

Puddingstone.

As the Tantivy stage battled its way through the driven snow, Martin Dimmock cursed the devil-driven blood-orange stormfront. He clutched the letter summoning him home closer. No time to be held ransom by the storm.

A whip cracked as the stage corned the rutted ice-bound track around the isolation hospital. With deft tugs on the reigns, the driver slipped the wheels violently, avoided the biggest drift and bought it to a skewed halt in front of the Holywell. A stand and deliver drumbeat swirled in the air.

Martin pulled the window and braved the chilly blast. The melody was no wind-chime. The devil sat cross-legged on the Holywell playing his fiddle. Notes rose into the air, condensed into frost-diamonds that tinkled then dissolved into the white carpet. Instinctively his fingers sought the puddingstone in his pocket to drive away this evil.

‘You travel towards death.’

Martin’s clenched the letter tight. ‘What knowledge of my journey?’

‘I know all of mortality. I can sooth your pain.’

‘How?’

‘Your father needn’t die. Promise me your soul for his life.’

‘I will not counter any deal with Lucifer.’

The Devil laughed, ‘when the church-bells chime for tonight’s new year, the portals between this world and mine open. Run around the church seven times for my sins and the man you owe so much will live. I’ll take your soul instead. You’ll become my chattel, my gleaner for the year ahead. Remember, fail and I snatch both.’

Martin spat into the void, rapped the stage roof. ‘Drive on.’

The church-bells pealed for New Year, drawing all to the watchnight service. Martin scrapped his boots and cracked open the door to St Marys. Candles skittered and his eyes flickered across the congregation. Relief, there in his usual pew, sat his father. Frost-diamonds fell from Martin’s coat as he convened with his kin. The letter had bought him home in time.

The vicar’s sermon began. Ecclesiastes. ‘A time to throw stones; a time to gather stones.’

The cacophony of his father’s wracked lungs joined the first chime of midnight. His blood-streaked kerchief froze Martin’s heartstrings. He had no choice.

On the seventh lap, his exertions flooded warm blood to his brain, which re-engaged. He paused at the fig-tree tomb; did spittle constitute a contract? The fig-tree unquestionably proved God lived. The vicar's lesson sponsored strength.

Midnight struck.

Winter lightning span him back to the Holywell, upon which the gleeful Devil danced. 'You failed; both souls are mine.'

Sermon in heart and puddingstone in hand, Martin shook his head.

'You think oldwives-tales of supernatural rocks can betray?'

'No, but this will.' Martin launched the puddingstone with all his faith and fig-tree belief.

It caught the Devil's midriff. Overbalanced, he toppled down the Holywell. The water churned. An eruption of frost-diamonds disgorged forth, instantly lost to the sparkling snow.

Martin pulled his coat tight, smiled, then snuffled the hoar-bright aether as he trudged towards Town. Devil bedamned; he'd not betrayed his father, who Godswill would weather this storm.