Trio

R P Vine

"If I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."
– *Corinthians A 13.2*

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For Friederica Sophia.
I would bring you flowers, if only I knew where.

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Prelude

(Dresden – July 1772)

THE GIRL SPRINTS up the stone steps from the crypt, erupts through the door and out into the Dresden night. Then she stops, dead. *This*, she thinks, *is where things get real.* But even that phrase, the voice in her head that thinks it, is modern – too modern for here, for now.

The Frauenkirche clock chimes the quarter hour. She jumps and glances back up at it. Windows dark but for the faintest gleam of candlelight within, the domed church looms into a starry sky behind her like a great stone bell.

When she left, it wasn't yet twilight. Here, the July dusk has already collapsed into night. As her eyes adjust, she sees tall houses lining the wide Neumarkt square in front of her. Like the church they are all but dark. The darkness astonishes her.

The twenty-first century was brilliantly lit: storefronts and headlights and streetlights. Here, there is just a crescent moon setting behind a chimney pot and a brilliant white star hanging above the Hofkirche's spire: so bright it gleams off the damp cobbles.

The star reminds her of Tom, of standing together in the churchyard, looking up at Venus. Or was it Jupiter? She can't recall now, as if her memories of the future are already fading.

That night, she had quoted Sappho:

> The Moon has set and the Pleiades. It's midnight and the hours pass by, but I sleep alone.

How appropriate, she thinks, self-pityingly. For it will soon be midnight; the moon is setting; and tonight she will truly sleep alone – among a city of strangers.

At this rate you won't sleep at all, she tells herself, wiping a tear from her lashes and pulling herself together.

She strides out across the cobbles, heading towards the hope of an inn and a bed, clicks on a powerful torch to light the way. It blasts half the square with icy brilliance, like some dark magic in a world of candlelight and moonlight. She extinguishes it before someone sees.

Scanning the terrace across the square, she realises she is looking for a modern hotel sign. She finds herself thinking about a late check-in, wondering if she remembered her bank card.

Her footsteps falter. She stops, listens. So quiet! She is used to constant background noise – trucks on the main road, jets above, the faint hum of electricity. Here, she hears only living sounds: a distant cough, the clatter of hooves, and a stertorous sigh. In between, silence.

Hurrying out through the crypt and its catacombs just minutes ago, she had been full of hope and nostalgia, imagined something like emerging from Plato's cave: back to truth and light, to reality; coming home.

But the eighteenth century isn't light, it's dark – the velvety, oppressive dark of the deep countryside on a moonless night, even in the city. And home isn't here, it's days of bumping torture on a stagecoach away. As long as it would take Tom to fly to Australia; longer.

And her new "reality" is that Tom doesn't exist, won't exist for centuries. Maybe even her memories of him are shadows, not real at all. If the tunnel was indeed Plato's cave, she fears she has run deeper into darkness, not out of it.

Across the square, the night watchman appears. She sees his lantern bobbing in the dark, hears his heavy boots and the strike of his halberd on the cobbles.

The clock behind her strikes the hour now: twelve booming strikes of the great bell. *Midnight already?* She reaches for her phone to check. But she left her phone in the twenty-first century.

The echoing footfalls of the watchman cease. His lantern bobs to a stop. He stands tall, fills his lungs and sings out in a tobacco-hoarsened baritone:

Hört, ihr Herrn, und lasst euch sagen,
Die Glock' hat zwölf geschlagen.

Zwölf ist das Ziel der ganzen Zeit,
Mensch, bedenk' die Ewigkeit!

The last stanza cuts into her whirling thoughts: *Twelve is the end of all time / Man, consider eternity!*

Eternity, she thinks. She is stuck here for eternity. An eternity without electric light, without phones; *without Tom.*

Suddenly, she comes to the decision she didn't realise she was making. She turns, strides back over to the towering Frauenkirche and in through the door.

As she did before, long ago it seems, she creeps in below the great dome of the nave, slinks past the pews in the dark. A single candle burns steadily on the altar. By its dim gleam, she finds the door to the organ gallery stairs.

She cups her hand over her torch to light the stairwell with a bloody glow. Last time she took a wrong turn here in the dark and ended up in the crypt, but now she needs to go up.

Striding out onto the organ gallery, past a huge window overlooking Dresden, she hurries over to the console.

The three manuals and columns of rosewood stops are lit by a gilded cherub holding the only other candle in the midnight church. She slides onto the organ bench. The candle flickers. Her eyes rove the stops with their swirling labels:

Cornett

Quintadena

Rohrflöte

It's been years and she's forgotten where it is. Then she finds it:

Rauschwerk

She pulls, expecting a drawer to pop out, the drawer containing a thick sheaf of her grandfather's scores, his precious music, that she hid there years ago. But nothing happens. Nothing. She pushes the stop back in, pulls again. Still nothing.

She leans down and looks at the base of the manuals, where the drawer should be, catches a smell of fresh-sawn walnut and animal glue. She sees now with dismay that the scrollwork is new, replaced since she was last here. She rattles it, pulls it. But the wood is thick, glued and dowelled solid.

She panics. This cannot be. This is why she has come here, put herself through this; and Tom. To retrieve the scores, to save them from time and future fire.

She folds herself onto the pedals, ducks under the manuals and dares to shine her torch up. Through a tiny gap in the new casework, she glimpses what she thinks is the drawer. But without a hammer and chisel and a strong hand, it is completely sealed off.

Tears of frustration. She yanks again, but nothing gives.

Now she bolts. Just like last time, three years ago, she throws herself headlong back along the gallery and through the door to the stairs. Only this time she has no sheaf of scores to save, just herself. And time is running out.

A few steps down, off along a short passage and then down the giddying spirals. Round and round she skitters, back down towards the crypt, until she is deep below the church again.

At the bottom, she sprints the earth floor, hits the crypt door running, flings it wide and pushes back in. She ignores the great bronze tombs, the stink of death.

Just one idea left: get out of here, escape, get back – *back to Tom*.

She runs into the stinking catacombs as fast as she can go. Her wild panting echoes back at her.

Unlike last time, she doesn't feel ossuary bones under her hands or bump into coffins, because she can see. Her dazzling torch throws blazing light into every niche and corner like a cold sun.

Still, it takes her ages to find the place again – too long. Where the tunnel entrance had been less than an hour before, now there is just a blank brick wall. Desperately, she pushes and prods and shoves at the unyielding brick. But the tunnel back, back to Tom, back to her life, is gone.

(The English Lake District – Present Day)

Her alarm pings. She silences it, looks up from her book and out of the stone-mullioned window. Dusk is falling softly over the estate below. She has been so engrossed in reading she hasn't noticed how late it is. *The evenings are drawing in now*, she thinks.

She remembers what the alarm is for, leaps up and tosses aside her book of classical poetry. The candles on the mantelpiece flicker. Then she's running down the winding tower stairs.

From a hook by the door, she grabs an old wax jacket and cloth cap, slides into a pair of rubber boots and strides out. Her hasty boots crunch the gravel across to the nearby manor house.

She lets herself in at the back door, slips along an unlit corridor into an anteroom that smells of game – mostly pheasants – hanging from hooks in the ceiling. There, she opens a tall cabinet and pulls an old-fashioned double-barrelled shotgun from a rack.

She rips open a box of cartridges, slides two into the gun's breech and pockets a few more.

Carrying the shotgun broken open over her arm, she goes to leave. A tall shadow appears in the doorway. She starts, spooked.

'Deer, I presume, at this time of evening?' drawls a snooty voice. 'But not on your own, surely, *my dear*?'

'On my own, yes. But I'm not interested in deer.'

The girl's accent is crisp and firm, but without the man's exaggerated drawl.

The light clicks on, floods the room and makes them both blink. A tall and distinguished man stands in the doorway with his hand on the switch, peering at her drowsily.

'Had another row with mummy, then?' he asks with a laugh, eyeing the shotgun.

'She's not my mummy and I wouldn't waste the shot. It's the Herdwick lambs. We lost one to the fox last night. I'm going to check on them, see if I can catch him before he kills another.'

'I thought you didn't approve of fox hunting?'

'I don't. As you well know. I'm not intending to watch a pack of hounds rip him to pieces for fun. But I'll shoot him to protect my lambs, if I have to.'

'Are you still strong enough to handle the gun? I thought the doctor said–'

'Of course I am!' She pushes past the man and out the way she had come.

The parkland around the handsome old manor house is crepuscular now. The girl zips up her jacket and marches out across it, shotgun cradled in the crook of her elbow. Her torch flicks through the shadows, looking for signs of a white-tipped tail or a pointed muzzle.

She hastens down the long gravel driveway towards the side gates, then veers off left towards the back of the estate. Beyond a line of distant trees, she makes out a shadowy church spire against the dusk sky. But she's not going there, not tonight, not yet.

It's a cool evening for mid-September, the grass still wet from the day's rain. The girl shivers, pulls her collar up and her old cloth cap down and hurries on.

Soon after, she comes to the fenced enclosure for her small flock of Herdwick lambs. She opens the gate and steps in, careful not to let any slip out. The lambs, their once-black coats turning white, nuzzle around her looking for food.

She takes care to feed all the milling lambs, just nineteen of them now, then shoos them away so she can keep watch. She notices a dazzling white star, Venus, hanging low to the rosy western horizon.

Watching my flock below a star, she thinks, *a biblical scene*. Yet despite her comforting presence, they continue to crowd her, bleating and refusing to settle.

'Shh!' The girl tries to quieten them as she searches the gloaming for the fox. He is somewhere nearby, she is sure.

She finds an empty feed pail, turns it over and sits to wait. A cold breeze blows across the pastures. She hunkers down and huddles into her jacket, prepared for a long vigil.

Then she hears something – a rustle from the direction of the forest. Just wind in the branches? She stands up, snaps the shotgun shut, flips off the safety catch and fingers the triggers.

She hears breathing, ragged and heavy. *Not the fox, a man*.

'Who's there? Show yourself! You're trespassing and I'm armed!' she calls, peremptorily.

No response. She hears footsteps now, slow and dragging, drawing nearer along the track beyond the trees. Puzzled, she lowers the gun.

'Who's there?' she calls again.

'Mwrrrrr, miaow-ow-ow!' comes the surprising answer.

Her torch catches the silver eyes of a large cat looking at her beadily through the fence, its thick mackerel-patterned coat fluffed against the cold.

'Gosh, you silly kitty, you gave me a scare! I could have shot you!'

She leans over the fence to stroke it. But the cat jinks away, tail flicked over at the tip like a question mark.

After a few metres, the cat abruptly stops and looks back, waiting. She follows. It leads her on towards the track.

Then, as they pass between a line of trees, she sees something in the gathering darkness – a shadow on the gravel of the track.

The cat bounds on, then stops by the shadow. She hurries over, safes the gun and lays it aside, sets down her torch and kneels. The shadow resolves into a man.

He is slumped onto his knees as if in supplication. As she watches, he falls onto his side, twitches. An arm sticks out at an odd angle from under him. He looks broken.

Wary, she shuffles closer. The side of his face is covered in something wet, she sees now, oozing into his long curly hair and dribbling onto the stones.

She reaches out, gingerly pushes back his hair to reveal a deep, ugly wound above his temple. Blood trickles warm over her fingers.

'Oh my God! What happened to you? Were you in an accident?'

'Help. Help me! Hurt. I'm … hurt,' the man mutters, drifting in and out of consciousness.

The girl looks at the pool of blood, whips out her phone to call an ambulance. No signal.

She shrugs off her old wax jacket and throws it over him, whispers, 'Hang on. I'll be back, I promise.' Then she tears off, feet pounding the gravel, torch flashing randomly.

She is ill and unfit, but still she runs, hounded on by the thought of the man's lifeblood trickling away. She thinks to reach the house, call for an ambulance from there. But no, the ambulance station is miles of winding country lanes away. It will never make it in time.

The torch beam lights up a pair of old wooden garage doors ahead. Yes, this is the only way. She bangs right into them, unable to stop herself, then pulls a key from her pocket and fumbles it into the lock.

She pulls the garage doors wide, staggers in, panting and clutching a stitch. Her torch finds the corner of a dusty tarp. She drags it aside. A silver Bentley from the 1950s is revealed, with a long bonnet, tall chrome grille and big round headlights.

She yanks the door and flings herself behind the wheel, pushes the key in among the vintage dials of the dashboard. The engine purrs into life. She snicks the column lever into drive, edges the big car out of the open doors, then boots it back up the track with a spurt of gravel.

The soft yellow headlight beams pick out the dark form of the man, still lying where she'd left him. She pulls up with the passenger door as close as she can, sprints back around. She tries to rouse him, but he is limp and lifeless. She checks his pulse. Not dead, not yet.

In the headlamp beams, she glimpses his full face for the first time. He is younger than she thought, maybe her own age. And now she gives a little gasp of horror. For she recognises him.

The Tom in her memory is full of life; but not this one. His skin is deathly white, his eyes rolled back into his head. He is making gurgling, rattling noises.

'Tom?! Can you hear me? I need to get you to hospital. If you can hear me, please try to stand so I can pull you into the car.'

She massages his limp fingers, tries to shake him awake. But Tom, she realises, is way beyond that.

With no plan, she opens the boot and pulls out a couple of old car blankets, puts the gun in their place. She chucks a blanket onto the passenger seat and wraps Tom in the other as best she can.

Then she reckons the distance to the open car door. Too far to drag him; the track too narrow to manoeuvre the car closer; too weak and frail to lift him, surely?

A moment's frozen indecision, of helpless horror. Then, full of adrenaline and out of options, she kneels and embraces him. Heaving and straining, she somehow pulls him into a fireman's lift and staggers to the car.

Tom is slippery with blood, but she holds on, lowers him onto the seat and folds his legs into the footwell. She is covered in blood now. So much blood.

The pulse in his neck is weak under her fingers. Still alive, but only just. So little time.

She swaddles Tom in the blanket, kisses his bloodied cheek, closes his door and climbs back behind the wheel. Then she drives, holding the blanket tight to Tom's wound with one hand, steering with the other. She drives like hell.

Speeding and bumping down the estate's tracks, tyres spitting stones, she only stops to get the gates open. Then she is out on the old lane, driving as fast as she dares around the bends in the dark.

At last she reaches the main road. She mashes her foot into the carpet. The old car responds with a silent surge of power. Remorselessly, she keeps her foot down. The Bentley flashes past slower cars, accelerating until everything is a blur.

It is almost as if the old car understands the exigency of her need. The slender needle on the speedometer edges up to a hundred, then on. Still she keeps her foot down.

The girl loves this car. It was her grandfather's and then her father's, with her family for almost seventy years. But as the faithful Bentley consumes the road, it is the flesh and blood next to her, helpless and shaking, that consumes her thoughts and fears.

'Please, Tom. Please don't die,' she begs. 'I'm here. You're not alone in the cold and dark any more. We're nearly there. Hang on.'

Her hand is tired from pressing on the wound. So she leans across and hugs him to her, pulls his head into her shoulder to keep up the pressure. Unconsciously, Tom huddles back.

Half maddened by fear, dreading he will give a last spasm and die in her arms, she feels something in her soul give way. She kisses his head, her tears mingling with his bloodied curls.

'Hang in there. Don't die. Please? For me? You'll never be alone in the dark again. Can you hear me? I know you can. Hold on, hold on for me.'

She swerves the Bentley through the entrance to the hospital, bumps up the kerb and drives right up to the doors, in front of an astonished ambulance crew.

'HELP ME!'

Even as they're running over, she pulls Tom free of the seat. They take Tom from her arms and carry him into the bright and antiseptically clean lobby, dripping blood.

For a moment silence. Then pandemonium.

A waiting patient screams. Nurses and doctors run around. A trolley appears and Tom is laid onto clean white sheets.

A nurse peels away the blanket and pushes a compress onto his wound. Another cuts off his clothes and starts to clean him up. A transfusion bag of dark blood arrives. The nurse finds a vein and pushes in a cannula.

They try to wheel Tom away then, but the girl walks with him, holding his hand.

'I'm sorry, but you'll have to leave him to us now,' insists a young doctor, clad in green overalls.

'I won't leave him. He was all alone, dying in the dark. I found him. He needs me,' she explains, desperate for the doctor to understand what she doesn't understand herself.

She sees him frown at her, realises what she must look like, still in her wax jacket and muddy wellies, all smeared with blood.

'You got him here just in time. Thank you. I'm sure he'll thank you too. But you still have to leave him to us now,' he insists with a hint of apology. 'We need to get him up to theatre, stitch up that wound–'

'His name is Tom,' interrupts the girl. 'Tom Andrews. He's from Flookthwaite, lives with his mum, I think.'

'Tom Andrews,' acknowledges the doctor, making a note and slipping it into a clipboard on the trolley.

'And you are? Miss …?' His pen hovers above a fresh note. 'You'll be in shock,' he adds, seeing her start to shake as the adrenaline wears off. 'If you go and sit in the waiting room, I'll get someone to see you, call your parents.'

She imagines them turning up, Karen red in the face and raging as usual. There will be a scene and she'll be in big trouble for taking the car – grounded, probably forever.

'No, thanks, I'm okay.'

She watches while they wheel Tom away. Then the girl bites down on her shakes and pushes back out through the hospital doors. Still clarted in blood, in Tom, she strides past the ambulance crew with a regal, 'Good evening!', jumps in, bumps down the kerb and drives serenely away.