

Only Human

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About the Author
Also by Kate Thompson
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About the Book

In this thrilling sequel to *The Missing Link*, Christie and Danny undertake another dangerous journey which brings them into contact with their genetic origins in the most unexpected ways; Danny encounters the merpeople under the sea, while Christie comes into possession of the mysterious yeti stone in Tibet.

Only Human

KATE THOMPSON

RHCP DIGITAL

For Lucy

PART ONE

1

We ate no meat of any kind in Fourth World, but our dairy and our gardens provided for most of our needs. The rest, the best, came from the Atlantic.

Danny was our fisherman. He went out at night when there was no danger that anyone would see what happened when he entered the water. On land he was awkward; a lumbering hulk of a teenager who somehow wasn't put together quite right, all out of step with himself and everyone else. But at sea, the dolphin genes that had been given to him before his birth came into their own. In the cold waters of the Atlantic, Danny was in his element.

Sometimes he stayed there for hours, swimming far out into the deepest, darkest currents where the herring ran, and the cod and wild salmon. He could have lived at sea, he told us. But he always came back, lugging his catch along the silent glen in the dark, creeping through the sleeping house to his bed before the birds began to sing.

Once I walked down the path with him, just for company's sake. It was a clear, still night and the sea was quiet, examining the stars that lay reflected on its dark surface like new ideas. We sat on the shore together, examining them too, until Danny said,

'There's something out there that sings.'

'Sings?' I said. 'Is it the whales, Danny?'

He shook his head. 'Whales sing, and dolphins do, too. But this is different. This is something . . .'

He looked into my face and then past it, and I waited for the word he was searching for. But he didn't find it.

'Something else,' was all he said.

2

It was early summer, and I was in the garden sweating over my hoe when Loki came hurtling down the hillside towards me.

‘Thither-up!’ she panted. ‘Crampy gurgle-tube!’

I put aside the hoe and reached out a hand to her, but she was twisting around my legs like a small, dark tornado.

‘Loki, stop,’ I said, managing to grab hold of an ear. ‘What’s happening?’

She yelped and crouched at my feet.

‘Whisker-hunt,’ she said.

‘Whose whiskers?’ I asked. ‘What have you done?’

She tried to mime it, racing up and down, leaping and pouncing, then gazing intently at the fallen hoe and wagging her tail. But the little drama was meaningless to me. I sighed and shook my head.

‘I don’t understand, Loki.’

She looked sad and perplexed, and my heart ached for her. There had been an unusual connection between us since we had first met, a few days after she was born. We had both known it. She was my dog, I was her boy. We had rapidly become inseparable. She was the brightest of the litter from the very start, streets ahead of her brothers and sisters in learning how to talk and to count and to work things out for herself. Until the accident, that was.

It still sent a shock through my veins when I remembered it. Sandy and I had been out in the woods all day, working one at each end of the bush saw. We had put up a mighty heap of firewood and I was exhausted. Sandy’s frog muscle seemed to give her enormous stamina as well as strength,

and working with her was like trying to keep pace with a machine. So I was relieved when Tony arrived with his little cart to bring home the logs.

He stood patiently in the shafts while we loaded up. Sandy picked and tossed with her usual vigour, but my arms were like jelly after the day's work, and I was completely butterfingered. Loki realised I was in trouble and started retrieving the logs I dropped, even though she could barely get her little jaws around them. She was about three months old at the time.

I dropped one too many. The last one rolled under Tony's feet, and he decided to help, too, by pawing it back out to me. But Loki went for it at the same time, and Tony's hoof connected with her skull instead of the log.

He was mortified, poor thing. He thought he had killed her. So did I. She hadn't even yelped. She just sprawled where she had fetched up, quivering slightly. Her tongue was lolling and her eyes were open, but there was no sign of intelligence in them. I knelt beside her, frantic with concern. She was breathing, and her heart was beating. There was some chance, at least.

I forgot my exhaustion and ran home with her to Maggie. She laid Loki out on the kitchen table and examined her minutely. There was a soft swelling on the side of her head, and Maggie said that the bone had caved in underneath it. She made the pup comfortable in a box above the range, but confessed that she didn't hold out much hope for her.

I stayed up after the others had gone to bed, and draped Loki across my knees on the kitchen floor. I knew that she could hear me, even if she couldn't answer, and I talked to her non-stop about all the things we had done together and all the things we would still do, if only she would come back from whatever between-worlds place it was that she had gone to.

And she did come back. The next morning she was trying to lift her head, and her feet were twitching as though she

were dreaming, or trying to run back to us from her waiting death. Over the next few days she managed to sit up, and I fed her with milk and soft flakes of fish. But she could neither speak nor understand what was said to her.

I couldn't be a full-time nurse to her. I was needed outside in the gardens. It was Tina who had the idea of leaving the radio on to keep her company, and Maggie who extended the idea and suggested tapes instead, to re-establish Loki's vocabulary. Maggie loved to listen while she was working, and had a small library of books on tape down in the lab. So, for the next few weeks, Loki lived in the sitting room, and while the rest of us were out at work, she kept company with Shakespeare and Tolstoy, Barrett Browning and the Brontes, Melville and Manley Hopkins.

It worked.

Well, almost.

'Try again, Loki,' I said, laying a hand on her head.

'Wurra-wurra-wurra,' she barked, chasing some imaginary creature around in small circles.

'Relax, Loki. Calm down.'

She parked herself tight against my legs and gazed up into my eyes.

'Hackle-scrap,' she said. 'Timorous tremblepuss.'

'Puss?' I asked.

She resorted to mimicry. The plaintive little sound was far easier to understand than all her previous efforts.

'Miaow?'

3

Loki led the way back up the hill-side and I followed her. I didn't like to admit it but she was becoming a bit of a liability. The blow to her head had affected more than her ability to form sentences. It seemed to have knocked a lot of the sense out of her as well.

All the animals of Fourth World learned to follow certain basic codes of behaviour. You didn't steal things. You didn't go charging all over the vegetable gardens, but kept to the paths. You didn't get into fights with other animals; not serious ones, anyway. Even Sparky, and Obi and Kanobi, who were Loki's relations and weren't talking dogs, understood these things. But Loki didn't.

Nor did she understand about meal-times or bed-times, or about the difference between night and day. All the animals had their own bowls and their own beds, but Loki was notorious for taking the wrong ones and created constant friction among the animals. The humans, too. She would steal food from the table at every opportunity, and tear around the house in the middle of the night, shouting 'Roustabout!' or 'Moonstalking!' or 'Man-the-barricades!'

We had tried putting her outside at night, but that was worse. Every sound she heard became a threat to Fourth World, and she ran around and barked incessantly, annoying everyone and making it impossible for Obi and Kanobi and Oggy and Itchy to get on with the real work of listening out for threatening sounds.

And although nobody ever blamed me, I felt responsible all the same. Loki was my dog. More and more, as time went on, she was becoming my problem.

'Hi, Christie!'

I turned and saw Sandy bounding towards me across the steep fields. In three or four more powerful jumps she was at my side.

'Where are you going?'

I nodded towards Loki, ahead of me on the hill-side. 'She seems to have found more trouble.'

'What's new?' said Sandy and set off again, up the hill ahead of me.

I followed, annoyed by my own pathetic, human pace. I had grown fond of Sandy over the months that I had been at Fourth World, but it didn't mean she didn't get on my nerves. I was well aware of how much stronger and faster she was than me, but I couldn't see why she had to keep on rubbing it in. At least, at times like this one I couldn't. In the quiet of my own thoughts I understood it very well.

At the top of the hill she stopped and called back to me.

'Come on, slow-coach!'

'All right, all right,' I called back. 'I'm only human, you know!'

She was well ahead of me again by the time I reached the heather-clad slopes above the meadows. Loki was with her, and came haring back to lick my hand and hurry me along.

'King's high-by-way,' she said. 'Squeezle-tib liberation crusade.'

'OK, Loki. I'm coming. I'm coming.'

'Suffocat!' she said. 'Urgent-emergency!'

Then she was gone again, jinking along the twisting path like a hunted hare, heading for the dam. I followed as quickly as I could, astonished, as usual, by her boundless energy.

I didn't know where she got it from and sometimes, I had to admit, it was worrying. I couldn't count the number of times I had lectured her on the importance of staying close to the house and of never, never talking in front of anyone who wasn't one of us; part of the Fourth World family. She

understood, as she understood most things that were said to her, but there was no way of knowing whether she remembered. I kept my concerns to myself, but I was sure the disastrous possibilities must have occurred to the others as well.

It was crucial to our existence here at Fourth World that no one should discover what Maggie and her partner, Bernard, had produced. If the outside world found out about the missing link, the gene that enabled animals to speak and reason as humans did, there was no telling what might happen. Only one thing was certain. Our peaceful, self-sufficient life here would come to an abrupt end.

4

'Miaow!' said Loki, standing above a discarded length of pipe left over from the installation of the hydro-electric scheme. Sandy was peering into one end. 'Stupid dog,' she said.

I was still out of breath and more irritated than ever. 'She's not stupid. She's just . . .'

'Just what?' Sandy stood up and walked to where the other end of the pipe disappeared into a well-established tangle of undergrowth. I knelt down where she had been and looked into the dark opening.

'Oedipus?'

'Miaow.'

This time the sound really was made by a cat. It was muted, and came from at least half-way along the pipe.

'Scuffle-scratch! Spittle-hiss!' said Loki, miming the encounter which, presumably, had resulted in Oedipus taking refuge in the pipe.

'You shouldn't chase him, Loki. I keep telling you that.'

'Scoundrel-tib,' said Loki. 'Harum-scarum!' She made a mock dive at the end of the pipe.

'No, Loki. No!'

She sighed and threw herself down on to the coarse grass.

'Extractapuss?' she said.

There was nothing to be seen inside the pipe. The other end had been completely closed over by the tangled grass and heather.

'Come out, Oedipus,' I called.

'Stuck!' he yowled, his voice distorted by the long hollow of the pipe. 'Can't turn round.'

'Then reverse out.'

'Reverse?'

'Yes. Reverse. Go backwards.'

'I know what "reverse" means, Christie.'

'Then why don't you?'

Sandy gave the pipe a savage kick. 'Just come out, you thick-head!'

There was a long silence.

'Oedipus?' I said.

'What?' he spat.

'Come on. Back out, will you?'

'I will not,' said Oedipus. 'I have my dignity to consider.'

Dignity. I was kneeling in the mud, talking into the end of an old pipe, and he was concerned about dignity.

'I don't think there's anything particularly dignified about starving to death. Do you?'

'Sarcophopuss,' said Loki.

'Get rid of her!' Oedipus mewled. 'Get rid of that mad dog!'

'If I do, will you come out?'

There was another long pause, and then a small voice came back. 'I might. But don't kick the pipe again, OK?'

'Go away, Loki,' I said. 'Go home.'

She pricked her ears and looked at me, tilting her head to one side and then the other.

'You heard me. Go back to the house.'

Her ears flattened, and with a dejected expression she began to slink back down the path. There was a scrabbling sound from inside the pipe as Oedipus began his humiliating return to the daylight world. I could judge his position by the sound of his claws and, despite his objections, he was making rapid progress.

'All right, puss?' I said.

'Don't look.'

I turned away and caught Sandy's eye. We were both grinning, trying our hardest not to laugh. Loki was barely

twenty yards away, dawdling along at a snail's pace that must have taken great concentration for her to maintain. By the sound of things, Oedipus was almost at the mouth of the pipe when Loki's head snapped up and she began a fast and furious barking.

The cat shot back down to the end of the pipe. I stood up, ready to reprimand Loki, convinced that she was up to her old mischief again. But as soon as I was on my feet I could see what it was that she was barking at. Along the glen, two figures were approaching Fourth World.

5

It was very unusual for us to get visitors. Soon after Danny and Tina and I arrived at Fourth World, three men had attempted a night raid on the greenhouses, but since then we had encountered no intruders. From time to time, someone would walk up from Bettyhill with something to barter for some of our vegetables. Usually it was fish, and usually Maggie was happy to trade. We had vegetables coming out of our ears at that time of year, and although we had plenty of fish as well, it suited us not to divulge that in case anyone should start wondering where we got it from. Maggie said that a few vegetables was a small price to pay for being on good terms with the neighbours. And although she didn't encourage people to come, she never turned anyone away, either.

'Shh, Loki,' I said, standing beside her, stroking her dented skull. Between her frantic barks, she spat out bits of disjointed vocabulary.

'Treachery! To horse! To horse! Marauder-men!'

'I don't think so,' I said.

Sandy was crouching beside her with a look of intense concentration on her face.

'Is it them?' she said.

'Who?'

I could see now that it was a man and a boy who were approaching. I couldn't be sure, but I didn't think I had seen them before. Their hands were empty and they both had large rucksacks on their backs which was, I thought, an odd way to carry fish. And there was something else that was odd. Several birds were fluttering above their heads,

hopping from branch to branch, keeping pace with them. A small red shape that I suspected was a fox was occasionally visible through the trees, and behind it was a black-and-white dog. It might have been Oggy, the sheepdog who had come to Ireland to fetch Danny home, and it might have been his sister, Itchy. But I had a feeling that it was neither of them. They had, I had heard, another sister, Titch, but I had never seen her. I knew where she had gone, though. And I knew who had gone with her.

Loki was still barking savagely, and I could barely hear Sandy's voice above her racket.

'It is! It's them!'

A surge of excitement charged my bones.

'Shut up, Loki! They aren't strangers!'

Sandy was already gone, leaping down the steep hill-side. Loki tore after her, barking wildly.

I glanced back towards the dam. Oedipus's tail emerged from the pipe, followed by the rest of him. He scowled disdainfully at us, then shook his paws one by one and began to wash them.

'Come on, puss,' I called. 'No time for that, now. Bernard and Colin are home.'

PART TWO

1

I ran as hard as I could, but within a few moments the others, even Oedipus, were out of sight in the valley below. At the bottom of the hill I raced through the orchard and on to the path that led to the house. Then I stopped and somehow managed to find the breath to whistle for Loki.

I was brimming with excitement. It was going to be a great homecoming. Three of us had made the arduous journey from Ireland to Fourth World: Danny, my step-brother, Tina, the homeless girl who had befriended Oggy in Dublin, and I. Danny was Colin's half-brother, but none of us had met Bernard and Colin. They had set out on a research expedition before we arrived and had been away ever since. They belonged to Fourth World and, as far as I was concerned, they were part of my new family.

I knew that but Loki didn't. I didn't really expect her to come to my call, so when she did, I praised her.

'Stay with me now, Loki. You hear?'

'Ring-alarum!' she growled, trying to swallow her barks. 'Hedge-knights!'

'They're family, Loki. Sandy's brother and her father.'

'Kithkin,' she said, but she had inherited, from her Doberman parents, a tendency to be suspicious. As we raced along the narrow path towards the glen, she was still grumbling threateningly and her hackles were stiff.

I was considering getting hold of her collar when I rounded a bend and everyone came into view. Maggie and Danny were standing with the newcomers and Tina was hanging back, watching. I couldn't see Sandy anywhere, but before I had time to wonder where she was, Loki spotted the fox.

She stopped for one astonished moment and her hackles bristled. Then, with an explosive shout that sounded something like 'Public-enemy!' she hurled herself straight at it. The fox decided against negotiation, whipped round, and fled.

'Loki!' I yelled. 'Loki!'

She might as well have been deaf. As I caught up with the others she disappeared into the scrub down beside the river.

'I'm sorry,' I said, singling out the man I took to be Bernard. 'She's just a bit . . . I mean, she had an accident . . .'

'Don't worry,' said Bernard.

'She's unruly, but she's not bad,' I babbled. 'I mean . . . Even if she caught him, I don't think . . .'

I shut my mouth, aware that Bernard wasn't listening. He was gazing intently at Maggie and she was gazing back. Abruptly they both stepped forward and into each other's arms. I felt the colour rise into my cheeks and looked away, careful not to meet anyone's eye. But I couldn't help sneaking another look. I was amazed at how well they fitted together. On the rare occasions when I had tried to hug someone, some bit or the other always got in the way; a nose or an elbow or a hat or a pair of spectacles. Not so with Maggie and Bernard. They fitted and they stayed fitted. Maybe that was what it meant when two people were said to be made for each other?

Eventually they broke apart and Maggie moved on to hug Colin. I held out a hand to Bernard and began to introduce myself, but his attention was somewhere behind me.

I turned. Sandy had emerged from the shadows and was gazing at her father with a mixture of pleasure and anxiety. I moved aside, expecting him to welcome her, but his eyes slid away from her and back to me. Maggie stepped in and introduced me, and Bernard's strong, hot hand engulfed my cold, bony one. He had a black, bushy beard and clear, brown eyes which shone with warmth and acceptance. I