

THE GOLDEN RULE

“Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as end and never merely as means.”

– Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*

“The weak and botched shall perish – first principle of our charity – and one should help them to it”

– Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*

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Part One

*What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is WHERE WE START FROM.*

TS Eliot – Little Gidding

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CHAPTER ONE

SATURDAY 20TH MAY 2017

The next body they found was that of a young Indian woman, only fourteen miles away –which all but spoiled Araminta’s sixteenth birthday. We had almost begun to relax: almost a year and half had passed since we had heard anything of Jeremy or Immanuel; we hadn’t noticed any anachronisms or strangers poking around, and the only lasting evidence of our time travel escapades was the difference in the name of a coach company – which, since our accidental visit to 1985, was no longer *Black Orchid*. Still, Araminta and I were the only ones to remember that, and the world had not stopped turning.

I had been planning a birthday treat for Minty: knowing how fond she was of ice cream, I had the idea of taking her on a quick day trip to Paris. Something Immanuel had said when he was looking around my room about violet ice cream you can buy in the Latin Quarter appealed.

We hadn’t used the Chronosphere as a teleport before but I supposed it would be easy enough. I decided to experiment that weekend.

The difficulty, I discovered, was that whereas we think of the present as a point in time, there is really no

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such thing: time is constantly moving at the rate of a second per second. There is, then, only the *perceived present moment*: when we had been in 1923, it was the present for us.

Jeremy had told us the Present is really 2517. This means there's no setting on the Chronosphere to direct it to the 'present'. What I had to do, was programme in a precise point in space-time which would coincide with my disappearance from my current location. I might lose a few seconds (perhaps even a minute), but if I set it for a short time in advance then I wouldn't have to risk the whole butterfly effect thing.

The first jump I made saved me £2.40 in bus fares. Unfortunately, I'd gone to school without my house keys and, finding both Mum and Kirsty were out, I had to wait for the next door neighbour to get home from work to borrow the spare.

I had got better at programming the Chronosphere (or, perhaps it was learning from me? I sometimes liked to think of it as being partly organic). I was tempted to take it apart and discover its secrets but the other part of me wanted to enjoy its mystery. A bit like a magic trick. We want the fun of guessing the illusion but, once it's revealed, it loses its wonder. I decided to simply accept it for its own sake – a mysterious, white, egg-shaped time travelling device from the 26th century (via the 16th).

You might be wondering how it was that I had convinced Araminta to let me keep hold of it? I don't actually remember us arguing all that much. I was terrified that her father (a man I still didn't trust) might discover it and the truth we'd been hiding. Minty didn't say as much, but I think she also wanted it out of his reach. The other ghost between us was the unmentioned foreknowledge we shared of things to come: both of my older selves had been in possession of the Chronosphere. And Araminta was never with them.

I was, therefore, understandably anxious about

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turning up at Minty's house armed with the 'Sphere, but I thought it was the best chance of surprising her.

Mrs Stirling opened the door and greeted me with a wide smile.

"Hello, Christopher. Do come in."

"Thank you, Mrs Stirling. How are you?"

"Well, thank you. And yourself?"

"Very."

"Nice day for your walk. Where will you go?" she asked.

"Oh. I thought we'd just grab an ice cream or something."

I patted my back pocket, hoping I'd remembered to slip the €50 note in I'd been saving for the occasion. It represented a good month of paper-round wages.

"How's the book coming along?" I asked. Mrs Stirling wrote historical fiction. She'd been working on her latest novel for over half a year.

"Actually, I'm almost finished," she said, proudly. We stood in the vestibule in silence for a few moments. The grandfather clock ticked loudly. It ran two minutes slow, which annoyed me.

A flash of red hair went past.

"Minty."

"Chris! You're here. Good. Sorry, I won't be a moment. I'm just looking for my shoes. Mother, have you seen my shoes?"

"Which pair, sweetheart?"

"Oh, you know, the ones with the little things on the side..." They disappeared out of earshot and I wandered into their lounge and stood, waiting. The television was on News 24, low. Then I saw it: *Breaking News: 'Domino Killer' strikes again: Body of unidentified woman found in Bossingwood skip.*

Araminta came into the room and sat down to put her shoes on.

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“What is it?”

“He’s back,” I sighed, pointing at the television.
Paris would have to wait.

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CHAPTER TWO

“Way to ruin your birthday!” I said, when we left the house. “I had this great surprise all worked out, too!”

“It’s fine, Chris. Don’t think about it. This is more important,” said Minty.

We went to the park near her house and sat down on a bench by the tennis courts.

“What are we going to do?” I asked.

“I don’t know, Chris. I need time to think.”

We sat in silence for a few moments until my impatience got the better of me.

“Come on,” I insisted.

“Where?”

“If we’re going to spend time thinking we might as well do it somewhere nice. Now, close your eyes.”

“What for?”

“Your birthday surprise!” I said, looking around to check there was no one in sight.

“Chris, you know I don’t like –”

We both lurched forwards as the train-jolt-like lurch of the Chronosphere catapulted us across the English channel.

I adjusted to our new surroundings slightly before Araminta, although not quite in time to dodge her slap, which seemed to come out of nowhere.

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“What was that for?!”

“You know how much it hurts when you don’t warn me! Anyway, where are –?” she didn’t need to finish her sentence. We had materialised in the Rue St. Germain, just by a large church with slightly blackened bricks.

“You’re welcome. Happy Birthday, Minty.”

“You’re impossible!”

“Forgiven?”

“Yes,” she said, reluctantly.

“Good. Because, apparently, they do a really good violet-flavoured ice cream here.”

We made our way through the bustling streets. An assorted aroma of different cuisines hit our nostrils as we were assailed by the proprietors of a dozen different restaurants vying for our patronage.

“We *are* in the present, right?” asked Minty.

“I think that’s a matter of perspective,” I said, “but, basically, yes. *Our* present.”

I could see a yellow ice cream chest ahead of us with the words *boissons* and *glacés* written in pink bubble writing on its side.

“I think this is it,” I said. The man behind the counter had dark hair in a ponytail and a stubbly beard. He smiled and (presumably) asked what we wanted.

“Um, un boule de violette, s’il vous plait” I bumbled in about the only French I knew.

“Qui d’accord une boule,” he corrected.

“Pardon.”

“You are American?” he asked.

“No. English.”

“Ah. Alors, baignoire ou cornet?” he pointed to the tubs and then the cones.

“Cornet, s’il vous plait.”

“Voilà.”

I took the purple coloured ice cream from him, handed it to Minty and then asked for another one. In

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English.

He wasn't best amused with my €50 note but managed to find me change and, wishing us a good day, turned to his next customer. Minty and I walked on through the Latin Quarter, licking our cones. Immanuel hadn't lied about how good it was.

"OK, so we've had our little break. I think we should get back to the serious stuff now," said Araminta.

"Fine." We crossed over a road and found a bench in a garden area outside a church to sit on.

"How many victims is it now, then?" I asked.

"Six. Five in our time, and at least one that we know of, from earlier."

"Tell me about that one again," I said.

Minty's memory of her trip to 2517 was still a little hazy but she repeated her story:

"Well, like I say; I was in this room at the top of the *Historical Improvement Society* building and this man – Hendry I think his name was – was showing me a picture of a body from 1844 with a domino piece on it."

"And the *HIS* thinks that the killer is targeting members of *The Domino Group*. That is to say, their greatest rivals in this whole temporal war thing?"

"Why are you just repeating what we already know, Chris?"

"It helps me think. I'm just trying to work out what links all of the victims. I mean, besides the whole *Domino Group* thing. Is there anything...I don't know, *ordinary* that links them? You know, that our own police might come up with?"

"If there were, surely they'd have figured it out by now? It's no wonder the police have been stumped, Chris: five victims: two men, three women; different ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds. Nothing seems to link them at all."

"All the same, I think there must be something: I

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mean why would the Domino Group have all these agents in the 21st Century anyway? How do they recruit them? Did they know each other?"

I pushed the remainder of the ice cream to the bottom of the cone with my tongue. A hungry pigeon strutted about on the ground.

"Also," I continued, "we should think about the numbers on the domino pieces that they find. They're all different, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"Well, what do they mean?"

"I don't know, Chris. I'm not an expert, am I? You keep asking the same questions over and over again. It's not going to make an answer pop out of the sky!"

The truth was, I was frustrated: we had been able to follow a series of clues and veiled references halfway across the country to find the Chronosphere in a matter of weeks. Now that we were armed, not only with police data, but a time travel device, I thought we should have put the matter to bed already.

"Perhaps we're not motivated properly," I thought out loud.

We stood and continued our walk, past the Musee du Moyan Age and towards the Jardin de Luxembourg. The sun had reached its zenith in the May sky and bathed us in a warm light. The path around the garden was dusty and had already covered our shoes in a white film. There were green metal chairs dotted about the place, which people were sitting on. Students and families. An old couple reading silently, side by side. It was truly serene. Even the little boys and girls running about, ducking in between trees and chairs, seemed part of the noisy calm.

Over by a clump of trees, some men were playing dominoes. Minty had seen them too.

"Do you remember what the numbers were on the Domino pieces found on the bodies?"

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“Not off top of my head,” I said.

“I think it might be important.”

“OK.”

“We should check.”

“I don’t think they’ve released much info about the latest victim, though.”

“No. I guess they’re still trying to identify her. We’ll have to wait.”

“Not necessarily,” I said.

CHAPTER THREE

SATURDAY 10TH JUNE 2017

We had jumped a couple of weeks into the future to see if we could find out any details about the recent murder. Araminta was worried about drawing too much attention to ourselves but I reasoned that if we just stuck to what was in the public domain it couldn't do much harm. To avoid any unnecessary encounters with our future selves, we had decided to visit the scene of the crime. I also thought we might learn more from the local news.

Bossingwood was a village compared to our town, which made it easier to make enquiries, although it also made any strangers seem far more conspicuous.

We materialised a short walk from the green that bordered the outskirts of the village and, following the directions on Minty's phone, made our way to the high street.

It was bustling with people enjoying the good weather. There were several coffee shops and Estate

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Agents; the odd hairdresser.

“Nice place.”

“Yeah. It’s just like *Midsummer Murders*,” I said.

Minty didn’t get it.

“Shall we try a newsagent?”

There was one imaginatively called *Bossingwood News* just a few paces up. It was the sort of establishment that has a sign on the door saying ONLY TWO CHILDREN AT A TIME. The entrance bell didn’t quite ring as I pushed my way heavily through the warped door but I could feel the beady eyes of the the proprietor fixed on us as soon as we crossed the threshold. He was probably in his sixties, with a shock of yellow hair tucked behind a pair of thick-lensed glasses. His beige cardigan was buttoned up incorrectly and had a stain down it.

“Good morning.” I said, as politely as possibly. The man grunted and returned to the crossword he was doing. I could still feel him looking at us as we made our way to the news stand.

There were all the usual national papers and some regional ones, a copy of the *Ely Standard* and something that looked a little more local. We each picked up a copy and flicked through. It was mostly full of articles about missing cats and housing advertisements. A reminder that the village green would host a fete next Saturday and a letter to the Editor from Mrs. Preston lamenting the withdrawal of fresh mint tea from the local coffee house menu.

“Will you be buying that copy or did you mistake this for a library?” said the shopkeeper in a gruff, Northern, voice.

“We were looking for something about the recent

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murder, actually,” I said, as casually as I dared.

“Oh, you were, were you? I might have known it: good for nothings! Poking their noses into other people’s tragedies because your own lives are so miserable in their idle inconsequence. Go on; clear off and leave me in peace!”

Minty and I exchanged a glance. She shrugged her shoulders and I put the newspaper back and we left the shop.

“Friendly chap.”

“Any other bright ideas, Chris?”

I was about to reply that I was all out of ideas when something I saw in the window of the shop next door gave me a brainwave:

“Actually, Minty, I think I do.”

“What?”

I turned her around and pointed.

“What do you think?”

“What do you mean, what do I think? What do I think about what?...Chris?”

“I believe the expression is: ‘two birds with one stone.’”

“You’re joking.”

“No. I think that would suit you.”

“You want me to get my hair cut?”

“Everyone knows hairdressers gossip,” I said.

“Do they?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never been to a salon?”

“Well...”

“Seriously! Minty, where have you been? Right. That settles it!”

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Before she could protest, I grabbed her hand and bundled her inside.

I don't think either she or I quite expected them to lop so much off. The word 'trim' certainly didn't seem to be in the girl's vocabulary. I sat on an armchair watching crests of red fall onto the blue tiles. The sun was streaming in the window. The signage acted as a prism and refracted a rainbow onto the scissors in the hairdresser's hand, making Minty's hair look almost golden for a moment. I wondered what the other versions of us were doing right now – the ones sixteen miles away who had already had this escapade two weeks ago. Perhaps I was at the cinema with Josh, or doing something else normal. Maybe Minty and I were in the middle of another adventure. We might not even be in 2017. My mind began to race and it suddenly occurred to me that, for all we knew, we might not be alive. If we got any closer to the Domino Killer, it was possible he (or she, I suppose) might catch onto us. I began to feel a tightening in my chest as I convinced myself of the very real danger our other selves might be in. I wanted to grab Minty and run for the hills but it would ruin her haircut. So I just took a deep breath and kept my mouth shut.

"Terrible about that girl that was killed isn't it? Did you know her?" said Araminta as the girl trimmed behind her ears.

"Arti? She was one of me regulars. I've been cutting her hair every first Monday of the month for years! Dunno why she was so particular about the first Monday though. Monday's never a great day to have your hair cut. Especially not at ten o' clock."

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“Why?”

“I drink a lot on Sundays.”

“She must have been very particular about her hair.”

“Yeah. She had quite a high-powered job I think.”

“Not on Mondays though,” I interrupted. The hairdresser shot me a *don't-eavesdrop-on-my-conversation* look and continued snipping away.

“It was horrible the way they found her in a skip though, wasn't it?” pressed Araminta.

“Yeah. It was jank. She'd of 'ated that. She was always really clean, was Arti. Yeah, she had beautiful nails. Actually, she put me onto the little nail bar down the road. *Something French?*”

“I hope she hadn't been in the skip too long, then.”

“No. I think the corner bloke said she probably been there a day, tops. So she would of died, what the Friday?”

“I hope they catch the killer,” said Araminta.

“You know, I got a theory about him.”

“Oh yes?”

“Yeah. I think he's like a bit dyslexic or somefing.”

I noticed that her voice had a curious habit of going up at the end of her sentences – as if she were unsure of herself. It made it very hard to distinguish between her statements and questions.

“Oh?”

“Well, this was like his fifth victim and the numbers on the Domino he left was one and three – so he's obviously lost count. Or he can't count. So maybe he's, like, dyslexic? So maybe they should look up all the dyslexic kids from schools, like, twenty years ago?”

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“I think you mean dyscalculia,” I said, quietly.

“What’s his problem? I hope you’re not going out with him. He’s a bit of a sulker, in’t he?”

“Tell me about it!” said Minty. “We’re just mates.”

I bit my lip and raised an eyebrow. Minty winked at me. Her hair was about done and the girl brought out a mirror for her to inspect the damage. It looked good. It was a little modern but it suited her. Well, it was different at least and it brought out her blue eyes a little more.

“Thank you. That’s lovely.”

“You’re welcome. You have lovely hair.”

I stood, muttered a compliment and reached for the door.

“That’ll be £40, please.”

I nearly laughed out loud. It costs me a little over a fiver to get my hair done. Curse of being a girl I guess.

“Oh, of course.” Minty shot me a desperate look. All I had on me was the change from the ice creams.

“D’you accept Euros?” I tried. Clearly, they didn’t.

“Um. Sorry, this is a bit embarrassing,” said Minty, “I seem to have left my purse in my, err...”

At that moment my phone went with a text. It was from Minty’s number.

You’re not dead. I have the money for the haircut. Come to my place. Now. A x

I smiled. Time travel has its benefits.

“Actually I think I saw a cash point just round the corner,” I said, “won’t be a tick.”

I went out of the door and, quickly checking to see no one was about, set the 'Sphere for Minty’s house, a few seconds into the future.

She was waiting for me, dressed casually in jeans and

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T-shirt. Her hair was still short, of course. I opened my mouth to speak but she simply said,

“Best not tell you anything, Chris. Paradoxes and all that. Here’s the cash. Hurry back, that hairdresser was trying to talk me into having a French manicure. And then she thought she recognised me.”

“Right. Thanks.”

I took the money and used the Chronosphere to return to the salon, hoping my timing didn’t arouse any suspicion.

“Here you are.” I handed the money over to the girl and smiled.

“Well, at least you paid. That’s something. Maybe you’re all right after all.” She giggled and we left.

“Thanks for that,” said Minty.

“Oh, it was your money. Just remember to put some by in a fortnight.”

“I meant about being nice in there. Sorry she didn’t like you.”

“She was just thick. It annoyed me.”

“Don’t be such a snob. We can’t all be top of the class, Chris.”

“You’re top of yours, aren’t you?”

“Well, yes. But I don’t laud it about over others.”

I nodded and she did a little twirl in front of me.

“What do you think, then?”

“It’s good. You look good,” I said.

“Thanks. So, where to now?”

“Home, I think. We don’t have any money and we should plan our next move.”

We found a quiet side street and held our breaths for the train-jolt that would take us home.

CHAPTER FOUR

SATURDAY 20TH MAY 2017

“Araminta Stirling! What *have* you done?” exclaimed her mother when we walked back in.

“Oh, don’t you like it, Mother?” Mrs. Stirling inhaled sharply but thought it better to not say anything, rather than something that might hurt her daughter’s feelings. Her hair had often been a sensitive topic.

“I can’t wait to show Father. Where is he?”

“He’s at the University, Sweetheart. It’s the beginning of his Saturday evening lecture series.”

“Aren’t all the students doing exams?”

“Next month, I think.”

I started choking, involuntarily, which Mrs. Stirling took as a polite reminder that I was standing in the vestibule.

“Christopher. Do come in. Would you like a cup of tea?”

“Yes, thank you Mrs Stirling.”

“Have you had a productive day, Mother?”

“Quite, thank you.”

I followed Minty and Mrs Stirling into the kitchen and chose a teabag.

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“What are you two doing for the rest of the evening then?”

Minty shrugged her shoulders.

“Fancy a game of pool?” I asked.

The Stirlings’ house was practically a mansion. I loved their billiard room. It had oak panelled walls and those traditional green lights that came down over the table. They didn’t seem to play as much as I would if I had the house. Then again, perhaps it’s easy to take things for granted when you have them.

“Sure. If you can take being beaten by a girl!”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Won’t be the last!”

We took our teas with us and I selected a long cue from the rack at the far end of the room. The other great advantage of the house was that the rooms were so far apart it was reasonably easy to have a fairly private conversation. The hitting of the balls helped, too, and we were soon engrossed in our scheming.

“The numbers on Arti’s body were lower than those on the other bodies. What do you think that means?” I asked.

“That’s the million dollar question, Chris.” It was her shot and she crouched down to get a better look at the angle she’d have to hit the cue ball. I could tell she wasn’t quite with me – she had a sort of glazed look in her eye.

“Minty?”

“I was just remembering the picture they showed me in the future.”

“The one of the body found in 1844?”

“The domino piece was in the girl’s mouth – and there were three dots on the bit I could see.”

“The others in our time had more, right?”

“My notebook’s upstairs. Shall I get it?”

“Good idea.”

Minty disappeared upstairs and I sat down in one of the

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red leather chairs. I had never thought it a good idea that Minty kept a notebook of our adventures. Especially not with her father about, but, until I had any further evidence to support my suspicions about him, I didn't want to risk upsetting Minty by accusing him of being a villain. Besides, the whole thing might have been in my imagination anyway. It's just a feeling I got when I was around him. Still, I was losing the game so I didn't mind the distraction.

"Here. I knew I'd written them down!" Minty said triumphantly, waving her red leather notebook.

"All right. So, let's have them."

"OK. So, first there was the unidentified woman from 1844. The only dots visible were three pips. The rest of the piece was in her mouth so, nothing there. Second, which I guess is the first we heard of, was Matthew Taylor, 34. Body found in skip in Kingston, October 21st, 2015. Domino piece near the body with a four and one dots."

"I think they're called pips, actually." Minty shot me a *don't-be-a-pedant* look and I muttered an apology.

"The third victim was another woman – identified later as Elizabeth Burrows. She was older – 46. Body found, as you remember, by a cleaning lady in her flat in London. That was about a week later. The numbers were two and four. Next, Francis White – black student at Oxford, found in the Bodleian Library on 4th November. Numbers were three again, and five. Then, the one which really threw everyone off the scent – that tramp in Yorkshire."

"Right. That was a bit of a wildcard?"

"Especially as they couldn't identify the body."

"Yeah I remember reading about it on my paper round. They nearly missed it, didn't they?"

"Yes." Araminta looked through her notes, trying to find the newspaper clipping she'd kept. She passed it to me.

"Detectives are now treating the death of "Joe

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Bloggs” as suspicious. Sources say a domino piece found in the coat pocket of the unidentified vagrant found dead on the Yorkshire moors on Tuesday is consistent with the other victims of the so-called “Domino Killer.” Police are co-ordinating with Scotland Yard and national forces to identify the man and bring the killer to justice.’ It goes on with a load of political rambling,” I said.

“What were the numbers?”

“There’s a picture but I can’t quite see. Think your eyesight’s better than mine?”

Minty took the paper back and peered.

“Hang on, I think Father has a magnifying glass in his Study. Do you want to get it?”

“Not really. That room gives me the creeps!”

“Don’t be a woos, Chris.”

“Fine.”

I slunk up the creaking staircase and, making sure Mrs Stirling was nowhere in sight, crept into Dr Stirling’s Study. The painting of the crow with the beady eyes still sent a shiver down my spine.

As usual, the place was a mess – bits of yellowing paper, journals and notebooks littered the floor. I wondered if I could use the time to find any evidence on him being a part of the Domino Group – or something worse – but I didn’t want to arouse Minty’s suspicions that there was anything amiss by being absent for too long. I could see the handle of the magnifying glass peeking out of a pile of books. I gingerly retrieved it, as if I were playing *Operation*. The clock in the corner chimed the hour quite suddenly, startling me. I turned and knocked something off the desk. I winced as I heard a clang resonate on the hard floor and held my breath, counting the seconds to see if anyone would burst in and accuse me of meddling. Only the crow admonished me.

I bent down to retrieve the object. It was a ring binder, full to bursting. A few leaves had fallen out. I

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looked at them, hoping there would be page numbers, but it just seemed to bear arbitrary squiggles in English and Greek. I opened the binder at random and stuffed the papers in as best I could and replaced the binder on the corner of the desk. Taking a quick survey of the room, I was about to leave, when I saw one final sheet floating about on the floor. It had a rough sketch of a sort of rod and the words *Golden Staff? Measure? Ruler?* scrawled alongside it.

I looked at the clock. I'd been almost ten minutes. Minty would be wondering what I was doing. Hurriedly, I made my way downstairs, brandishing the magnifying glass.

"What took you so long?"

"You know what your Dad's study is like: it was buried underneath a mountain of papers."

"Well, I figured it out anyway: the pips were a two and a six."

"Well done. So...What do you think it means?"

"No idea. You?"

I shook my head.

"I don't know, Minty. I think it was easier when we had the cryptic clues in that poem and had to follow the trail. This is like the other way round – we have all the evidence and we're missing the clue!"

"Well, at least we have half term, now. We should be able to unearth something in a week."

"There is that. If my Mum doesn't make me repaint the house or something."