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tBk magazine, Spring 2010

Sam Osman was born in London to an English mother and Sudanese father. She read modern languages at Clare College, Cambridge, before joining the BBC. She lives in London with her husband, three children, a dog and a goldfish. *Serpent's Gold* is her second book for children.

www.samosmanbooks.com

SERPENT'S GOLD



SAM OSMAN



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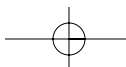
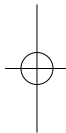
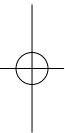
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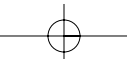
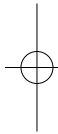
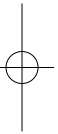
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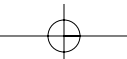
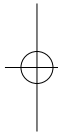
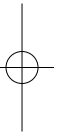
For Charlotte, Murdo and Lily
with love





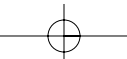
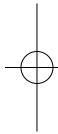
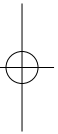
“Everything is determined, the beginning as well as the end, by forces over which we have no control. It is determined for insects as well as for the stars. Human beings, vegetables or cosmic dust, we all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible piper.”

Albert Einstein



*The itch, the snitch, rheumatic and the gout,
If the devil puts them in you, let these waters take
them out.
If the devil does his dancing on the roads that lead
to life,
Take a needle from these waters to relieve the world
of strife.
If the devil's doorway opens and his demons join the
dance,
Then seek across the oceans for a spur and spear
and lance,
For the devil he is clever and the devil he is sly,
And the roads grow sorely restless when the devil
passes by.
But you'll not hurt him with your weapons till your
will's a whetted spear,
For the will's the only weapon that the devil's
dancers fear.*

Folk rhyme engraved above the
healing well at Thornham



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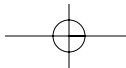
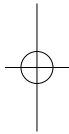
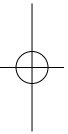
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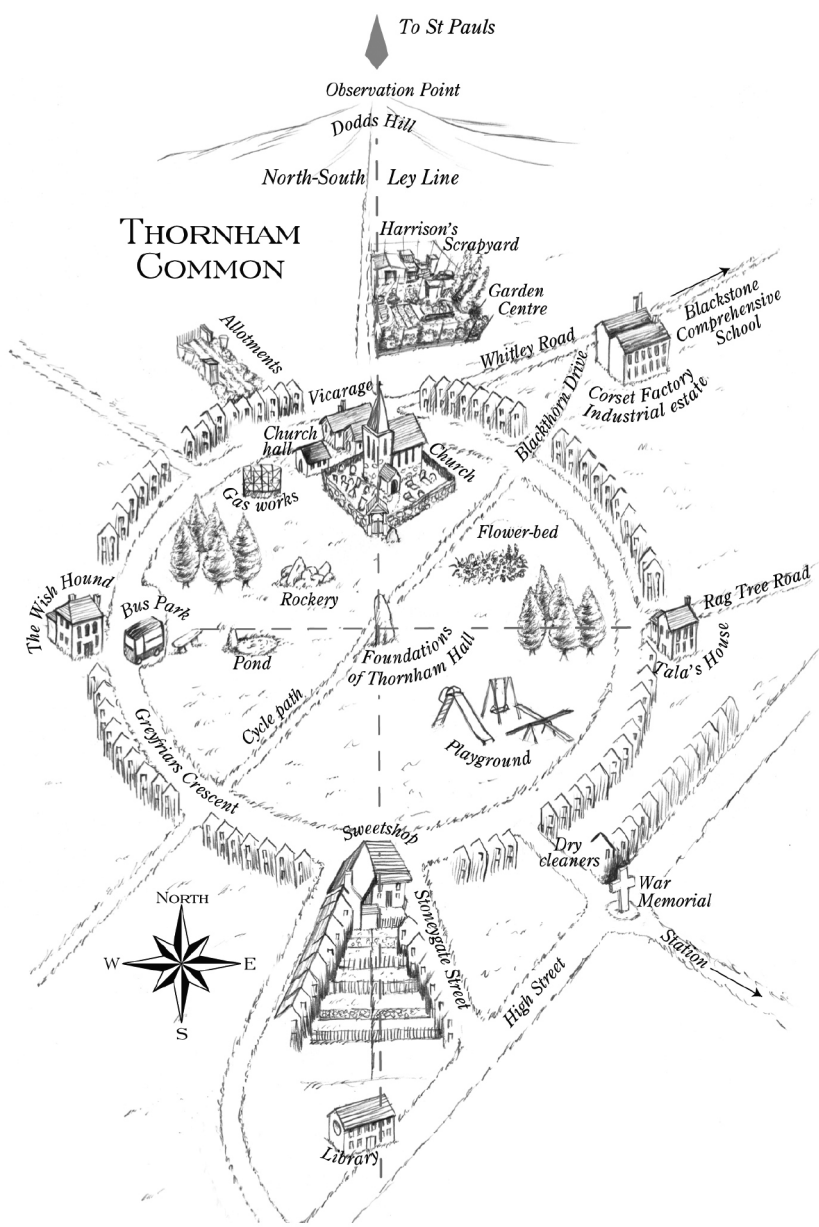
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PART ONE
The Devil's Doorway





1

The Beast

There was malice in the damp morning air. Wolfie Brown could feel it on his skin and smell it in the stale, gritty winds whirling litter down the gutters of Greyfriars Crescent. He swung his empty delivery bag over his shoulder and jumped back on his bike, eager to get home, eager to get away from the smears of blackened mist drifting low over Thornham, wringing all the colour from the landscape and turning the trees and the tower of St Michael's Church into grimy smudges of grey.

The Browns had owned the sweet shop on the south side of Thornham Common for generations. The then Lord of the Manor, Sir Edgar de Monteneuf, had given them the plot back in the Middle Ages, when this sprawling London suburb was a village surrounded by thorn woods and the remains of a Bronze Age stone circle still towered over its

common grazing land. Wolfie was looking out across a view he knew so well he could have drawn it in his dreams, yet suddenly it felt strange to him, as if the sitters in an old family photograph had shifted their poses very slightly, transforming the known and familiar into something deeply unsettling.

A violent jolt shook the jagged scrap of gold hanging at his throat. It was half of a golden star that had once belonged to his father. Fumbling beneath his jumper, he grasped the spikes. A flesh-searing heat sprang from the metal, as if he had plunged his hand into the otherworldly furnace in which the star had been forged. It tuned his senses to the living forces of the cosmos and now its red-hot pulser signalled danger. He felt no pain, only a bitter, blood-numbing dread that his mother was in peril. Racing across the common he bumped his bike through the back gate of the shop. He saw her framed in the kitchen window as she pushed back her hair and disappeared into the storeroom, yet the fear in his star was spiralling into panic. Feverishly he cast around the cluttered yard. The lid had been knocked off the dustbin, and over by the outhouse a large terracotta planter lay broken in a pool of compost. Wolfie froze. Slowly his eyes travelled upwards from the mess. A black bin liner flapped eerily from the outhouse roof. He stood there straining his ears for the swish of wind-blown plastic, but the undulating darkness made no sound. The air stilled. Out of the pool of black appeared two slanted, amber eyes. They stared at him, unblinking

and defiant. A long, pendulous tail uncoiled, twitching lazily. Wolfie laid down his bike and edged backwards. This was not a bin bag. It was a panther.

The lustrous creature was beautiful, yet Wolfie's flesh crawled as if he were looking at something foul and rotting. A rancid smell of earth and blood and stagnant water floated on the breeze. He held his breath to keep from retching. The back door flew open. Barking loudly, his dog Elvis bounded out, massive and supple as a wolf; in a flash of grizzled fur he leapt on to the outhouse roof. The panther swung its savage stare from Wolfie and faced the great mongrel without fear, merely dropping its blunt head below its shoulders and flexing one razor-clawed paw. Elvis moved closer, his lean body tensed. For a moment the two beasts eyed each other, as though across a deep divide that neither was able to bridge. And then, in one sinuous movement, the panther turned and sprang into the air, soaring high over the wall into Stoneygate Street.

Elvis dropped clumsily back into the yard. His tail drooped. Crouching low, he padded over to Wolfie and together they stared up and down the empty street. A falling shower of blue sparks fizzed from an overhead cable – and as if snapped from a trance, Wolfie grabbed the dog's collar and pulled him into the kitchen.

“Mum!” he yelled.

Clutching her dressing gown, Sarah Brown hurried through from the storeroom. “What was all the barking about?”

"There was a panther . . ." panted Wolfie, ". . . on the outhouse."

She ran to the window and took in his bike discarded by the gate, the rubbish spilling from the open dustbin and, with a little squeeze of sadness, the smashed planter. She glanced quizzically at her son.

"Honest, Mum. If you don't believe me look at Elvis."

The huge dog was pacing and whining, clearly spooked.

"I'll ring the police."

She made the call and ran outside in her slippers. It was silly, she knew, to feel so upset about a broken plant pot, but she had bought it when she was an art student and paid for it with the money from the first painting she had ever sold. The man on the market stall claimed it was Native American; a Navajo blacksmith's quenching pot. Sarah had no idea if this was true but she loved the way the fine pattern of wavy lines snaking beneath the glaze seemed to echo the ripple and hiss of hot metal slicing through water.

She had been feeling tired and a bit feverish for days and now, as she carefully rubbed the shards of earthenware clean with her fingers, a dull ache crept into her skull. She carried the pieces into the outhouse, wondering if she could glue them back together. With a sigh she swept the scattered compost into a pile. Stooping to rescue a single half-chewed stem from the mess, she cradled it in her palm and brought it inside.

"Looks like your panther took a fancy to my Saravita,"

she said. "Thank goodness the rest of the cuttings are in the airing cupboard."

Within fifteen minutes, Constable Mike Mott was rapping on the shop window. As Wolfie unbolted the door the policeman gave him a long hard look. There was something strange about this kid. His eyes weren't exactly shifty, just a funny shade of green flecked with yellow. Mott found them oddly disturbing.

"This way," mumbled Wolfie.

An ear-splitting screech burst from Mott's radio. He jabbed the buttons and ducked into the kitchen, tripping over a bundle of newspapers and a paint-splattered palette propped against an artist's easel. The smell of warm dog and melting sugar, the mismatch of flowered china on the dresser and the torn leather sofa pulled up in front of the fire, stirred echoes of childhood visits to his grandparents' house. But Mott was not a sentimental man and the cluttered cosiness of the Browns' kitchen did nothing to dispel his suspicions that this skinny kid with shaggy hair was up to something. A panther in Thornham? Forget it. Still, he had to go through the motions.

"Morning, Madam. Are you Sarah Brown?"

Sarah looked up from stirring an enormous pan of fudge. "Yes, Officer. Can I get you a cup of tea?"

"No, thanks. Did you see this animal yourself?"

"No, I was in the storeroom."

Avoiding the solemn gaze of the huge dog lying by the hearth, Mott turned to Wolfie.

“Name?”

“Wolfie Brown.”

“Age?”

“Twelve.”

“Where did this sighting take place?”

“In the yard. The panther was on the outhouse.”

“Time?”

“Bout . . . half past seven.”

“What were you doing out so early?”

“Paper round.”

“Hmm . . . how big was this . . . cat?”

Wolfie spread his arms. “Pretty big.”

“Colouring?”

“Black and really shiny.”

“What shape were its ears?”

“Small . . . maybe a bit pointy.”

“Tail?”

“Long and kind of curled up at the end.”

“Any other distinguishing features?”

Wolfie stared at the floor. How could he describe the malign presence of the creature or the revulsion he had felt when it looked at him?

“It smelt funny,” he muttered.

“Did it make any noise. . .?”

“No.”

“. . .do any damage?”

"It knocked over a lovely old plant pot and ate my herbs," said Sarah.

"Hmm. Did it stay on the roof?"

"No," said Wolfie. "When my dog came out it jumped into the street and just . . . disappeared."

Mott clicked his biro and looked sternly at Wolfie. "Look, son, wasting police time is a serious offence."

Sarah slammed the saucepan on to the back burner.

"I can assure you that Wolfie is telling the truth," came a gruff voice from the doorway. "I saw the panther quite plainly from the bathroom window."

An elderly man in a brown and red plaid dressing gown had stepped into the kitchen.

"Your name, sir?" asked the constable, meeting a pair of bright blue eyes set beneath thick white eyebrows.

"Remus Forester. I lodge here."

"Occupation?"

Mr Forester straightened his shoulders. "I am the proprietor and editor of a magazine called *The Earth Mysterian*."

Here we go, thought PC Mott. "This wouldn't be some kind of publicity stunt to increase your magazine's sales, would it, sir? Because as I just told this young man—"

"How dare you, constable," bristled Mr Forester. "*The Earth Mysterian* is renowned worldwide for its fair and factual reporting of anomalous events."

"In that case, sir," said Mott, momentarily chastened,

"can you add anything to the lad's description?" His pen hovered hopefully.

"Only to confirm the numinous beauty of the beast and to say that an animal such as this is probably a link between the world we know and a dimension sadly beyond our understanding."

The constable stared at his pad as if he had lost the ability to blink. "Right you are, sir. That's a great help. Thank you." He snapped the notebook shut and stuffed it in his pocket.

"This may throw some light on your investigation," went on Mr Forester, sifting through the pile of pamphlets on the dresser and pressing one into the policeman's hand. "This is a short introduction to ley lines, the paths of energy coursing through the cosmos whose actions may well lie behind this morning's manifestation."

Wolfie was gazing at the old man, obviously shaken by his words. A dark wiry girl came running into the kitchen, pulling her unbrushed hair into a ponytail. Roused by the turmoil in her own broken star, she shrank back in horror at the sight of the policeman.

"It's OK, Tala," Wolfie said quickly. "I saw a panther in the back yard."

"You're kidding."

Mott studied the girl. What was she looking so guilty about? She'd got the same funny eyes as the boy, but she was too foreign-looking to be his sister and that accent was definitely American.

"Did you see anything, Miss . . . er?"

"Bean . . . no . . . sorry. I was asleep."

"Live here . . . do you?"

"No."

Wolfie shot her a look of warning, which was not lost on Mott.

"I mean, yes. I'm staying here . . . while my uncle's away . . . on . . . business," said Tala, flustered.

Mott put on his cap. There was definitely something fishy about this lot. That batty old lodger, two kids who were obviously hiding something and that hippy dippy woman who'd been looking daggers at him for the last ten minutes.

"What you saw was probably an oversized domestic cat. But I'll just take a look around outside."

Wolfie joined Sarah at the window and watched Mott kick the pile of compost, poke the contents of the dustbin with his truncheon and stride away trying to kill the screeching crackle from his radio.

"He didn't believe a word you said. I've got a good mind to make a complaint," Sarah said crossly. She noticed a fine crack in the corner of the windowpane, pointing like a crooked finger to the sky, and as she reached out to touch it a jag of pain burrowed deep into her brain.

PC Mott might have been a little less dismissive of Mr Forester if he had seen him explaining his theories on last Friday's edition of the TV programme *World Watch*.

“The debate rages on over the cause of the mysterious explosion of light that erupted last week over the South London suburb of Thornham,” the host, Julian Forsyth, had announced to the studio audience. “Meteorologists attributed the light show to colliding space debris. However, subsequent reports of unusual electromagnetic activity all around the world, ranging from sporadic power cuts, electrical fires and mobile phone interference to clouds of sparks appearing over certain ancient structures including Stonehenge, Machu Picchu and the Great Pyramid at Giza, accompanied by an *eight hundred per cent* increase in magnetometer readings at these sites, have raised the question, *Is something fundamental happening to the earth’s magnetic field?* Conventional scientists confess themselves baffled. However, members of the so-called earth mysteries community are claiming that it was the light ball at Thornham that triggered these unexplained phenomena and that it’s all to do with something called ‘ley lines’.”

“With us in the studio to explain this controversial ‘alternative’ view is Remus Forester, editor of the specialist journal *The Earth Mysterian*.”

Tala and Wolfie shifted down the sofa to make way for their friend Zi’ib, who had come round specially to watch the programme. This tall thin boy with dark skin, thick wiry curls and green, gold-flecked eyes just like theirs also wore a broken star around his neck.

“I’m glad Sarah made Mr Forester trim his eyebrows,” he grinned.

“Yeah, but look, he’s got odd socks on,” groaned Tala.

“Remus Forester, can you tell us exactly what ley lines are?” asked Julian Forsyth.

“Well, Julian, they are lines of natural earth energy that criss-cross the world like the veins of a living organism and channel the forces that enable our planet to support life. Without them the earth would be merely a lump of dead rock.”

“So if this ‘earth energy’ actually exists, why are we only hearing about it now?”

“Mankind has known about it for thousands of years under different names – life force, cosmic breath, chi, prana, celestial fire, dragon energy, ley energy. . .”

Tala began to relax. Mr Forester was doing fine.

“Our early ancestors lived in harmony with this force, developing ways to channel, harness and regenerate it using a complex network of megaliths and stone circles activated by complex rituals. There is even evidence that they actually used the earth energy to power their civilizations – employing it to heal the sick, fertilize the soil, transport thought, heavy materials and possibly even people, across considerable distances. They also had an innate sensitivity that enabled them to engage with the energy – what we now might call a sixth sense. Sadly, in most of us that ability has atrophied through disuse, although traces of it remain in those who are lucky enough to be able to dowse.”

“So how do these ley lines, these channels of energy, relate to the explosion of light at Thornham?”

“Allow me to give you some context here, Julian. Earth mysterians are divided on the precise make-up of the ley system. However, I adhere to the view that the earth is part of a wider system of planets capable of supporting life, scattered across a dimension of the cosmos which has been called the Wilderness Between the Worlds. Not only are the individual inhabited planets veined by ley lines, they are linked together by a web of *interplanetary* leys to create one vast connected entity.”

Julian Forsyth, well known for his combative interviewing style, remained unusually quiet.

“Now, on planets where there are no *conscious* beings – for simplicity’s sake, let’s call all such beings people – the energy runs freely through the leys in total harmony with the flora and fauna it has brought into existence. But as soon as you get *people* on a planet things get complicated. Their consciousness actually saps the life force. That’s fine as long as those conscious beings use the methods I mentioned earlier to husband and regenerate it. However, if the population forgets the secrets of that regeneration technology the energy begins to dry up. Sadly, Julian, that is exactly what has been happening to our world.” His voice grew grave. “Centuries of abuse and neglect of our ley system have substantially depleted the earth’s energies, jeopardizing our planet’s very ability to support life. If those energies ever disappear completely, it will be like pulling the plug on a life support system.”

A roving camera swept the faces of the audience. Some

frowning, some shaking their heads, others open mouthed. All were silent, transfixed by Mr Forester's strange theory.

"Not only would that mean catastrophe for us, it would have grave consequences for every planet on the cosmic grid."

"In what way?" murmured Julian.

"Imagine the cosmic leys as the wires on a string of old-fashioned fairy lights. If one bulb dies, the flow of power along the whole set is interrupted."

"So how does that relate to the events at Thornham?"

Mr Forester drew a long breath. "I believe that the explosion of light over Thornham Common signalled the release of an unimaginably massive injection of cosmic energy into the ley grid that we can only hope has snatched our planet back from the brink!" He paused, his ruddy face alight as if marvelling at the wonders he was relating. "According to many dowsers and geomancers who have contacted *The Earth Mysterian*, the world is now glowing with levels of fresh, raw, vibrant energy not seen since the Bronze Age. It is as if the power supply has been turned up from two volts to two thousand volts. In my opinion, it is this influx of energy that is causing the strange phenomena taking place at key nodes on the earth's ley grid."

"Why would something like that happen at *Thornham*? Why not some important ancient site?"

"Thornham may look like an ordinary London suburb, but its common is the point where eight of the country's

most important ley lines meet in a perfect star shape. Our ancestors recognized the extraordinary significance of that convergence of power lines by marking it with a stone circle much larger even than Stonehenge. Sadly that circle was destroyed long ago. Possibly deliberately.”

He turned to stare earnestly into the camera. “Now that our precious planet has been given a second chance we must learn from such catastrophic mistakes and restore our ancestral rapport with the forces of the cosmos! We must repair and replace the stone energy receptors our megalithic forebears erected across the landscape and seek out the fragments of their lost technologies hidden in the ancient texts, myths and folk ceremonies that have managed to survive! SILK, the Society for the Investigation of Lost Knowledge, is planning a major conference and a series of nationwide seminars to discuss the way forward, so please visit their website to see how you can get involved.”

Julian Forsyth fingered his collar.

“Finally, before I take questions from the audience, what do you think triggered the regeneration of these ‘earth energies’?”

“I really don’t know. I wish I did. All I can say is that unlike the forces of electricity and gravity, the power in the leys has memory and intent – consciousness, in fact. It strives constantly to keep the ley system going by using human beings as instruments of its will. So it is possible that, knowingly or unknowingly, human beings were

involved. Even so, that doesn't explain how this energy was sourced or created. However, a number of *The Earth Mysterian's* readers have been doing their own detective work and the magazine will be publishing their findings later in the year."

Wolfie, Tala and Zi'ib went rigid, appalled and suddenly afraid. What if someone discovered that *they* had saved the leys? What if it came out that three human children had been born for the precise purpose of repairing the centuries of ignorance that had brought the planet to the brink?

That task had torn their lives and families apart. Now they huddled on the sofa, fearful for their secrets. But other dangers were threatening their young lives. Outside on Thornham Common, a germ of darkness was slowly taking root beneath the earth, spreading its negative vibrations through the flow of energy that these three reluctant guardians of the earth's ancient forces had sacrificed so much to revive.

"Um, Mr Forester," Wolfie said, after PC Mott had left and Sarah had gone to get dressed. "Why did you just tell that policeman the panther might have something to do with the energies in the leys?"

"Because," said Mr Forester, "I have a horrible suspicion it may."

"But how?" Wolfie said. "All that new energy's s'posed to be a good thing and that panther felt, I dunno, bad and creepy."

“The vast infusion of fresh energy now coursing through the leys is like a torrent of life-giving water pouring into a dried-up network of rivers. In itself a wonderful thing. But if something were to poison one of the tributaries. . .” He broke off, visibly perturbed.

“What could poison energy?” Tala asked.

“You’d be surprised. Traumatic events, shifting underground fault lines, even portals opening up from other dimensions can all affect the vibrational frequency of the energies, turning them from positive to negative and creating what is called a black stream. These black streams can cause serious upset, and manifest themselves as all sorts of disturbing phenomena.”

Wolfie paled. “You mean that panther isn’t real?”

“It’s real all right. Elemental beasts have always woven their way into our lives. It’s just that the forces that give them life are the dark mirror of those that animate the world we think we know.”

Wolfie met Tala’s shocked gaze as a dank, spirit-sapping foreboding vibrated through their stars.

“Can’t this black stream be cleaned?” demanded Tala.

“Well, yes, and in most ancient cultures there was a priestly elite who knew how to turn negative forces positive again. But they had to keep their knowledge secret because in the wrong hands it could also be used to turn positive forces negative.”

Tala frowned. “Who’d want to do that?”

“Oh my dear, seekers of wisdom have been tempted to

misuse their knowledge since time began. It's human nature. I'm sure there have always been those who would happily contaminate the earth's whole ley system if that enabled them to control it. Sadly, the need for secrecy means that all but a fragment of the old cleansing technologies have been lost. However, I shall get straight on to the Society for the Investigation of Lost Knowledge. Some of their members have achieved excellent results with purifying mildly tainted pockets of energy."

"What if this is more than a mild contamination?"

"Then we might have a serious problem," the old man said quietly.

The uneasy silence was broken by the snap of the letter box in the shop. Tala jumped up nervously and clattered around making Elvis's breakfast.

Sarah came in scrunching up a letter. "When will that smarmy estate agent get it into his head that I do *not* want to sell this shop." She frowned at the heavily smudged postmark on a second envelope and skimmed its contents. "Oh, thank goodness. His mobile's been off for weeks. I know there's been trouble with the phone networks but I was beginning to think he'd had an accident." She waved the typed sheet at Tala. "It's from your Uncle Matthias."

Tala hacked at a lump of meat. "Yeah? What's he say?" But she knew exactly what the letter said. She had written it herself.

"Something's come up on some mineral survey he set up for the government and he's going straight on from Alaska

to sort it out. It all sounds a bit hush-hush. He wants to know if you can stay on here till he gets back. That's fine with us, isn't it, Wolfie?"

"Sure," Wolfie mumbled.

Neither he nor Tala were devious by nature and the strain of so many secrets and lies was making them brittle and wary.

Tala's "Uncle Matthias" had brought her from America to live in Thornham when her father suddenly vanished. But the children had discovered that Matthias was an imposter who was unlikely ever to return, and they feared that if anyone found out she had been abandoned she would get sent straight back to the States.

Right now there was far too much at stake to let that happen.