

The Missing Link

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Part Eleven

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About the Author

Also by Kate Thompson

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About the Book

Danny has always believed that his scientist mother is dead. But when a talking dog tells him it isn't true, Danny sets out on a mission to find his mother and her hidden laboratory in Fourth World. But Danny is locked in his own world, so he will need the help of his step-brother Christie, if he is to succeed. After a long and difficult journey the boys discover that Danny's mother is involved in some complex genetic engineering, and she holds the key to Danny's past and his future.

THE MISSING LINK

Kate Thompson

RHCP DIGITAL

For Conor

PART ONE

1

EVERYBODY IN OUR town had their own ideas about my stepbrother, Danny. Some of them called him disabled, some said he was autistic, and some just referred to him as 'that poor boy'. The truth was that there were only two people who knew what Danny really was. One was his father, who didn't believe it. The other was his mother, who did.

2

I WAS ON the *Titanic*. All my friends were there, and Mom and Dad; my real dad, not Maurice, and hundreds of other people. Inside, the lights were blazing, but it was dark outside the portholes and I knew that Danny was out there, swimming around in the freezing waters. I looked down and discovered that I had a fiddle in my hand. When I looked around, I saw that everyone else had fiddles, too. On the stage in front of us, Leonardo di Caprio was tapping a music stand with a conductor's baton.

Tap, tap.

I lifted the fiddle, and at the same time I realised that I didn't know how to play it.

Tap, tap.

Flames began to spring up among the people. All over the place. Just from nowhere. I looked at the blank portholes and wondered how to get out; how to join Danny out there. I couldn't remember how I had got in. Fear began to clutch at me.

Tap, tap. Tap, tap.

I opened my eyes, delighted to find that I was dreaming. The first light of a dull autumn morning was illuminating my chaotic bedroom. Mom refused to come into it any more. Maurice said it was bad Feng Shui. At least, I think that's what he said.

Tap, tap.

Leonardo again. Except that it couldn't be. Dreams were mad. Danny swimming. Danny, who was terrified of any stretch of water bigger than the bathtub.

Tap, tap. Rattatap.

The sound was coming from the window. Outside it, in the bluish morning, I could see the dark shape of a bird. As I watched, it turned its head and peered through the glass with a little, bright eye. Then it tapped again with its beak.

I looked at my clock. Just half-past seven. I could have lived with that if it hadn't been Sunday. The bird tapped again. I sat up, hauled one of my pillows out from behind me, and launched it at the window. There was an Action Man and a baked beans money box on the sill and they both went flying, but the bird did as well, and that was what mattered. It gave a funny little squawk as it lifted off, and as I flopped back on to my bed and doubled up my other pillow I laughed. It had sounded just like, 'Cor! Flaming heck!'

I would have to tell Danny about that.

But I forgot. I went back to sleep and when I next saw Danny he didn't put me in the mood to share jokes.

'Come with me to the woods,' he said, lowering himself as carefully as he could on to the end of my bed.

I yelped and pulled my foot out from under him. It was still only eight-thirty.

'Sod off, Danny!' I said.

'Just a little walk,' he said. 'Come on, Christerbie.'

'Christie,' I said. 'Say it properly or don't say it at all.'

Living with Danny was like living with a little brother. Except that he wasn't little. He was big. Fifteen. Two years older than me.

'Come on,' he said. 'Come on.'

He was at his best in the mornings. It was the only time I found him good company. As the day wore on he always lost his clarity and got confused and silly. But it was still Sunday.

'I want a lie-in,' I said. 'It's all right for you. I have to go to school all week.'

I turned over and yanked at my covers, but they were trapped underneath him. I shut my eyes and hoped, but he didn't budge. I could feel his disappointment in the air and I steeled myself against giving in to him.

Everything was so difficult for him. He had been born with some kind of abnormality which made him heavy and clumsy. He had a big, barrel chest and skinny legs which didn't bend quite right, and huge flat feet which always seemed to be in the way. They said he was mentally subnormal, and I suppose they were right, although sometimes, especially in the mornings, I wondered.

When Mom first married Maurice I couldn't believe it. Here I was, not only having to get used to a new father but this freak as well. I hated Mom for marrying Maurice and Maurice for marrying Mom. But most of all I hated Danny. I thought he was just an overgrown toddler, constantly the centre of attention, ruling every waking hour in the new house.

But then, one morning, he came in and sat on my bed, just like he was doing now. I was wide awake that time; still grieving over the change in my life. I told him to go away and leave me alone. But he was clear and lucid, and he said, 'Sorry, Christie. I don't know why I'm like this. I'm some kind of a mistake, aren't I?'

I was shocked. 'No,' I said. 'You're not a mistake. You're just . . .'

'Just what?' he said.

'I don't know,' I said. 'You're just different.'

After that I could never be angry with him any more. I was still angry with Mom and Maurice, but not with Danny.

'Will you come out with me later?' he asked me now.

I groaned. In the early mornings we sometimes managed to get in our walk without meeting anyone else. If we went later, we would be bound to encounter people, and I would have to fend off their attention. 'I want to watch *Top Thirty*

Hits,' I said, knowing how feeble I must sound. 'And I want to play on the computer, and then there's a match on.'

'I hate the telly,' said Danny. 'Real life is better.'

He pointed at the window and I was briefly reminded of the black bird. Then I noticed something else.

'It's raining, anyway,' I said, delighted at the reprieve.

'It's OK,' said Danny. 'We're waterproof.'

'What did he say?' said Maurice, appearing at the doorway in his dressing-gown.

'He thinks he's waterproof,' I said.

'Just as well,' said Maurice. 'It's high time he had a bath.'

Danny loved the bath. He whooped and giggled and followed Maurice off towards the bathroom. As I turned over and snuggled back into the warmth of my lost sleep I remembered the dream. Dreams were mad. Danny swimming. As if.

3

DANNY STOOD AT the sitting-room window.

'Look, Christerly,' he said. 'My darling has come back.'

'Your darling?' I said, tearing my eyes away from the match. 'What are you on about, your darling?'

He pointed into the front garden. 'My darling. My darling.'

I usually tried to ignore him, but I had to look.

'See?' he said. 'My darling.'

I joined him at the window and followed the line of his pointing finger, to where a bird like a small black crow sat on the garden wall.

'Starling, Danny,' I said. 'Not "darling". Say "starling".'

'Starling,' said Danny. 'Darling starling.'

'And say "Christie",' I said. 'Not "Christerly".'

'Christerbie,' he said. 'Christmassy, Cricketty, Crinkly.'

'Oh brilliant,' I said. 'And now shut up. I want to watch the match.'

Danny giggled. 'Shut up, smut up, squash up,' he sang, and I knew we were in for trouble.

'Enough, Danny,' I said, with as much threat in my tone as I could muster. 'Don't start now, all right? Just don't start.'

But he had already started, and he was only just getting going. 'Chuff up, Christine, my darling starling, oh my darling saviour starling, follow me up to Scotland.'

He began to dance clumsily about the floor, lurching dangerously close to the television and singing higher and faster. I could have stopped him if I'd had the patience, but

he was really annoying me, and I was slipping back into the familiar resentment that ruled my new life.

‘Mom!’ I shouted. ‘Mom! Do something about Danny, will you!’

I knew it wasn’t really her problem, either, though she did her best to cope. But I wasn’t going to call my stepfather. It would have been an admission of a relationship that I still refused to acknowledge.

He came in, anyway.

Danny was still singing, saluting the window and flapping his arms like a grotesque bird-man. ‘Fly away with me, darling starling. Fly high in the sky, bye-bye.’

‘He’s all right, Christie,’ said Maurice. ‘He’s only singing.’

‘And I’m only trying to watch the blasted match, aren’t I?’

Danny picked up on the tension, and his voice slid up the scale. He started whooping and wailing, higher than a kite, nutty as a fruitcake.

‘All right, Danny,’ said Maurice, but his tone suggested that he knew it was hopeless, that Danny would get higher and higher until he ended up shouting and crying and throwing a tantrum. He was too big now for his father to restrain him, and if he couldn’t be persuaded to calm down it often ended with Maurice having to give him a sedative. Either that or he would hyperventilate and pass out. I had discovered my own way of dealing with him, but it was my secret. Knowing it, and keeping it to myself, made me feel powerful. I might look normal on the outside, but I had hidden powers. I was a clandestine magician. One day I might tell them, but not yet. I wasn’t ready to let Maurice off the hook.

Instead I stormed out, leaving the television to compete with Danny’s chaos.

Mom was standing in the kitchen, looking anxious. She stroked my hair apologetically, but I wriggled away.

'I'm going round to Matty's for a game of Warhammer,' I said.

Mom nodded. 'OK.'

Matty's house was about a mile away. 'Can I have a lift?' I asked.

'You're joking, aren't you?' said Mom.

'No. Why?'

'Hasn't it sunk in on you yet?' she said. 'Haven't you noticed that we've had petrol rationing for six weeks now?'

I did know, of course. It was all over the news all the time. Boring. I suppose it didn't really affect me all that much. I always cycled to school and I didn't go out much otherwise. And if we didn't have the obligatory weekend outings to the relatives it was a relief, not a hardship. I thought it was just another of those endless 'adult' problems that they seemed to like complaining about. So when Mom refused me a lift that day, I just got sulky and said I wouldn't go. Then, when that produced no results, I changed my mind and decided to walk.

The black bird was sitting on the garden gate when I went out. I wouldn't have noticed it, except that it didn't fly away as I approached. It put its head on one side and stared at me with a shrewd brown eye. I remembered that it had been at my window.

'Shoo!' I said, reaching for the latch.

'Shoo yourself,' said the bird. 'Are you Danny?'

Mom was calling me from the front door. 'What time will you be back?'

I tore my eyes from the bird and turned to her, but I couldn't answer.

'Not later than nine, you hear?' she said.

I promised and turned back to the gate. But the bird had gone.

I was hearing things, that was all.

4

AT ABOUT HALF-PAST ten that night, just about the time when I was walking home from Matty Duignan's house, another part of this story was beginning somewhere else. About a hundred-and-eighty miles away. In Dublin.

In the dark lanes which ran parallel to Grafton Street, the ISPCA dog wardens were working. They were trying to round up a stray; a black and white sheepdog that had been hanging around the area for some time. But he was proving, as ever, elusive.

They came across him raiding the bins at the back of a Chinese restaurant. The driver stopped the van and quietly the two men got out. The dog was trying to reach some scraps in the bottom of an overturned bin, and his head was deep inside it. The first he knew of the presence of the dog wardens was the feel of a heavily-gloved hand taking hold of the scruff of his neck.

Quicker than thought the dog snaked round and wrenched free of the clumsy hand. His head missed the waiting choke chain by a hair's breadth, and before the wardens could make another grab he was hurtling down the street and away.

The two men threw mouthfuls of curses after him and leapt back into their van. In all their years in the business they had never come across a dog like him. He seemed friendly and intelligent, and on the first couple of occasions that they had got close to him, he had fawned and wagged his tail and smiled at them. But at a safe distance. No matter how sweetly they spoke to him or what delightful

titbits they offered, they could not tempt him to come within reach. This evening was the first time that either of them had touched him.

They sped after him, as fast as was safe in the narrow lanes. At a crossroads they stopped and just caught sight of his tail as he slipped round the corner of the next junction. But by the time they got there, the dog was nowhere to be seen. Slowly they cruised the street, peering behind parked cars and crawling past skips and bins. A couple came out of the pub, but apart from them the only living thing they could see was a homeless girl huddled in blankets at the rear doorway of a shopping arcade.

'Poor kid,' she heard one of them say, as they drove on by.

The girl made a V-sign with her fingers after the van. Then she laughed.

'You're tickling me!'

The dog scrambled out from the tent the girl had made with her knees. He licked her face.

'Stop, stop!' she shouted, pushing him away, then changing her mind and pulling him back. She held him tight against her and wrapped her arms around him. Bony ribs knocked against bony ribs.

'You're even skinnier than I am,' said the girl.

'I'm not,' said the dog.

The girl cast her mind back across the day. She had met up with Mick in Stephen's Green in the afternoon, but she was sure he hadn't given her anything. In fact, she hadn't taken any kind of drugs since the time she had landed up in hospital last Christmas. She didn't even like to think about that.

'I like you,' said the dog.

Tina wondered if it was a flashback. She knew that it could happen; that the drug experience could return months, or even years, later.

'We're in the same boat,' said the dog.

Maybe it was that bottle of cider she had shared with Mick and Ronan yesterday. It had made her feel a bit peculiar, all right.

'I'm Oggy,' said the dog. 'I'm lost as well.'

'I'm not lost,' said Tina.

'Oh,' said Oggy. 'Does that mean that I'm found?'

A tall, rangy boy was shuffling along the street. The dog wavered for a moment, thinking about running, but the girl put a kind hand on his head and he slumped against her gratefully.

'Lo, Mick,' she said.

'Lo, Tina G,' said the boy. 'Anything happening?'

'Yeah,' said Tina. 'This dog has been talking to me.'

'Great, great,' said Mick. 'Nice dog.'

'Yeah, nice dog,' said Tina. 'But he's been talking to me, Mick. I mean, speaking, like.'

'That's great, Tina. I mean, that's really cool.'

'His name is Oggy,' said Tina. 'Why don't you speak to Mick, Oggy?'

Oggy wagged his tail and licked her face.

'Go on,' she said. 'Talk to him like you talked to me.'

Oggy lifted a paw on to Tina's knee, then rolled over on to his back and waved all four feet in the air.

'Nice dog,' said Mick.

'Talk to him, Oggy,' Tina pointed at Mick. 'Go on. Talk to him.'

Oggy got up and took two steps towards Mick, then growled menacingly.

'Ah, no, it's cool,' said Mick, backing off. 'I believe you.'

'Are you stupid or what?' said Tina to the dog.

'See you around,' said Mick, walking rapidly away down the street. Oggy watched him go, then returned to Tina's side and licked her face ecstatically.

'I like you!' he said.

5

MOM GAVE ME a hard time about coming home late, and I went upstairs in a huff. The door to Danny's room was open. I looked in.

He was in bed, already drowsy from the sleeping pill that he had to take every night. I went in and sat down on the chair beside him.

'All right, Danny?'

'All right, Christie.'

His *banky*, the grubby woollen blanket that he carried with him everywhere, was draped over the rest of his bedclothes. He clutched at the corner of it and dragged it closer to his cheek.

'Do you like my Mom, Danny?' I asked.

He giggled and nodded. He loved everyone, Danny did. He was always happy, except when he got into a tizzy and went over the top.

'You like my Mom,' he said.

'I don't really know her,' I said.

Danny's eyelids began to close and I stayed quiet, thinking about his mother, Maggie. She had come to see him once, soon after Mom and Maurice got married. She had taken him out for a walk in the woods, and I had waited at home, watching TV. Maurice was clearly worried; kept looking at his watch and pacing round the room. It was irritating.

'What's up with you?' I said, and my tone made Mom flinch.

'I just don't trust her, that's all,' he said.

'Why?' I said. 'What do you think she's going to do?'

Maurice shrugged. 'She's not like you and me, Christie. That woman is a law unto herself. There's no knowing what she might get up to.'

I turned back to the TV, but the ads were on.

'Why does Danny live with you, anyway?' I asked. 'Why doesn't he live with her?'

'It's a long story,' said Maurice, glancing at Mom in a conspiratorial sort of way. 'Danny's mother isn't really fit to look after a child. He has lived with me since he was a baby.'

'She looks all right to me,' I said.

'She is all right,' said Mom. 'It's just that she . . . well . . . she attaches more importance to her work than . . .'

Maurice was looking at her in a warning kind of way.

It made me determined to push on. 'What kind of work does she do?'

'She's a scientist,' said Maurice.

'Cool,' I said, delighted to be able to oppose him in yet another matter. 'What kind of scientist?'

'A mad one,' he said.

I laughed but he didn't, and there was a darkness in his expression that persuaded me not to press on any further.

When Danny and Maggie came back, we sat around in the kitchen and drank tea and ate ham sandwiches. She was a bit mad-looking, I suppose, with wild, wind-blown hair and a fresh look to her skin, as though she spent most of her life striding through storms. I thought she was beautiful, not in a sexy way, but kind of magical and powerful. I couldn't help watching her, wondering what kind of science she worked at. After a while, she told me there were presents for Danny and me in a bag in the sitting-room, and asked if I'd take Danny out to open them.

I did. There were the obligatory Scottish things; Edinburgh rock and shortbread, but the other things were

cool: a solar clock you could make yourself for Danny, and a book for me called *Catastrophe Theory*.

I went in to say thanks and found myself in the middle of one of those storms I had imagined.

‘No way!’ Maurice was saying. ‘Not in a million years!’

‘He’s my son, Maurice,’ said Maggie. ‘Did it never occur to you that he might be better off with me?’

‘Better off with you? That’s a joke! After what you did to him?’

They all looked at me, then, and I know that there was something private; something I wasn’t to know. Then Maggie said, more quietly, ‘I know him, Maurice. I know what he is. I can help him, don’t you see?’

‘Help him?’ said Maurice, his anger driving him close to apoplexy. ‘Help him?’

Mom made a face at me and I went out again, to where Danny was happily unpacking the pieces of the solar clock. Behind me the row went on and on, until eventually Maggie left. She came to say goodbye to us; Danny wept and wept, and when she went out he started to go over the top and Maurice had to come and take him away. I watched Maggie sweeping down the garden path and walking along the street towards the bus station. I wished I could go with her.

Danny’s eyes shot open again.

‘Open my window, Christie,’ he said.

I opened it, just a crack.

‘You like my mother,’ he went on.

‘I told you, Danny. I don’t know her.’

He shook his head. ‘When we go to Scotland,’ he said. ‘Watch out for my darling.’ As he slipped over the edge of sleep he mumbled again. ‘You like her.’

6

WHEN I WENT downstairs, the news was on the television. I played with the Gameboy and didn't really listen, but I know there was something about the oil crisis worsening. Mom shook her head a lot and made worried noises, but Maurice said it would never happen; they wouldn't allow it.

Whatever 'it' was.

After the news Mom and Maurice went to bed, but I stayed up to watch *Aliens 3*. Mom said she didn't like me watching things like that, but Maurice said boys needed adventure, and these days the only way they could get it was by watching it on TV.

Afterwards I wished I had listened to Mom. The film had given me the creeps and I couldn't sleep. I found myself thinking about Maggie again, and about something else that had happened on the day she came to see Danny. I had finished off some homework and I went down to the kitchen to get some tea. Danny was already asleep, and Mom and Maurice were sitting at the table. I was in my socks. They didn't hear me come down.

Mom was saying, 'But she must have some rights to him. In law, I mean. If she decided to push it.'

'She won't do that,' said Maurice. 'She wouldn't dare. She knows I could shop her tomorrow if I had half a mind.'

I stayed still, breathing slowly and silently. There was a pause, and then Mom said, 'What do you mean, "shop her"?''

There was a longer pause, and I could hear Maurice moving restlessly. Then he said, 'She's doing things up there that are . . . well . . . not entirely legal.'

'What sort of things?' said Mom.

There was another pause, and then Maurice said, 'Is that you, Christie?'

I stepped into the kitchen. 'What's not legal?' I said.

But Maurice was as silent as an egg.

'Fine,' I said. 'Be like that.'

7

A CANDLE WAS flickering in my room; one of those tiny little night-light things. I could see Danny peering down at me and, sitting on top of my bedside lamp, was the black bird.

I experienced that sudden, overwhelming terror that happens in dreams, just before you wake. I sat up, shrinking away until my back met the wall, waiting for that blessed moment when I would open my eyes on to reality; mundane and secure. But it didn't come.

'Darling,' said Danny. 'My darling has come.'

I had a sudden image of the bird flying into my face, its wings flapping, its long, pointed beak probing my eye sockets.

'Say hello,' said Danny, sounding groggy, a bit like Boris Karloff, as he battled with the sedative still lingering in his bloodstream. 'Say hello, Darling.'

'Hello,' said the bird.

'Hello,' I said, suddenly enchanted.

'I told you she would come,' said Danny. 'I told you to watch out for my darling. You have to come with us, Christie. I can't go without you.'

'Go where?' I said, but I was still waiting for the dream to be over.

'Scotland,' said Danny. 'To Mother. The darling will bring us.'

I noticed that Danny had got himself dressed. He was holding the corner of his *banky*, which streamed out on the floor behind him.

'Your mother's mad,' I said. 'And so are you.'