a big biplane turned and pointed down the field as if readying for take-off. It paused for a moment, and Louisa peered hard to see if Tom was in the cockpit. She heard the engine run up to full power, and they turned away, holding onto their caps as the propeller wash tugged at their clothing. As the engine note diminished, they turned back to see the machine climbing away to make a wide circuit of the hospital. Then it appeared behind them, very low and fast. It rushed over their heads with a roar and the airflow whistling through its wires; they could almost touch it. They ducked and turned to watch it fly across the airfield before it pulled up, waggled its wings and turned east. Louisa rushed to the fence and waved frantically. ‘Do you think that was a Bristol Fighter? Do you think it was Tom?’

‘You’re crying, Louisa,’ said Beth.

From Tom to Louisa

*2nd Lt Tom Munro
A Flight
62 Squadron
RFC Planques
May 1918*

I’ve finally arrived at my first squadron here at RFC Planques. It’s in the middle of nowhere, and the nearest town is Hesdin. Harry Price, who flew us here, said he saw two nurses at the airfield fence when we left Étapes. Was that you? I wanted to see you, but we had to rush off and get our aeroplane to the squadron. They are very short of machines.

We’re settling in now and have met my Flight Commander, Captain George Bentworth and the CO, Major Watlington. They both seem like good types but sticklers for discipline, except when we let our hair down in the evening. We’re billeted in the officer’s mess, an old farmhouse converted by one of

our officers who is a dab hand with a hammer and chisel! As usual, the latrines are outside in tents, but the temperature is warming up now, so that's not too bad. I feel a bit sorry for the farmer as the building has been appropriated. I can see where his pictures used to be on the walls; shadows of the recent past, I suppose. All are now replaced by squadron memorabilia, trophies, and parts of Hun aeroplanes. The dining space is quite tight, but I am impressed by how the stewards make a special effort to maintain the standards we are used to back home. We sleep in rather cramped rooms dotted around the farmhouse and in tents. I'm in a tent as I am very much the "new boy".

I don't know if you are affected at your hospital too, but we lost 20 pilots and observers to the flu, so there is a lot of pressure on us. The CO was interested in our experience, and I could see him flinch when I mentioned my 45 hours of flying time. Harry has much more at 395 hours. He asked about our combat experience, and of course, I have none. We both expressed our hope to fly single-seat scouts, but the major reassured us of the fighting qualities of the Brisfit despite it being a two-seater. We have been teamed up with our observer/gunners, and I have been blessed with a rather noisy, brash American called Bill Franklin. I've been warned that he is a bit of a rascal on the ground but probably one of the best shots on the squadron; that's reassuring.

I met Bill in the bar on my first evening. I could see why they describe him as a rascal. He has a really cheeky chappie look about him and is always winking. It's early days, but I think we'll get on. The atmosphere became noisier and the officers more animated as the evening wore on, although the usual mess formalities, such as the loyal toast, were observed with a modicum of respect. Once this was over, the music box became the centre of attention and a jolly singsong added to the revelry; "Goodbye-ee", "Old Joe Whip", and of course, the old favourite, "It's a long way to Tipperary". Mess games broke out, and I felt that I should join in, but I didn't feel quite ready. Captain Bentworth, my flight commander rescued me and sent me off to bed; "Off you trot, Munro. You have a busy day tomorrow," he said.

A busy day was an understatement. Today, I had a furious practise air fight with the boss, the CO, whom I had to follow through all sorts of dramatic aerial manoeuvres and then we reversed roles, and I had to try to shake him off. I could not, despite some pretty violent manoeuvres on my part. I don't know how Bill puts up with it in the back. He just said, "Do what you like; I'm used to it". I felt exhausted and just a little nauseous after our flights. Bill just climbed down from our machine and walked off as if he had just stepped off a bus. The boss is a superb pilot. Perhaps I will be as good as that one day.

We've completed our initial introduction into real combat flying with bombing and ground strafing with our guns on the range, and I've also done some formation flying, which is exciting and very tiring with the concentration involved. Can you imagine flying only feet apart at 100 miles per hour?

It's still very cold, particularly at altitude. Sometimes we get up to 18,000 feet. We smother our faces in whale oil to protect our skin from frostbite. It stinks of fish as you can guess. Some chaps have blue-green blotches on their cheeks! We are starting to introduce electrically heated Sidcot suits, but most of us just pile on the clothes. I've taken to wearing two sweaters under my tunic, a pair of long woollen stockings which come up to my thighs, smaller boot socks and my fleece-lined flying boots, which come right up to my hips. I have a woollen helmet under my leather one and a huge scarf around my neck. Finally, I have silk gloves under my leather gauntlets. You should see us waddling out to our Brisfits! When we return from ops, we can hardly extricate ourselves from the cockpit.

Changing the subject, I mistakenly asked Bill where we go for entertainment. He replied, "Whatever do you mean, my lad? Are you talking about horizontal entertainment?"

I told him I will need to go along with him to ensure he's not getting himself into trouble. Apparently, we go to St Omer.

I now await my first flight over the lines. Keep your letters coming. I wrote to your father. I have ideas for flying after the war. He seemed to be

interested when we last spoke. I have also written to my mother but take a lot of care about what I say. I know she worries. She writes back with all the local gossip and war news that she picks up from her newspapers.

Lots of love

Tom x (x)

PS. We all have nicknames here. Guess what Ive been named. "Munners" yuk!

PPS. My new address is on the envelope.

From Sir George Foster to Tom

"Fairview"

Wilton

May 1918

Thank you for your letter and your ideas on flying after the war. I hope that life is interesting and not too dangerous for you. I have to say that I am rather worried about Louisa being in France now and not that far from the Front Line to boot. Has she mentioned that she's thinking about studying to be a doctor? Whatever next! I don't find it easy. She asks all sorts of awkward questions about my business. I don't feel it's a woman's place, but she certainly doesn't agree. You can imagine your mother's thoughts on the matter.

Anyway, I wanted to tell you about some ideas I have for when the war ends – hopefully very soon. I am considering starting an aviation business to operate an aeroplane or two. Foster Aviation Services; has a ring to it, don't you think? I imagine it will involve passenger services and the carriage of cargo and mail to European destinations like Paris. From your comments and being a pilot, I thought you might be interested in joining me in this venture. We touched on the subject briefly when we met at the factory. What do you think? Perhaps we could start with joyriding as we saw before the

war. Then we could develop that into a more serious commercial service.

Write when you get a chance, and let me know your thoughts. Your mother sends her love, and I'm sure Louisa does as well.

All the Best

George

CHAPTER 8

From Louisa to Tom

SJAH
Étaples
May 1918

I have just had a most dreadful experience, and it helps to write about it. I hope you don't mind. I am still at the St John Ambulance Hospital at Étaples, and until yesterday, my work had been exhausting and, at times, very unpleasant, but nothing compared to what we experienced a few nights ago.

I was fast asleep when, I was awakened by the most terrible bang, a series of bangs, the last of which blew the windows in. I felt like my head was going to explode. I couldn't hear a thing except for a high-pitched squeal. Once I gathered myself, I dressed quickly and stumbled up the road to my ward as dawn broke. It was only a matter of minutes from the explosion which had shattered my sleep, and people, some with stretchers, were dashing this way and that. A fire engine clattered past and disappeared around the back of the nearest ward.

My ward was demolished. A foul smell of burnt bedding filled the air, and I rushed towards the piles of rubble to search for Beth. Sister Fallows stopped me with a firm hand on my shoulder. 'Don't, Foster,' she said. 'We need to check it's safe. There might be unexploded bombs. The army people are checking first.'

I asked if Beth had been seen, as she had been on duty that night, but nobody replied. As you can imagine, I was desperate to get into the ward to find her. Other hospital staff milled around, waiting to enter the buildings, as some patients staggered clear. We comforted them as best we could, sitting them down with some water and blankets across their shoulders. Troops had been called to help find survivors, but they were just hanging around, waiting for the word to start searching. A sergeant was bawling instructions. I

wanted to tell him to shut up. It was getting light, and the true extent of the damage was becoming obvious. Just about all our buildings were affected. I scrutinized everyone as they emerged. Most were barely recognisable, but I didn't see Beth. I saw matron speaking to Sister Fallows, and they both looked across at me. My heart sank. I rushed over. The matron looked crushed, then stood tall. 'Nurse Foster, Louisa, you must be strong,' she said.

I think I put my hands to my mouth. I didn't want her to say it. I felt sick and my stomach churned. I knew what was coming. Matron took my arm. She guided me away from other people. Then she told me. Nurse Bain-Dyke, that's Beth, had been found with several patients. She was dead.

Beth was such a good friend. I wanted to see her, but the matron stopped me from looking under the blankets which were covering the casualties. I recognised Beth's shoes. I still wanted to see her, but two nurses held me back. I feel foolish now at the way I struggled to free myself.

The sight of the fresh injuries was new to me. Bodies covered in dust and debris, puncture wounds from flying glass, limbs, massive blood loss.... God, I'm sorry... I shouldn't write to you like this, but with these gruesome sights came a kind of relief. I found that I could ignore the horror of the scenes and get down to the job. I am quietly pleased that I can do that. If I'm to be a doctor, I need to be able to cope with these situations.

It took us until around midday until calm was restored at the hospital. Everyone looked filthy and exhausted, me included, I expect. Do you remember me preening after I arrived at your house with my father? A long time ago. Eventually, we were sent back to our huts to clean up and take a rest. But when I arrived, it hit me then that I didn't have Beth to talk to. I lay down on my bed, cried my heart out, and then mercifully fell asleep.

I still cannot believe it. The hospital had been bombed! Don't you think that is terrible? Who would bomb a hospital? All the roofs are painted with big red crosses, so it must have been deliberate.

We have since heard that a German crew was captured after the raid, and they claimed that they were supposed to be bombing the docks. I suppose they would not be able to see the big red crosses at night.

I went to Beth's funeral at the Étaples Military Cemetery today, but I still feel very low. I can't tell Father and Mary about the bombing. They will be terribly worried for me. I expect Mary will read about it in the newspapers.

We must fight on, and I hope you're not in too much danger. I got your squadron number from Father, so I hope you get this letter. If you are not far away, could you come to see me? I'd love that.

Look after yourself.

Louisa x

PS. Did you fly over our hospital a few weeks ago? I think I saw you

From Tom to Louisa

RFC Planques

June 1918

I got your letter about Beth. I'm so sorry. It must have been so difficult to lose a friend like that. I expect I will experience the same at some point. That could be all too soon, as I am just about to take my first trip across the Lines.

We planned for a six am take-off, but it was delayed until the afternoon. I was pretty nervous, but Bill Franklin, said that I needed to get used to the waiting around. My flight commander, Bentworth, is a good type, but OC 'B' Flight, Captain Tollard-McFee, is an ass. He calls us schoolboys, which might be appropriate for some of the young lads but not me. He gets very obnoxious when drunk, which is most nights. "Another day, another death" is his favourite maxim.

We waited for several hours, and Bill explained how he got into the war. He's a Londoner originally, but his father emigrated to the US when he was four years old. They settled in New York, and his "Pa" set up a garage business. Bill described his father as a bad-tempered son-of-a-bitch who used to "beat him and his brother something terrible". As soon as possible, he and his brother, Andy, left for England to join up. That was in 1914. Andy was

killed at Passchendaele in 1917, and Bill avoided the trenches by getting into the RFC. He started as a mechanic and changed to observer as soon as possible. I'm writing this as we wait and wait and wait. I'm flying the lovely new Brisfit we brought out here from Blighty, so that's a good omen, I think. Oh, looks like we're off. More later xxx.

Back now. When we got airborne, Bentworth told me to stick to him like glue. We were to patrol the line from Diksmuide in the north to Arras in the south and we climbed up to fifteen thousand feet. Bloody cold up there, I can tell you. Bill seems to be strong enough to handle twin Lewis guns which must be a hell of a struggle when I throw the machine around. He says he's got big biceps which he demonstrates with a broad grin. He rattles around in the back as if he's moving furniture about, but it's reassuring somehow.

Our little formation climbed at full power, and we made a wide orbit of the airfield dodging scattered cumulus clouds on our way east towards Lens, the countryside below a sombre green in the evening light. These pretty clouds can conceal danger, and the Huns often pounce on us from these useful hiding places. We play the same tricks, of course. I don't suppose I will ever see clouds in the same way again. I felt a rush of pride as I looked left and right to see Harry and Mick in their machines which were dancing up and down in the warm evening air. As we neared the lines at Lens, the landscape changed to a wide expanse of grey tortured land, zig-zag lines of trenches filled in places with khaki uniforms, which changed to grey as I looked east. I could see little splashes of white as some faces glanced up in response to our engine noise, and small fires glowed here and there. I was warned about "Archie", the anti-aircraft fire, and true to form, grey puffs of smoke started bursting in our vicinity. The German anti-aircraft fire produces these grey puffs of harmless-looking smoke, but these innocuous woolly balls are far from harmless if they hit the target; shards of shrapnel can rip your head off and inflict awful wounds. I imagine that you are seeing that sort of thing. You are brave, Louisa and I'm proud of you.

I was thinking about you when Bill tested his "pride and joy". That's what

he calls his Lewis guns. I wished he'd warned me first. I nearly jumped over the side. I did likewise with my single Vickers gun. Hardly a match to the racket Bill can make with his.

After twenty minutes or so, Bentworth turned our formation to head south, and the "Archie" intensified over Lens and Arras. Some Archie was getting close and I felt our Brisfit jump and buck, and some smoking holes appeared in our left wing. I turned to look at Bill, who just raised his hands and shrugged again. That didn't make me feel any better, but I was distracted from my worries when Harry's machine rushed forward to alert Bentworth to something, and the formation turned immediately to the east and began climbing. A hand pointed upwards from the lead aeroplane, and I spotted a group of about twelve dots high and off to the right. Bill cocked his guns, and I followed suit. My stomach churned – my first fight.

The Hun aeroplanes grew bigger rapidly, dots became crosses, and crosses resolved into a bunch of Fokker Triplanes. "Devilishly manoeuvrable and seriously 'splitarse' machines", I was told. Bentworth turned to face the attack, and I tucked in and turned with his machine, but within seconds he was gone. Bill yelled. 'Turn right, turn hard!'

The gyrating joust that followed was my first real combat. A little Triplane locked onto my tail, and if it were not for Bill, we would have been a smoking wreck in the landscape below. I could hear Bill yelling. 'I'll get the bastard.' I couldn't hear the rest; it was drowned out by the racket of Bill's guns. My air fighting training with Bentworth had proved its worth. I turned hard and sank into my seat as the Brisfit responded to my commands on the controls. My last resort would be to spin out of the fight, but I knew that this was no guarantee of escape. The Hun pilot knew his stuff, but my Brisfit is a tough bird. I turned steep and hard, amazed at how Bill could keep firing. I twisted and turned about in the sky, the cloudscape a dizzying, tumbling image beyond the nose of our Brisfit. I caught a momentary glimpse of my adversary, its gaudy paintwork gleaming with a dulled intensity in the sunlight, big black crosses on the fuselage and a little black goggled head in the cockpit. For a second, I couldn't believe that this little chap was trying to

kill me. How could he? We're both pilots, for God's sake, and we love to fly, so what're we doing?

I remembered that the "Tripe" would come apart in a dive, so I shouted to Bill. 'I'm going to dive.' As the nose went down, pointing directly at a cloud, I winced at the racket produced by the airflow screaming through the struts and wires, a wailing banshee. I glanced behind again. Bill had stopped firing. The Tripe was gone.

I realised that I hadn't fired a single shot as I pulled out of my precipitous dive and levelled out, shaking and sweating profusely. I noticed the smell of cordite for the first time, and dizziness washed over me. My neck ached from the constant twisting and turning. It was chaotic and frightening, but I still felt there was a deadly beauty in the fight. But before I had a moment to appreciate it, Bill banged my head and pointed up and to the left. He was pointing out another Brisfit in the distance. I obediently turned and headed for the friendly machine, a place of safety. It was Mick Rowley, and I tucked in gratefully on his left wing. I so appreciated his wave.

We found our airfield without difficulty in the bright clear air. I bumped my aeroplane onto the ground in an untidy landing; normally I'd be embarrassed, but today I felt I had an excuse. I stopped the engine as Bill seemed to be getting impatient, and the propeller shuddered to a halt. All was quiet and still, apart from the ticking noise from the engine as it cooled. I could smell the grass again as it percolated through the usual aeroplane smells of hot oil and doped fabric. The mechanics milled around inspecting my Brisfit. They pointed, touched, and chatted as they assessed the damage.

Bentworth was taxiing in as I jumped to the ground. I was still a bit shaken, but I tried to control any sign of this as the crews gathered around, comparing notes on the fight. They were all pretty excited, apart from Mick and Bernie, who displayed a casual familiarity with it all. I followed my mechanic around to my Brisfit's tail, and I was not at all surprised to see a deadly line of holes running along the fuselage towards Bill's cockpit. I couldn't fail to notice Bill's expression.

'That was too close for comfort "Munnars" (my new nickname, yuk). That

stunt of yours saved our bacon.’ he said.

My decision to dive away from the Tripe was obviously right, and I was mightily relieved about that. We got home from my first fight!!! Unfortunately, my day was spoilt when I heard that Harry was missing. The news sent a chill through me. Only when someone is not around do you realise how important they are. We became friends almost instantly. I felt that I should have a quiet night but apparently, we don’t mope over lost friends. I suppose we would be moping all the time, so it has a logic to it. We await more news about Harry and I was persuaded to “drown my sorrows”. I had a good session in the bar that night.

A very relieved Tom (Munners) x (x)

But worried about Harry

CHAPTER 9

From Tom to Louisa

*RFC Planques
June 1918*

I didn't get a reply to my letter about my first fight. Are you alright? I suppose you might be finding it difficult after losing your friend Beth. I'm thinking about you.

We had a silly night in the bar yesterday. It's quite a common occurrence, apparently. Chaps letting their hair down, and so on. Ferris and I escaped for dinner and went back later. Bill was absent again. We don't know where he goes. I must find out. He's a bit of a lad, you know.

By the time we returned to the bar, someone was shouting shampoo! shampoo! and the adjutant was mixing whisky and champagne in a big tin basin. I was still sober at this stage in the proceedings and could not see the fun in sloshing whisky and champagne cocktails over the heads of drunken officers. Pushing to the bar, we decided to try catching up with our pals, and we downed a few whiskies in quick succession.

I heard a familiar voice above the racket. 'Come on, Munnors, time for a shampoo.' It was Bill, who had returned mysteriously. With little say in the matter, I was dragged unceremoniously from the bar, spread-eagled across the "operating table", and sponged with the shampoo mix to whoops of delight from my tottering compatriots. By now, the whisky had taken the desired effect, and I decided that I wanted to shampoo somebody. Ferris was nearby and was an easy target, so, assisted by other willing volunteers, Ferris ended up prostrate on the sodden table to be vigorously sponged by yours truly. After another whisky or two, we then raced around the room without touching the ground, causing some damage to the curtains and rickety chairs. I nearly tripped over one fellow, David Pebbles; he was sitting on the floor, staring at the wall and looking pretty miserable. His nerve is

gone. I suspect he'll be off to Home Establishment soon for a rest.

After goodness knows how long, I decided to take a break from the games and staggered back to my tent, very drunk, I have to say. I remember collapsing on my bed and conked out. The next thing I noticed was a dazzling, bright light and my head buzzing like a trapped insect. I could just make out a silhouetted figure in the light at the end of my tent. Guess what? It was Harry. He'd been shot down but was OK, and he and his observer were returned to Planques without a scratch. I was mightily relieved and dragged myself to my feet to give him a big hug. I felt quite tearful. He is a dear friend, and he smiled warmly at my tears. I did notice a change, though. Once his smile faded, he had a worn, troubled, even scared look. I haven't seen Harry look that way before. I suspect he'd had a big fright. He'll tell me all about it in due course. How we hide our feelings, us warriors.

I've managed to procure a little folding table and chair, which I write at. I like to be on my own in my quarters. As it's usually a tent, I have a little paraffin lamp which perches on the corner of my table. That leaves just enough space for my paper, my ink pot and my trusty safety pen. I have two candles in reserve in case the paraffin runs out! Heaven knows what the poor light will do for my eyesight which is pretty important in this job. Oh, I nearly forgot, we are on the move again. Very short notice. A place called Croisette. Letter to be continued...

Welcome to RAF Croisette. It is even more rudimentary than Planques. Everything is in tents. The officer's mess, the all-important bar, kitchens, ops., latrines, Bessoneau hangars and so on. They were all being erected when we flew in. I am sharing with Bill, and our tent will be "generously" equipped with two metal framed beds, a wooden bedside cabinet each, a small shared wardrobe and the usual Tilley lamps. I quite like the Tilley lamps. They have a soft, calming hiss which puts me to sleep given half a chance.

There is to be a major offensive with the objective of pushing back a bulge in the line. All personnel are confined to camp this evening. We will be

escorting DH4 and DH9 machines bombing bridge targets over the Somme around Saint Quentin. Our Brisfits are to provide top cover, and Sopwith Camels will provide close support. I'm off for a good night's sleep if I can. A few whiskies help. I am not sleeping too well, these days. Fingers crossed.

After the usual nerve-jangling delays, we got airborne for our climb up to a very cold fifteen thousand feet. My new Sidcot suit is well padded underneath with my uniform and multiple layers of clothing, but the freezing cold draughts start to penetrate after fifteen minutes or so. The Somme river sparkled from time to time, and as Saint Quentin came into view, a formation of 10 to 15 dots appeared high up to the east. The Hun machines swooped past in a rush and were gone in seconds after their first pass. I didn't even get a shot at them and felt a bit foolish. But not for long as Bill spotted another machine plodding along lower down, a German Pfalz. He hadn't seen us, and we were on his tail within seconds. As we were taught, we closed until the machine filled my view, and I let go with my Vickers gun. My fire raked his tail, and I saw my rounds splintering his tail and fuselage. Bill yelled at me to "get the pilot", and as I fired again, the Pfalz seemed to stagger in the air under my hail of bullets. A puff of smoke flew back over my Brisfit and I got a whiff of burning. The Hun took no evasive action. He tried to make a run for it, but I think my third burst got the pilot as the Pfalz pitched nose down to the vertical, and plunged away trailing smoke. It didn't recover from its dive and slammed into the ground with a fiery cloud of smoke and debris. Bill clapped me on the shoulder. 'That's your first Munnings.' I felt a bit sick.

We flew again in the afternoon, and I find that I am exhausted after a couple of flights. It must be the physical/mental strain of the fight. I thought it would get easier, but looking at the more experienced on the squadron, it seems not. Some of them look awful. Drawn features, keep themselves to themselves, wander off before ops but let their hair down in the bar, something terrible at times.

I still see that Hun machine smashing into the ground. Not a pleasant sight,

Louisa. A fellow pilot. It doesn't seem right. I am constantly reminded by Bill and the rest; it's war!

When your letter arrived this morning, I nearly tore Daniel Ferris's hand off. I can't wait to read it, but we are off on some low-flying ops. Sounds scary. I'll tell you all about it later.

Tom x(x)

PS What I'd give to see you again? Soon hopefully

Reluctantly, Louisa took some leave before the hospital was moved to Trouville. Sister Fallows had to insist, 'You need a break, Foster. I know Beth was a good friend, and you feel her loss terribly, but you're no good to me until you've had a break. If it's any consolation, the surgeon has said that you can help in the theatre when you return.'

There was little doubt that Louisa needed a change of scene, but repetitive sermons from Tom's mother were not the fillip she needed. There was little relief from Mary's frequent advice as Louisa's presence at Fairview allowed Mary to decamp from Endless Street without offending any sensibilities. The contrast between Louisa's conditions in Étapes and the luxury of Fairview made her feel uncomfortable and guilt-ridden, particularly when she took her first long, unhurried soak in a hot bath. She thought of her hut, the draughty latrines, the mess hall, the tented wards, and Beth. She couldn't stop thinking about Beth. She didn't even have Beth's family details but resolved to visit them one day.

One evening, Louisa's patience was tested to the limit. 'You need to meet a nice young man, Louisa,' Mary said before she finished a mouthful. She clearly felt that this comment was urgent.

Louisa took a long, deep breath, her furrowed brow giving a clear warning of the impending retort. Sir George winced as he waited for the response. 'I thought that we had finished with this subject, Mary. You know that I have ambitions, and they don't fit well with marriage and children and all the other

plans you have in mind for me.'

'But ...'

'No buts if you please. I'm sure I will meet the right man in time, just not now. Please accept that.'

Mary went quiet and looked angrily at Sir George for support. He didn't dare and changed the subject.

'I've had some correspondence with Tom about our aviation project.'

'Are you really interested in that, Father?'

'Yes, I am, and I can't wait until he gets back and we can make a start.'

Mary yawned. 'I think I'll have an early night. Breakfast at eight?'

Sir George stood and gave her a hug and kissed her cheek. 'Yes, dear, do get some rest. I need to take a drive over to the factory tomorrow. Perhaps you'd like to join me, Louisa. See all the old staff. We're very busy with aeroplanes and the like. Tom would be pleased.'

'Very well, Father. Goodnight, Mary' said Louisa forcing a smile.

Sir George sighed and moved across to sit beside Louisa on the settee. 'Oh, Louisa, she does go on, I know, but we are very happy together. Maybe she finds it difficult to have another woman around.'

'It is my home, Father.'

'Of course. Just be patient. I'll try and explain your plans to her.' Sir George paused as if plucking up courage. 'You're looking very tired, my dear. Are things very hard for you? I always thought that you would find it difficult.'

'Well, I am tired, and that's why I'm here to have a rest, not lectures from ... Sorry. My journey home was awful. The trains and troopships were crammed with wounded. I feel so angry at the madness of this damn war. I spent most of the journey helping my fellow nurses. I told you about my friend Beth. I was terribly shocked and miss her most awfully. I'll never forget her, but I must move on. I don't sleep too well; I often make tea at night. I hope I won't disturb you.'

'I sleep like a log, so don't worry. I'll have some things left out for you.'

'Thanks. Where was I? I know; I want to tell you about the hospital.'

‘Please do. I’d like to hear your stories.’

‘Well, after the bombing, our hospital is to move up the coast to Trouville. We have much to do to get the place organised. That’s why I didn’t want to come home. The wounded keep coming, and we’re getting gas casualties now.’

Louisa paused and shook her head scornfully. ‘Also, I must say that many of these lads have other ailments which are definitely not the result of fighting the Germans.’

Sir George put his arm around Louisa’s shoulder and drew her to him. ‘It must be distressing for you, my lamb.’

‘You haven’t called me that for a while.’

‘I suppose I haven’t. You just look so tired, my dear.’

‘Can I tell you about some things?’

‘Do if it helps.’

‘Well, we also have a lot of officers and men with mental problems in addition to their wounds. It’s often called “shell shock”, but one of the doctors told us not to use that term. War neurosis seems to be favoured. Sometimes these poor fellows won’t talk at all, but we keep trying. The doctors call it mutism and said that the men can take a long time to recover. We VADs just keep these men company. Night-time is the worst; they often relive their nightmares and can be loud and violent. Some have strange repetitive behaviour. You know, walking back and forth, rocking to and fro. Others stare into the distance, and sometimes we have to stop some fellows banging their heads against the wall. It’s nightmarish, Father. It’s frightening at first, but you get to know each patient. They’re all different, of course, but they need someone to take an interest in them. Then they get to know and trust you, confide in you, and start talking. It helps these patients if they share their experiences. I find the medical aspects very interesting, but I have to listen to some awful stories. We do our best. We don’t get to see the results of our work as our patients are transferred once their injuries are stable. They go off back to their regiments or to recover elsewhere. The serious cases go back to England; I do often wonder how they are. I didn’t tell you about the

bombing as I didn't want you to worry. Everyone was exhausted. I was ordered to go home for some leave eventually by the sister.'

Sir George nodded. 'Mary read about it in the newspaper, so we got to know. Your letters put our minds at rest.'

'I thought she would. Probably said something like, "I told you so".'

'Oh Louisa. She's just very set in her ways. Despite all her foibles, we are very happy together. I have been so lonely since your mother died, and with you away now, I need a friend, a companion. I'm sure you can see that.'

She kissed him on the cheek. 'I do. I'll behave. I just need to be more tolerant, I suppose.'

Louisa accompanied her father to Foster Engineering the next morning and enjoyed meeting some of the workers she had known over the years. She heard about those who had gone to the Front and some who would not return. She couldn't get Étapes out of her mind, and the return to France was embraced with some relief. She left Fairview with a clear understanding of how important Mary was to her father; she would just have to get used to it.

From Tom to Louisa

RAF Croisette

July 1918

We had a rather disquieting briefing this morning before my first "low-down" job. That's attacking ground targets. As you might imagine, we are very vulnerable to fire from the ground as any Hun soldier can take a pot-shot at us. I'm writing this in my tent, waiting for the damn weather to clear as usual. I'm not sure that I should feel relieved or frustrated, or disappointed.

Bill has just barged in. We're off. More later.

... God that was awful but bloody exciting and terrifying. Sorry about the language! True to form, Bill gave me his frank advice on low flying. 'It's a bit

risky,' he said. 'Once your bombs are gone, keep really low and shoot up anything; troops, artillery, trucks, horses, anything. Just make sure it's Huns, as we could be right near the advancing Tommies.'

I can't say that Bill's advice cheered me up very much, so off we went to the latrines for the usual pre-flight essentials! There was little cheer in the ops tent this morning, more of a resigned determination. Some of our people looked very agitated; others were just quiet. One fellow plays his violin, and others manage to play cards or read. I like to read the newspapers to find out how the war is going. Nobody tells us. We all handle our nerves in our own way. Your letters are my favourite distraction.

When we eventually got airborne, we flew in pairs to the target area to the east of the Douai – Cambrai Road. We had received reports that there were streams of Hun troops and vehicles moving east on the roads to Valenciennes and Le Cateau. We were to be first on the target, which pleased Bill. 'Good, they won't be ready for us,' he said. We were loaded with green, 25-pound Cooper bombs hung under the Brisfit's wings, and Bill had to forsake his twin Lewis gun and make do with one in view of our heavy bomb load. I remember looking uneasily at these bombs, thinking that they were going to kill someone. Soon we were off. I watched Harry's machine rumbling ponderously across the grass under the weight of the bomb load, and my Brisfit was equally reluctant to leave the ground. But once we were up in the air, we crossed over no-man's-land and spotted more movement than usual from the Tommies as they pushed forward over the scarred landscape. The westerly breeze kicked up turbulent air, which tossed our aeroplanes about like flimsy boats on a big sea, so I kept well clear of the other machines as they rose and fell with a lively sense of purpose.

When the devastated town of Arras appeared, we headed towards Douai, and I pushed down to treetop level. I had to wrestle with the controls as I manoeuvred with a violent ferocity that surprised and frightened me at first. I wondered if the machine could take it. I forgot about that soon enough. We roared on, grey uniforms and lines of trucks, carts and horses flashing past. Keeping low meant pulling up and pushing down to clear trees and

buildings; I still wonder how Bill coped with the violent motion. I could see Harry's aeroplane off to our right, and he was firing. I banked hard to the left to line up with a road and fired a long burst at troops, horses and anything else on the road. I choked and coughed at the smell of cordite. I remember thinking that you would hate this. I could see my rounds kicking up dirt and debris. Some hit home and ripped into troops and horses. I could see soldiers trying to aim at me. I assumed they were firing. I certainly couldn't hear them. Horses bolted and reared up, dragging their handlers off the road. With my engine at full throttle and both hands on the stick, I pitched and rolled my machine to follow the road and buildings — at least what was left of them. A high church steeple filled my view, and I turned abruptly to fly around it and caught sight of a sniper in the tower. Tracer zipped by, flashing through and around my machine. I ducked instinctively. Bill gave the steeple a good burst as we swept by. I realised I was grinning. I was getting the hang of this low flying.

We were well on the way to Le Cateau now. Bill pointed out a concentration of vehicles towing artillery guns. A target for our bombs. I pulled up to what I thought was a good height, and with only a slight hesitation, I pulled the bomb toggle. The explosions bucked our machine something terrible, but I didn't know if we had done any damage. At least the bombs had detonated. We dived down again to tree-top height and further still to field level. I impressed even myself as I brought the Brisfit around in a tight right-hand turn, my wing tip pirouetting around a road junction barely 20 feet below. Bill fired at targets pivoting under the wing tip. Harry was gone now; we were on our own. I pulled into another turn to follow a road and emptied my remaining rounds into an artillery piece which was being towed by a pair of horses. I shuddered as I saw my rounds rip into the horses, which collapsed off the road, dragging the gun into a ditch. With ammunition and bombs expended, I pulled my Brisfit into a steep turn to head west, and Bill yelled from behind. 'Give me a target, I've got some rounds left! I duly obliged and found a concentration of troops. Bill emptied his remaining rounds into his target with a whoop of delight. A bang on my head told me

what I needed to know. 'Out of ammo; let's get outta here,' Bill bellowed.

By the time Croisette appeared on our nose, another pair of Brisfits was staggering into the air. I was down on the ground within minutes of spotting the airfield, and we taxied back to the hangars to re-arm for our next run to Cambrai. The engine shuddered to a halt, and all was quiet. I made a determined effort to relax, but my legs were shaking and rattling on the rudder bar. I clasped my hands in the privacy of my cockpit, clutching them hard to stop them from shaking. A voice shouted beside me. 'Are you hit, sir?' I said no, but then I realised that he meant Bill. He'd been wounded.

Also, Harry is missing again. We've had reports from the Line that he was seen to crash in Hunland. We can only hope he is a POW and is treated well. I dread the thought of being downed after we have just shot up the Hun troops. I don't expect we would be very welcome! Best not to think about that, eh?

The good news is that Bill is all right, just concussed from a very close shave. A bullet just nicked his forehead. He's resting up, and I have a new gunner called Bristow. I flew three times, but Wilson and Penrose from 'B' Flight were shot down and probably killed, according to OC 'B' Flight. He wouldn't say that unless he were certain.

Sorry about the lengthy description of today's flying, but I find it helps me to wind down. It took me a while, and I am starting to worry about tomorrow. A good stiff drink is in order. Ferris has just poked his head around the tent flap. Apparently, there is a "do" in the bar tent, so duty calls. I definitely need that drink tonight.

Write soon, please.

Tom xxx

From Louisa to Tom

Trouville
July 1918

I finally received your letter. It was misplaced probably after our move. You must be feeling the dangers you face. I pray for you regularly. It must be terrifying at times. And then you have to go and face it all again. You are a very brave chap, Thomas.

I have had some adventures of my own. I have now spent some time helping in our operating theatres. VAD nurses are not usually employed in that role, but we are very short-staffed, and the matron recommended me. I feel it is an enormous compliment, and I try very hard to do my best. The surgery is quite amazing, and rather than be horrified by the sights (and sounds), I find it fascinating. I started off mopping up, but recently I have been handing out the instruments and getting close to the procedures. Amputations are all too frequent. I cringed at first at the sawing sounds. When we take a brief rest, I wonder at how we manage to drink dark tea and eat cake in the theatre with the foetid stench of saturated dressing and human parts heaped on the floor. I will spare you any more details, but the doctors seem to be impressed with me. Good signs if I want to be a doctor, don't you think?

My only problem is that I am exhausted. We're working twelve-hour days and sometimes nights, and as usual, our workload is in direct relation to the fighting. We still get trainloads of casualties, and whilst I have become numbed to the desperate condition of the poor souls, it hits home at odd times, and I get overwhelmed by the tragedy we see day after day after day. We nurses support each other most wonderfully, but just the other day, we were all in tears. It just broke out in our hut. I can't say what did it, but we felt better afterwards. Matron would not approve!

I'm pleased that you find writing your letters helpful. I certainly enjoy reading them, although the situations you describe are far from enjoyable. But, keep them coming. Dear Beth loved them, and I have a few new friends who don't get many letters, so I hope you don't mind if I read them out. I can miss bits if it gets horrid or you get too personal. We find them so helpful in understanding what you boys are going through. One of my friends has her fiancée at the front, and he paints a dire picture of their conditions. God, when will this all end?

Much love and look after yourself (if that's possible in your world) x
Louisa xxx

CHAPTER 10

There was a buoyant atmosphere in the 62 Squadron bar tent that evening despite the loss of Wilson and his observer. Even Daniel Ferris was back to his usual jovial self after a few drinks. The CO added a few words of advice on ground attacks. ‘I don’t expect it’ll always be like that, chaps. It’s not great for the boys in the back, but keep twisting and turning and skidding your way along and make yourself a difficult target. That’ll keep you alive. Low and fast, surprize, surprize. Low and fast, surprize, surprize.’

The Major’s favourite phrase rumbled under the breaths of the crews whenever he appeared for briefings; “low and fast, surprize, surprize, low and fast, surprize, surprize”. Bill was told to stay off the drink after getting his injury but ignored the advice and was well engaged in the developing mess games. ‘Bill, don’t do anything stupid, I want my gunner back,’ said Tom.

‘Oh, don’t worry, I’ll be there to look after your ass tomorrow. You wait and see.’ With that, he steamed back into his game of mess rugby which made Tom wince.

Ferris appeared at his side. ‘How was it today, Tom?’

‘Bloody terrifying. Going back for more is the hard bit. And we’ll be doing it again tomorrow. What we need is some duff weather.’

Ferris mustered a strained smile and took a big gulp of his whisky. ‘Our lives are on a thread. It really puts the wind up me.’

‘You’re right, Ferris. Let’s hope that Fritz keeps retreating and puts his guns down soon, eh.’

Ferris nodded with a sigh. ‘Heard from Louisa recently?’

Tom shrugged. ‘Yes, in fits and starts. She said that she had lost her best friend in a bombing raid at the hospital. Now she’s working in an operating theatre. She’s a brave lass. She asked me to visit, but with all our moves, it’s impossible. I’ll write and explain.’

‘I’m sorry, Tom; perhaps it’s not a good time for love. The ladies don’t want to be involved with us flying types. They’re just being pragmatic.’

‘Who says it’s love, Ferris?’

‘Well, you do show all the signs; pining and getting miserable if you don’t hear from her. You like to talk about her.’

‘What do you know about love, Ferris; not for the ladies, was it?’

‘That’s not fair, Tom. I thought you would understand my predicament. Perhaps not.’

Tom clasped his hands together and placed them to his mouth. ‘Sorry, Ferris, I shouldn’t have said that. I’ll try to understand; just give me time. You need to be careful, though.’

‘We might not have time,’ said Ferris.

‘I agree on that, Ferris, but I do miss her. I just want to see her and be with her. We’ve only met a couple of times. It’s strange. I think this war distorts our view of... well, everything.’

Ferris assumed a wistful look and stared across the room with a mock Shakespearean pose, ‘What is love? A wistful tendril that connects two young people. A fragile thread of spider silk; invisible, strong and robust but too easily broken...’

‘Stop it, Ferris. I wonder how we will look if we survive this lot. Young, hardly. Worn out and in tatters more like. Even my handsome Ferris has got worry lines. Listen, you don’t need to be “in love” to write to a girl. Do you write to someone, your family at least?’

‘My sister mostly.’

‘You didn’t tell me you had a sister, Ferris.’

‘Well, you didn’t ask. You don’t ask much, do you, Tom? A little egotistical, I might say.’

Tom felt chastised. ‘Louisa said something like that.’

‘Well, there you are. Perhaps that’s where you’re going wrong with the ladies. Perhaps you should be interested in them and other people for that matter. And if you like writing, why not start a diary? Write about the day’s events and the people you meet. You know, a dear diary sort of thing, all

your private ramblings. It's good for the soul, a good therapy.'

'My letters to Louisa do that for me. I told her that, and I mean it. It helps me. I don't escape, but it just helps. She reads them out to her friends. I like that.'

'I hope you don't get all lovey-dovey.'

Tom elbowed Ferris in the ribs as Bill crashed into their table again. Helpful hands launched him back into the game of mess rugby, which was slowly destroying what was left of the furniture.

'Off you go, Bill.'

'You're really quite smart, Ferris, aren't you? Let's drink to the new Tom. I shall make a start on the right track; how are you, my dear Ferris, tell me about your family?'

Aided by a few whiskies, they sat amongst the developing chaos and chatted till gone midnight when the CO cleared the room and sent everyone to bed, including Bill; proud as punch of his scar.

From Tom to Louisa

RAF Croisette

August 1918

I have some bad news to report. Today we were escorting DH4s and DH9s from IX Brigade, who were bombing railway yards at Valenciennes, Douai and Cambrai. I was having a desperate tussle with a Fokker D.VII, which ended up tearing for home when I was getting the better of him. We were in a massive dive as I followed him down and gave him a good burst. Bits flew off him, but he kept going; then, at a silly speed, he pulled hard, and I followed. The world went grey and then black around me. When we pull out of a dive, because of the force of it all, we weigh more than our normal weight and the blood drains from our heads. We need to be careful. I don't know how much I weighed on that pull-out, maybe 4 or 5 times my normal weight, but the world went black. I only pulled out when I heard Bill shouting 'He's gone.

Let him get back to his sausages. There'll be more.'

We were returning to Croisette when we spotted a Brisfit in trouble; it was Ferris. The top wing was flapping and about to come off when his machine tumbled to the ground and cartwheeled in a cloud of smoke, dust and aeroplane bits. My heart sank. We circled overhead for a few minutes to find somewhere to land. There was nowhere, but we could see some Tommies rushing to the crash. We decided to return to the airfield, and from there, it would be easier to get back to the crash site by road. Fortunately, he crashed on our side of the lines.

When we got to the site, the wreckage was a blackened skeleton crackling and sparking with the intense heat. I stopped dead in my tracks. I saw a blanket over a body. Bill volunteered to look. He lifted the blanket and then turned away, as white as milk. I've never seen Bill like that. He couldn't identify the body. He said it was burnt to a cinder. He walked off for a few minutes by himself. I asked where the other one was. The army types didn't realise that the Brisfit is a two-seater. We started a furious search around the wreckage until we heard a shout. 'Over here!'

It was Ferris, thank God, but he was in a bad way. He was lying face down, still strapped to his basket seat. His legs and arms were broken and twisted at awful angles, and his Sidcot suit was still smouldering. The medic found a pulse. We bundled him onto a stretcher and took him to the St Pol CCS in our truck.

That was the last I saw of him. I find that so hard. To just walk away. I think he has been repatriated, but I don't know how he is. We had the funeral for Jimmy Glass today; he was Ferris's gunner. We're getting quite practised at being pallbearers, and I have been surprised at how helpful these funerals are for us. The gathering of fellow officers and men, the feelings of comradeship, the guard of honour, the volley fire, the coffin draped in the Union Flag, the Last Post. It brings a tear to my eye even writing about it, but somehow it has a calming, resolving feel. I went to see our padre today to have a chat. That helped.

Sorry, I've had to resort to pencil. That large pot of ink has run out. The

adjutant wouldn't let me have a drop. 'Need it for the copious censoring of your letters,' he said, looking over his glasses. It's a bit of a standing joke here, my letter writing. 'You're always at it,' they say, but it's my way of escaping and talking to you. You know it helps me to cope. If only we could meet up. I'd so love to see you. Just you. Up close.

We had a few drinks this evening. I need to drink more often now. Driven to drink is the expression that comes to mind. The nerves are starting to jangle. Climbing into my machine triggers very different feelings now, as you can imagine. Some cannot do it after a while and are returned to Home Establishment for R&R. Many go to be instructors. My instructor, Davidson, was one of those, and he was in a terrible state. I wonder how he is now. I understand now. God, I do.

It's getting late, so a few "medicinal" drinks, then head down for more of the same tomorrow. I'm ready for a rest. I hope I sleep. Wish me luck. If only I could be with you.

*All my love
Thomas xxx*

The bar tent was alive with expectation; the stale smell of beer competing with the blue fog of cigarette smoke. Chattering crews shouted above the racket deliberating noisily on the day's flying, hands and arms gesticulating wildly to emulate their aerial battles. Others sat at rickety tables; unsteady on the worn grass surface, the ubiquitous Tilley lamps cast lively shadows on the tent ceiling.

'Are they due back tonight, sir?' the barman asked.

'Any moment now, Corporal. Our truck should have picked them up from the hospital at seven.'

'They must be OK then?'

'Walking wounded, although I understand that Lt Franklin has a broken leg.'

Heads swivelled and the raucous conversation was interrupted by shouts and cheers, which broke out as Bill Franklin appeared in a wheelchair, his leg in a plaster cast protruding forward like a bowsprit on a sailing ship. His face was a picture of delight at the reception. Tom Munro clutched the wheelchair handles and struggled to make progress across the grass until others leapt to his assistance. Tom sported a large bandage applied diagonally across his face and wrapped around his head in the style of a turban. His appearance elicited much mirth which masked the relief that most felt at seeing the popular pair back on the squadron.

‘Tell us all about it then,’ was the general request as whiskies were thrust into their hands.

‘Later,’ said Tom peering from his one eye. ‘Thanks, I’m desperate for a drink. Nothing in the hospital so I’ve some catching up to do.’

‘I hear you ended up in no-man’s-land? Come on, Bill tell all.’

Bill gulped his first beer in one and was too busy enjoying the treat for an immediate response. Eventually, he banged his glass down on the bar and took a few sated breaths. ‘Look, guys, we got shot down, ended up in a shell crater for a few hours and were rescued by some bloody brave Tommies. We had a bit of tussle with a few adventurous Huns, but we’re back aren’t we?’

‘But what happened in your shell hole. Did...?’

Bill looked at Tom. It would be difficult to judge his expression behind the bandages but Tom wasn’t looking happy. ‘Let’s leave it there, guys, Bill snapped. ‘We’re just mighty pleased to be back. Let us enjoy a few drinks, eh?’

It wasn’t long before Bill noticed Tom shaking his head and steadying himself at the bar. He seemed to be ignoring questions and looked as if he wanted to escape all the attention. ‘Come on, Tom, wheel me to our tent. We need to get our heads down, and my leg is hurting like hell. Where’s the doc?’

Tom clutched the wheelchair again and managed with some help to get Bill to his tent and into his bunk with much moaning and groaning. ‘I need some fresh air before I hit the hay,’ said Tom staggering out into the night. He

looked up at the stars, shook his head and breathed heavily before bursting into floods of tears. He knew that Bill would hear him but it didn't matter. He had been there in the crater; he knew what had happened.

Tom drifted through the shady world that separates sleep from consciousness. Troubling images circulated across his mind's eye, some recognisable, others wispy phantoms from another world. He tossed and turned as the pictures formed into something more real, focused, and memorable. The rounds thudding into his machine, the tumbling final moments of his flight. The violent impact and grey, flashing figures. Then the boy again. 'He's just a boy,' he cried out.

'For god's sake Tom, put a sock in it,' said Bill struggling with his leg which was hanging precariously halfway out of his bed. 'This man needs his sleep.'

'What, sorry. Just had an awful dream. That bloody crater. I keep having that dream, Bill'

'It'll pass. Just get some sleep.'

From Tom to Louisa

RAF Marquion

October 1918

Haven't heard from you for a while. Maybe your letters have not caught up with me yet. I'm at another field again; Marquion on the Arras-Cambrai road. It's only a few miles from Cambrai, which pleases Bill, although he is in a plaster cast after a little accident. No need to worry, I'm OK. Bill looks ridiculous, and everyone wants to sign his cast. I've got a little scar. Bill thinks it makes me look better, ha ha.

I'm back flying again and our escort duties continue with more distant flights into enemy territory as far as Mons, Charleroi and La Louviere. Bill is obviously still off flying, so my replacement observer is a young but experienced lad called Ricky Bristow, whom I've flown with before.

We had an amazing flight today. We were flying with SE5s and Camels, and I felt a wonderful feeling of camaraderie as our aeroplanes formed up with the DH4s and 9s. We flew as a tight little formation as the larger planes plodded along lower down, appearing and disappearing under the clouds. A frantic fight ensued as we approached Charleroi, and I managed to shoot down a badly flown Fokker D.VII. He was easy meat!

I had a second success on this job, and Ricky played a big part. A Fokker Triplane latched onto our tail, and despite all my efforts to shake him off, he stayed put. If it weren't for Ricky's accurate firing, we would have been finished. I frantically worked the rudder bar to skid our machine about the sky, giving Ricky sporadic views of the Tripe. But even these short glimpses were long enough for him to snatch short but accurate bursts, and the Triplane pilot pulled away. But today we wouldn't let him get back to his sausages, no, we saw our opportunity and managed to get onto the Hun's tail. The Triplane steepened his dive, but this is a fatal tactic against the sturdy Brisfit. I followed the Hun down to about ten thousand feet, where he was close enough for a shot. The cloud below was approaching rapidly, and I knew I had seconds to pull the trigger before Fritz would find his hiding place. I was close, very close, and I opened up with my Vickers gun. I could see my rounds rip into the pilot's cockpit and his back. I ducked as bits flew off his machine and glanced off our Brisfit.

The Tripe disappeared into the cloud, and I couldn't help but follow him into the murk. I pulled hard on the stick to climb back up into clear air and felt the world going grey around me once more from pulling out of the dive. Or at least I thought I was pulling out. I felt quite dizzy for a moment and wasn't quite sure which way was up. I glanced down at my instruments to check that I was climbing, hoping that I would pop out of the cloud and into clear air. My altimeter showed my height was increasing, but I noticed the wind noise reducing rapidly. I glanced again at my instruments trying frantically to make sense of them. The speed was getting low, (65 mph) and my inclinometer ball was off to the side. My controls felt slack and soggy. I centralised my rudder pedals and pushed my stick forward, which forced me

upwards against my lap strap. I still did not know which way was up. I applied more power and checked my altimeter again. I think it read 4500 feet and still 65 mph. But then my speed started to build, and the wind noise increased to a wail. Ricky yelled from behind. 'What's going on, Tom?'

I pulled back on the stick trying to slow us down, but the wind noise was becoming deafening. I muttered an optimistic plea to our Brisfit to sort things out. I had visions of a smoking heap on the ground. In a flash, the ground appeared as if the cloud had been snatched away; we were almost inverted and heading straight towards the earth. With both hands, I rolled off the bank as quickly as I could. I closed the throttle and pulled hard as a roadway grew larger rapidly over the nose. I was close enough for a landing but not at the speed we were doing. I pulled as hard on the stick as I dared, and my vision tunnelled into that grey/black mist again and I sank heavily into my seat until we pointed back up to the cloud. I was shaking my head to restore my vision when Ricky piped up from the back, 'Good God, Munnors, that was too bloody close. Look, there's the Tripe.'

Sure enough, I saw our Triplane; now a black tangled wreck by the edge of a wood.

I felt that we had had quite enough excitement for one day, and we worked our way back up to 8000 feet, keeping well clear of clouds!

We had just spotted Maubeuge when Ricky piped up again. He had spotted a Sopwith Camel trailing smoke and heading for a field. I turned towards the trail left behind it and lowered the nose to catch up with the Camel. We could see the pilot pointing downwards, and within minutes he had landed in a large field. The trouble was that he was down in Hunland. I had a quick look and, after a deep breath to shrug off our earlier "excitement", decided that we should try and pick him up. Daft, I know, but there you are. I shouted my intentions to Ricky.

The wind was brisk from the west, and I turned over the top of the Camel to have a good look for Huns. The Camel was now sitting on the ground, engulfed by a pall of smoke. I glanced along the length of the field to decide if I could take off again with an extra passenger.

I brought the Brisfit round in a tight turn to the left and side-slipped hard to land as short as possible. Fortunately, the wind was strong. My landing was firm, and the Brisfit came to a halt just beyond the Camel. Machine gun and rifle fire opened up from a wood 100 yards to our right. The Camel pilot appeared to be uninjured and bolted towards our Brisfit but tripped or was hit and fell to the ground. He picked himself up and ran back to the Camel. He fired a flare into his cockpit and set the machine ablaze. Ricky jumped out of his cockpit, bolted towards the blazing Camel, grabbed the pilot, and dragged him to our machine. A pair of German soldiers burst out of the woods. They knelt to take aim. I grabbed my revolver and took a couple of shots. They were probably wide off the mark but discouraged the soldiers enough for Ricky to climb into his cockpit. He tumbled in with his passenger in a flurry of arms and legs. I opened the Falcon engine up to full power just as a burst of machine gun fire stitched a trail of holes across the grass and into our machine. I could hear the “dings” as the shots hit around the nose. The Brisfit accelerated more slowly with the extra weight, and I prayed that the shots hadn’t hit the engine. The trees at the end of the field grew larger as we slowly reached flying speed but we remained firmly on the ground. Ricky understood what was happening and threw his Lewis gun overboard. The Brisfit staggered into the air and I remember rising in my seat as I heard and felt the trees brushing the underside of the machine. I think I cried out, ‘Fly, fly, damn it!’

I must have felt particularly lucky that day as I circled around the woods to get a glimpse of the enemy troops and stayed low to let the speed build. We flew flat out above the trees, and I emptied my last rounds into the undergrowth until I ran out. The Camel pilot even took a few shots with his pistol. We probably didn’t hit anything, but it made us feel good.

There were some odd looks from the ground crew when we returned to Marguion; it wasn’t often that a machine landed with more people on board. The Camel pilot, Lt James Fairweather, was understandably grateful for our aerial taxi service, and we had a good blast in the bar tent that evening.

The Hun seems to be on the run, Louisa, so maybe the end is nigh???

*All my love,
Tom x(x)*

CHAPTER 11

From Tom to Louisa

*RAF Maubeuge
November 1918*

You probably know by now, but it was quite strange how we learnt of the news. We were sitting in our cockpits that morning, and I was glancing up at the puffy cumulus clouds as they drifted along in the breeze. A cheerful birdsong echoed across the airfield, and the sweet smell of grass clashed with that of oil, fuel and dope. It's strange, but I had not noticed the birdsong before; skylarks, I think. I looked along the line of aeroplanes, propellers still stationary, awaiting the green starting flare to soar into the air. I can still feel the collective tension of that moment. You would think we would get used to it, but we don't. I took a surreptitious sip from my hip flask. Others did likewise.

My gaze returned to my cockpit. My nerves were getting the better of me again; my legs shook, my stomach churned, and OC 'B' Flight's words still haunt me; "Another day, another death". I am more terrified of showing my nerves than fighting the Hun. God, I was thinking that I so need a rest and an instructor's posting back home before I break up entirely. But we need to keep at it somehow. We keep each other going. Comradeship, I suppose. My troublesome thoughts evaporated when the green flare soared into the air, and ground crews shuffled into action and began barking out their commands. Within minutes the propellers were turning, flattening the grass into that familiar silvery green. We normally wait a few minutes to warm the engines through before the chocks are pulled away. I always feel better when the engine throbs its familiar message through the machine. The wait is over.

I still had Ricky with me, and he reached forward and patted me on the shoulder. He pointed to the left. 'Look, that's the CO. What's he doing?' he shouted.

The CO appeared at the end of the line of aircraft, walking with great purpose and ceremony along the row, like a Shakespearean actor about to deliver a famous line. The crews leant out of their cockpits to follow his confident stride, peering around their aeroplane's wires and struts to follow his stately progress. Finally, he came to a halt in front of our line of Bristol Fighters, their propellers whirling impatiently. He turned to face the aeroplanes with a smart right turn, and after another theatrical pause, he raised his arms slowly and deliberately and formed a cross, the signal to shut down.

One by one, our engines shuddered to a halt, and there was silence again on the airfield. I could hear the skylarks again. Slowly we all climbed out; some looking puzzled, others hopeful, the smart ones all-knowing. We gathered around the CO, who remained silent.

Then he spoke. 'It's over. It's finished. Gentlemen... The war is over.'

What a strange and confused range of emotions emanated from my squadron comrades as we stood amongst the silent Bristol Fighters; some were tearful, some were overjoyed and whooped with delight one or two walked quietly off across the airfield, one or two just sat down. I started to think about those we had lost, and I wondered if I would see the others again, Harry and Ferris in particular. But quickly, Bill, still limping around in his cast, broke my spell. He charged up to me and lifted me off the ground in a bear hug. 'It's over, Thomas, the War's over,' he said. He never calls me Thomas!

Our CO watched quietly and mingled with other squadron people; formality and rank were forgotten as we savoured this rare moment together. I saw the CO hug one of our junior airmen. Life had some certainty again. Can you imagine what that feels like? I shall remember it always, Louisa. As you will know, it was the 11th of November 1918. I just had to write that down.

And I have just heard today that I have been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for my rescue of the Sopwith Camel pilot. It's a new medal, just introduced this year. I'm as proud as punch.

I so look forward to getting home and seeing you again. We shall have many more stories to tell. And we have our hopes and ambitions. Perhaps now we can tackle the future with some certainty. Your doctoring and my aviating, eh?

*Lots more Love,
Flying Officer Thomas Munro DFC, RAF xxxx*

From Louisa to Tom

*Fairview
January 1919*

I am not sure if you will get my letter as you say you are moving airfields so much. I thought I should let you know that I have finally returned home, but I continue my VAD nursing duties at Salisbury Infirmary for now. Unfortunately, we are treated like novices again!

The good news is that my father has agreed to help me with my medical training, and I have an interview at the London School of Medicine for Women. I'm very excited but nervous. What if they won't have me? Also, it's very expensive to train as a doctor, although Father has said he should be able to help. I hope he has enough money left for the aviation adventure you two are planning. He is always talking about it, so get home soon. I think he has been down to Bristol to talk about aeroplanes. Not sure where, though. You will have to ask him.

Your mother is well, and I think a wedding is in the air. Between you and me, they are waiting until you get home, so get a move on, Tom.

I see from your last letter that you may be "de-mobbed" soon, so fingers crossed and let us know when you are released.

Look after yourself.

Much Love

Louisa

PS. Congratulations on the DFC x

Flying continued at a slow but steady pace throughout January and February from Nivelles; Bill was passed fit for flying earlier in the month. Eventually, in late February, some of the squadron officers who had volunteered for demob were given a final choice; immediate demobilisation, the Army of Occupation or a permanent commission.

‘What do you think?’ said Tom.

‘I don’t need to think,’ said Bill as they leant on a Brisfit’s lower wing. ‘I want out. It’s going to be so boring. I fancy a go at the civil flying you’ve been talking about. Want a hand?’

‘Well, I don’t know how we’ll get started and what we’ll need. We’ll certainly need a machine, and maybe we will start with joyriding. Sir George is key, of course, as I don’t have the money to do anything like that. I don’t suppose we’ll need observers or gunners, Bill. What could you do?’

Bill sprung to his feet and stood to attention. ‘This sounds like an interview Tom. I could be a mechanic or odd job man.’

Tom shook his head. ‘Why don’t you learn to fly, Bill?’

‘Would you teach me, Tom? That’d be fun.’

‘Hmm, fun is not quite how I’d describe it. You’d need to do it properly and get your ticket at a flying school. Would you want to do that?’

Bill put his head to one side and flashed a rueful smile. He winked and shook his head, ‘I’m no pilot, I’d be much better as a mechanic. I did that before the war; I like to tinker with things. I got to know the Falcon engine and the old Brisfit quite well in the hangar these past weeks. Ask the sergeant.’

‘I’d like to think that you would do more than tinker Bill. If we have our own aeroplanes, someone will need to keep them in good shape. What do you think? Could you do that?’

‘Now that sounds right swell, Tom, count me in.’

‘From what I hear, you would need engine and airframe licences.’

‘We’ll see. Sounds a might complicated to me.’

Tom and Bill had their de-mob applications approved, and they left Nivelles on the 4th of March 1919 after yet another celebration in the mess. On that occasion, there was no flying the next day, no worrisome flight over the lines or the prospect of a frantic tussle with Hun machines. This time they could truly have a party. And party they did until the sun came up as their heads attested the following morning. ‘I’m sure we’ll see you chaps again somewhere,’ Tom shouted, leaning out of the ever-present draughty truck as it pulled away from the mess for the journey home. Not many were left from the original mob Tom thought; Daniel Ferris back in the UK somewhere, the old CO, Major Watlington, posted, Henry Stokes and George W-B both killed in the latter stages of the war and Harry Price, where was he if he was still alive? He stopped thinking about those he had lost; it made him miserable.

It was a bright, cold morning, and Tom was glad that he would have a sunny memory of this last day. At least he had Bill with him to keep him amused and have some connection with his old life at war. He felt that he would need that for some reason. He waved to the little group at the mess door. Captain Bentworth, now a squadron leader, had elected to take a permanent commission, and he stood with the group. ‘Good luck sirs,’ shouted a bunch of mechanics at the hangar. Tom waved back and glanced over at 4859, which was sitting on the line. What a lucky machine; surviving all those risky ground attack jobs! Memories of these missions flashed into his mind. He didn’t know it when he took his last flight in his favourite Brisfit; if only he had. Tom gulped and was not really surprised at how emotional he felt. ‘I wonder if we will ever see any of these people again, Bill, and our lucky Brisfit too. I wish we could take her with us,’ he said, nodding in the direction of his favourite aeroplane.

Bill patted him on the shoulder. ‘Come on, Tom, good times to come, eh?’

The packed little steamship drifted slowly out of a bustling Boulogne, and Tom took a moment to himself on deck. The overcast morning meant that the shipping, still in its grey camouflage merged easily into the seascape beyond the harbour. Once at the ship's rail, he watched patiently as the vessel got underway; the sea state suggested a rough crossing ahead. A neighbouring destroyer pitched up and down in the swell as it ploughed ahead of the ferry. Tom enjoyed the sight of these proud, purposeful vessels as they sliced through the rough sea. "Flung spray and blown spume" were words he recalled from his school days. The destroyer, with its slim profile and raked bow, made better progress compared to his own ship, which was not built for speed or, for that matter, comfort. More John Masefield poetry came to mind, and he struggled to find the words. Much had happened since his Salisbury school days:

Dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smoke stack,
Butting through the Channel in the mad March days,
With a cargo of Tyne coal, road-rails, pig-lead,
Firewood, ironware, and cheap tin trays.

The dirty British coaster in Masefield's poem would probably be more at risk from submarines than the weather a few months ago! The faces of young fresh school friends came to mind, only to be interrupted by the awful memories of more recent times: the brutal fight in the crater and the poor boy's face, losing control of his Bristol Fighter. He looked into the wind to blow off the troubling thoughts and searched with watery eyes for the white cliffs. For the first time in many months, the doors to a future had creaked open. The threat and almost certainty of a violent death had gone. It would take some time for that persistent dread to lift. He had lived with it for what seemed like forever, but it had only been a matter of months. He grinned. No more letters to Louisa. I can speak to her and be with her, and who knows what might happen. A future, at least, that was a certainty now.

Tom felt a jab in the ribs. 'A penny for your thoughts. Isn't that what you

guys say?’

‘Oh, Bill. Yes I was miles away.’

‘Thinking about your Louisa, I guess.’

‘Yes, and the rest. Our future and, well, I can’t wait to see Louisa again but I wonder how we’ll feel. We said a lot in our letters. Will we feel the same when we’re face to face? Gives me the “wind-up”.

‘You’ll be fine, Munnors. Just take it easy, see how things pan out.’

‘For goodness’ sake, Bill don’t call me Munnors. I’d like to leave that well behind now.’

CHAPTER 12

Bill and Tom reached the Munro home at Endless Street in Salisbury in the middle of the afternoon. A light drizzle and a dull overcast sky were not going to spoil this moment for Tom. He stood at the door and paused, savouring the expectation as if he was opening a promised Christmas present. He wondered how he would be greeted.

Bill was patient for once. ‘Smart little place you’ve got here, but does it warm up in England?’

‘Bill, it’s still winter. Look, you’ll have to behave; be a little restrained when you meet my mother. She’s old-fashioned, very traditional and quite quiet.’

‘OK, Tom, I get ya. I’ll be on my best behaviour. Have you told your Ma that I’m comin’ to stay?’

‘That’s the problem. No!’

‘Ah right, I see. Best I just hang back and take it steady then.’

‘That’s the ticket; just take my lead to start off with.’

Tom knocked at the door and straightened up with a ready smile.

He listened for the familiar footsteps for a while, then turned and shrugged at Bill. ‘Perhaps she’s at the Guildhall.’

Tom stepped back from the door, looked at the upstairs windows then turned to look down Endless Street with the beginnings of a scowl. ‘I could try the neighbours. They might know something. I did write to say when we would be home. She’s normally very particular about these things; very reliable.’ Before he could knock on the neighbour’s door, a police car turned slowly and carefully into Endless Street before pulling up beside Tom and Bill. They stood back in silence. Tom could see Mary and Louisa in the back seat; they looked grey and tearful. Tom glanced at Bill.

The driver opened his door carefully and broke the silence. ‘Are you Thomas Munro, Mrs Munro’s son?’

‘Yes, what’s wrong? Mother, what’s happened?’ said Tom opening his mother’s door. She sat still, anchored to the spot, her hands clutching her handbag to her chest.

Louisa opened her door on the other side of the car and came around the back. She threw her arms around Tom’s neck. He could feel her tears on his cheek.

‘My father’s dead, Tom. He’s dead. He crashed his car, and he’s dead.’

He turned to his mother, who was slowly pulling herself from her seat. ‘Surely this can’t be right, Mother?’ Tom muttered as she put a hand on his shoulder before walking ponderously to the front door. She struggled to make the key work. Bill stepped in to help. Mary cast a puzzled look at Bill but did not seem to have the energy to query his presence. She took off her coat, hung it on the hallstand and drifted into the kitchen mindlessly. ‘I’ll put the kettle on.’

Louisa dropped her arms from Tom’s shoulders and followed Mary into the kitchen, where the only sound was the gas hissing under the kettle. Tom and Bill lugged their bags into the hallway. He followed his mother into the front room, where she sat by the cold fireplace. Tom knelt down beside her and put his hand on her arm. ‘What happened, Mother?’ She didn’t respond and stared across the room at something, a painting.

‘Let me put the fire on, Mother. It’s a bit cold in here. Then we can have a nice cup of tea, and you can tell me all about it.’

Tom struggled to get the fire going. In normal circumstances, his mother would have brushed him aside and dealt with it herself. Eventually, the fire cast a more cheerful light across the room, and Tom put on the table lamps in the way his mother preferred. Mary remained silent, and Tom knelt beside her again as Louisa came into the room with a tray of tea. She turned and looked at Tom, then put her hand to his scar but said nothing. Louisa broke the awkward silence in a quavering voice. ‘He had a crash in his car on the way back from work. The doctor said that he would have died instantly. He went off the road and hit a tree. He fell asleep, I suppose.’

She burst into tears again and Tom took hold of her hands. He felt a twinge

of pride, even a little pleasure, that she seemed to take comfort from him, but quickly, the enormity of the situation hit home. His future was now in jeopardy, his mother had lost her husband-to-be and companion, Louisa had lost her father, Foster Engineering had lost its owner, its leader, and he had lost a friend. Quickly, he reprimanded himself for his selfishness; his future would have to wait.

Louisa lifted the teapot. 'We should have some tea'

'When did this happen, Louisa?' Tom asked.

Mary answered with her gaze still fixed on the painting, a recent gift from Sir George. 'Last night, quite late. The police came to the door, and I just couldn't believe it. I still can't.'

Tom returned to his mother's side. 'This is a terrible shock, Mother, but I'm home now, and we'll look after everything.'

Bill maintained his self-conscious presence at the back of the room until Tom introduced him. 'Mother, Louisa, this is Bill Franklin. I'm sure I've mentioned him to you in my letters.'

'Ma'am, Louisa. I can only offer my condolences. This is terrible news. Please let me know if I can help with anything, anything at all.'

Louisa looked at Bill. 'Oh, dear. Thank you. Not a very nice time to meet our family.'

They managed a light evening meal of scrambled eggs and toast, which Bill and Tom devoured in short order whilst eyeing up Mary and Louisa's plates which were almost untouched. Louisa spotted the hungry glances and shoved the plates in their direction.

Mary rubbed her forehead. 'I think I'll go to bed, everyone. Let's have breakfast at eight; we have things to arrange.'

'Of course, Mother,' said Tom.

'Yes, I have a few days off,' said Louisa. 'When we're ready, we need to talk about, well, everything.' Tears appeared in Louisa's eyes again. Mary also looked tearful, and Tom helped her to her bedroom.

'I hope she'll sleep,' he said, returning to the front room and sitting next to Louisa on the settee. 'This is a terrible shock for you,' Tom said quietly, his

hand resting on her forearm.

Bill returned from the kitchen, making Louisa sit up with a start. She seemed to shrug off her reverie and sat up straight. ‘Well, I’ll cope. We need to, but I’m worried about the future. This is hardly what we planned. We were so dependent on Father. We need to think about the funeral, the business, and where we go now with our ambitious dreams, Tom?’

‘We can discuss all this tomorrow. It’s too much of a shock just now. I don’t think Mother is ready to talk about the future either; she needs to come to terms with it all; we all do. We should all get some sleep.’

Louisa stayed the night at Endless Street and rose early. She found sleep impossible and spent a few waking hours turning over the issues which would need to be addressed. Seeing Tom was reassuring, particularly as she had no one to turn to. Her father had been the only real man in her life. Tears welled up again before she made a determined effort to calm herself. She knew that her father would want her to be brave. To take stock and deal with the situation. “You’re a big girl now”, he would say.’ She peered into her dressing table mirror. Not a pretty sight, but better than yesterday, she decided as she pulled at her cheeks to inspect her eyes. She spent some time preparing herself for the day and took some comfort from having Tom and Mary and even Bill to lean on. Suddenly she felt irritated and wanted to stamp her feet as she would as a child. My future, my dreams, my career could be gone now, she thought. All because of some stupid car accident. So sudden, so pointless. If only the clock could be turned back. She could write to Tom. Change the story. Yes, Father had an accident, but he was OK. Just a little injured. The thoughts tumbled through her mind until she took a long deep breath to return to reality and the day ahead.

She found Tom waiting in the front room. He sat, head in hands and jumped when Louisa appeared. ‘Hello, Tom, did you manage to sleep? I tossed and turned, thinking about all the things we need to do.’

‘Yes, me too. You’re looking better today.’

‘Thank you. I suppose we’ll need to shelve our plans for now. I can’t really think about the future. My mind seems to be enveloped in a cold, damp fog.’

‘I feel the same. George would love to be here now. At the start of something new and exciting for both of us. It’s just so unfair.’

‘Don’t, Tom, you’ll start me off.’

Tom took Louisa’s hand and sat her down beside him, remembering the day they first met. That same room. Their brief conversation about the family photograph. He wondered if he should talk about their relationship, the feelings they had expressed in their letters. Now, here he was with her, together again as he had wanted for so long. Did he feel the same, that longing to be with her? Were his feelings distorted by the war? What should he do? What should he say? How should he behave? Ferris would know. He felt confused and didn’t want to make decisions about dealing with his feelings. He ran his hand through his hair.

‘What’s wrong, Tom?’

‘Sorry, deep in thought,’ he mumbled, knowing that he needed to say something. He took a breath and locked eyes with her. ‘It’s our letters, Louisa. We said a lot and sort of implied even more. You’ve become very special to me.’

Louisa looked pale, her eyes red and tired from crying. ‘I don’t know what to say. Yes, you are special to me too. We shared a lot, and maybe there is more to share, but now we need to concentrate on the awful situation we face. I can’t really think about you and me, about us, until this fog clears, but God knows I’m going to need your help. Will you help me? Be with me. I can’t begin to think how I will handle the Fosters Engineering business and all the legal stuff. And there’s Fairview. I can’t live there on my own.’

‘You can live here.’

‘What, with your mother?’

‘Ssh, she’ll hear you.’

‘Well, you know what I mean. Look, I will be strong, Father would want that. We can be here for each other, and let’s just see how things work out between us.’

‘I suppose I feel the same, Louisa. Our future is so uncertain now, but it’s a lot more certain than it was last year. We were strong enough to see the war through to the end so, in time, we can fulfil our dreams as well.’ Tom took Louisa’s hands in his. ‘We must get on. The next few days are not going to be easy, but ...’

Louisa pulled Tom towards her and kissed him. ‘Yes, you’re right. First things first, then we can look to the future just as Father would want.’

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I don't suppose many people read acknowledgements but you are! Well done. Having researched much material for an earlier WWI novel which did not reach the page, I felt that I should put this research to good use. The result is *Letters to Louisa*. The story is a prequel to *Dark Treaty* in the form of a Novella in which the characters in the Tom Munro series are introduced. Whilst *Dark Treaty* is a standalone novel, I would recommend reading *Letters to Louisa* first in order to appreciate the background to the series and to get to know the characters.

I have again made much use of Advance Team readers for helpful and constructive feedback on the early versions of the story. This feedback is always helpful if not vital, and I would like to thank Ford Richards, Jan James, and Claire Pilkington for their helpful assistance, encouragement, and comments. As usual, I am indebted to my wife, Elisabeth, who is not only a valued member of my Advance Team but is always there to offer support, feedback and encouragement when the going gets tough!

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Voices and Images of the Great War; Lyn Macdonald, *Dog Fight – Aerial Tactics of the Aces of the First World War*; Norman Franks, *The Royal Flying Corps in World War I*; Ralph Barker, *Testament of Youth*; Vera Britten.

Other extracts, articles, papers and websites which were of particular interest include: *International Encyclopedia of the First World War – War Psychiatry and Shell Shock*; Fiona Reid, *The Voluntary Aid Detachment*; www.military-history.co.uk, *Veronica Nisbet's Original Scrapbook*; www.sja.onlineculture.co.uk

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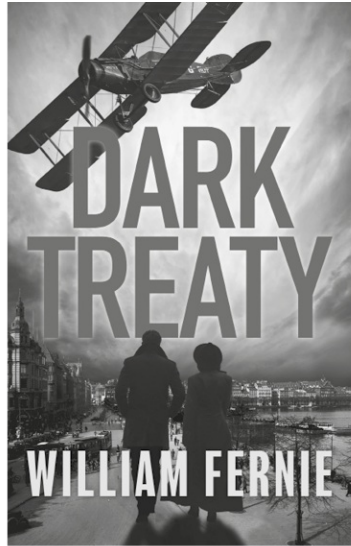
William Fernie is an aeronautical engineer, pilot and author of the Tom Munro series of historical fiction novels.

Following a short spell in the merchant navy, Bill read aeronautical engineering at university and served for sixteen years in the Royal Air Force, completing his service in the fascinating world of military intelligence.

Bill formed his own company after his military service and managed to combine his marine and aeronautical skills in what proved to be his most fulfilling work. Check out his website for an insight into his post-military career.

Throughout his working life, Bill satisfied his aviation and maritime interests by sailing and flying classic aircraft. His most recent aeroplane is a de Havilland Chipmunk which he delights in turning upside down at every opportunity.

Bill is married with two grown-up daughters and lives in West Hampshire. Watch out for the next book in the Tom Munro series, and keep in touch via Bill's website, www.fernieworks.com, or find him on Facebook/Meta @billfernieworks.



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