

The Blood Phoenix

(Tom Speed Returns)

By

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Prologue

Flt. Lt. David Metcalfe DFC glanced across the cockpit of the Lancaster at his co-pilot, his face lit red by the glow of the raging fires of Dresden five thousand feet below.

The aircraft should have been much higher but German flak had found them. He was as experienced as any other pilot on the squadron, more so than most, and this was to have been the final sortie of the tour. He was looking forward to the leave and some time with his fiancée, Miranda. He wondered if he would have any time to work on what he called 'his project'.

Before the war as a teacher of history at the King Edward school at Norwich he had started the project when he had discovered an old document that had stirred his interest. He had spent his spare time in research and was nearing a conclusion that would make his name if only he could complete it.

The pay off would be immense and he had kept meticulous records. When it was obvious that war was going to break out he made preparations. As an historian he doubted that England would be victorious in the coming conflict and he did not want the prize to fall to the Nazis.

He coded his research and created a treasure trail that he hoped someone, perhaps one of his students, would pick up and complete the project should the worst happen to him. He knew he had already beaten the average survival rate for a Bomber Command pilot. Now the huge aircraft was lower he imagined he could feel the heat of the fires below and the damp of his sweat was real. He could feel it building below his flying jacket and he imagined it trickling down his chest onto the small brass key on the chain around his neck.

The key locked a small box about six inches by eight and four inches tall. It had been given to him by Miranda and he wore the key round his neck as a good luck charm. He never flew without it and was not alone in Bomber Command in his belief in lucky charms.

Suddenly the Lancaster was rocked by an explosion and a large section of the cockpit was torn away carrying the co-pilot with it. With the controls virtually useless the Lancaster plummeted with increasing speed towards the ground. Metcalfe struggled to gain control and had he thought of abandoning his post he would not have been able. The pressure of the air rushing in through the damaged cockpit held him in his seat and fanned the vicious flames that greedily reached for him.

'Bugger!' he thought with regret but no panic, 'Last bloody show of the tour as well!'

A few moments later the Lancaster, with three of the engines restored ironically to full power, ploughed into the ground and exploded. The aircraft was fuelled for the return journey and the inferno that devoured the crew had such intense heat that even the key around the young pilot's neck melted into a small shapeless blob of molten brass. Perhaps the secret held by the key would die along with the doomed pilot and his crew.

Chapter 1

I have only ever owned one car, my 1962 E-Type Jaguar. My father had called it the last decent British car to be made and I had never had cause to challenge him on his viewpoint and as I gave a little extra pressure to the accelerator pedal the 5.3 litre engine easily and immediately boosted the car.

Some people tell me that the long bonnet is some sort of phallic statement but to me it is just sheer beautiful engineering. As an ex-Tornado pilot I had travelled at greater speeds than my car could achieve and in truth I am no speed junkie. OK from time to time if the road is clear and there are no cameras that I know of I let her have her head for the absolute pleasure of feeling the response to my right foot. I sense that she appreciates the freedom to express herself I give her on these occasions.

It may sound stupid to talk about a collection of metals, glass, leather and paint having feelings but she exudes quality to me and that's the way I feel. Maybe it's because of the relationship I had with the Tornado, not so much as piloting the aircraft, but being part of a single unit very much as the brain is part of the singularity that is the human body.

The human body! Damn it, I knew where my thoughts were going next. Two bodies as one and now Jade had left me with just my own body. Without even counting I knew it had been nearly a year since the bomb planted in my other car had killed her, shattering her beautiful responsive body and my dreams and hopes in one violent explosion. It had only been weeks that our relationship had lasted before it was cut short so tragically and what it might have been, well that was an unknown now and there were only two remotely satisfying aspects to cling to. The first is what we had in the short time that had been granted to us. The second was that I had been instrumental in the death of her killer. I had my vengeance.

At the memory of the safety axe in my hands cutting into the arm and then striking again at the man who had planted the bomb, to pin his hand to the sinking aircraft, my foot depressed the accelerator pedal and the needles on the speedometer and rev counter moved around their respective dials as the speed increased to over a hundred miles an hour. I held it at that for a couple of minutes I suppose before easing off the pedal and feeling cross with myself for my burst of...of what?

I was past the initial depression that had engulfed me and I hadn't felt the need to find a replacement for my affections, the memory of Jade was far too strong and alive. I hadn't taken to the bottle like I had once before because that would have been letting us both down somehow. I was rich enough not to need to work so I was not absorbed with my career as perhaps many people would have been. I wouldn't even say I was bored because I am happy with my own company for long periods but there was a gap in my life, something missing and it wasn't just the loss of the woman I had so helplessly fallen in love with.

Megan, my twin sister, had been her usual supportive self and had kept me 'in circulation' as she put it. What that involved was her calling Jasmine, Jade's identical twin sister, from time to time and getting news of how she was coping and passing on news of how I was doing. I had not seen Jasmine since the funeral and I knew how painful it would be because it would be like being with Jade again, only, it wouldn't be in reality.

I had seen Richard Temple a couple of times and turned down two of the three projects he had offered me and had cracked the third in a matter of two weeks or so but my heart wasn't in it. The bright spot about the third project was that it required me to register as a pupil pilot and I got my Private Pilot's Licence. I had used the fee Richard had paid me for pretending I couldn't already fly to pay for a few more hours and I had enjoyed escaping to another world above the clouds.

All in all I guess that my circle, for want of a better word, of friends were giving me time to come out of it but I knew they were all keeping an eye out for me.

As usually happened when I had these thoughts I felt my mood slipping and suddenly I had no pleasure from my excursion. Damn Graver! Damn Graver! I knew that no matter how much I cursed the passenger seat of my E-Type would never be occupied by Jade again.

I turned for home strictly observing the speed limits. I pulled into the drive of my cottage and killed the engine. The phone was ringing but by the time I had unlocked the door the answer machine had cut in. I pressed the right buttons.

It was my sister with a most unexpected message.

"Tom, I've just had a call from Jasmine. Apparently her grandmother, the one you met at the funeral, has died. The strange thing is you have apparently been mentioned in the will. I'll come back to you when I know more."

Why on earth would she leave anything to me? I had only met her the one time and had spoken to her for about ten to fifteen minutes. It had to be a mistake. I mean we had immediately fallen into easy conversation and I remembered being surprised that she had asked me what I thought of Tony, Jasmine's boy friend. She had confided she didn't think much of him and I hadn't commented. But to make me a beneficiary after such a short acquaintance, well it didn't make any sense

Chapter 2

‘Hi Sis, got your message.’ We never bothered much with the formalities. We had never needed to because we had always been so close.

‘Hi Broth, yes Jasmine called, as I said you have been named as a beneficiary in her grandmothers will.’

‘I only spoke to her the once. We exchanged a bit of small talk at Jade’s funeral but nothing of consequence. I mean why should she include me?’

‘I haven’t a clue and neither had Jasmine.’

‘Did she say what the legacy is?’ I didn’t expect or need a large sum of money but I was certainly intrigued.

‘We didn’t speak for long. She was on her mobile and the signal wasn’t all that good.’

I sensed Megan was holding something back so I prompted, ‘There you are then. I bet you misheard.’

‘I don’t think so. Apparently it is something that was of great sentimental value, a box or something I think.’

I know my sister and there was definitely something she wasn’t telling me. ‘Did she say anything else?’

There was a measurable pause and then it came.

‘She said that she is going to her grandmother’s house for the day to pick up a few things and make some arrangements.’ There was that pause again and I knew she was searching for the right words and perhaps the courage to say them.

‘Only she wondered if you would care to keep her company for the day. I can call her back if you want me to. Oh, one other thing. She will be stopping tonight in Woburn, she said you would know where, and she aims to leave after breakfast.’

I knew exactly where. The Inn at Woburn was where I had first slept with Jade not that we got much sleep. That memory was as vivid as the event but it was accompanied by a colossal pain at the thought that such a night would never be repeated. Now it was my turn to use the pause. I didn’t know how I would react to seeing Jasmine, I couldn’t tell her apart from Jade for one thing. That was why I hadn’t been directly in touch. I imagined it would be just too painful and to see her again at the Inn at Woburn of all places, well it was a huge chasm to leap.

I have an interest in quotations of famous people. I’m not hyper about it and I don’t have a written collection or anything like that but I do have an ability to recall them when I think them apposite. I can do several of Churchill’s speeches and I must admit they have inspired me on occasions.

There was one that came to the front of my mind at that moment but I wasn’t certain who had said it, I didn’t think it was Churchill but whoever it was it seemed appropriate for the moment: ***“Anything can be achieved in small, deliberate steps. But there are times you need the courage to take a great leap; you can’t cross a chasm in two small jumps”***

For me meeting Jasmine again, and at Woburn, would be a hell of a chasm and a giant leap and I wasn’t sure if I was ready. I realised I was still holding the phone to my ear and Megan was patiently waiting for my response. When it came it was with some surprise. I took a deep breath and said, ‘OK Sis, tell her I’ll be there.’