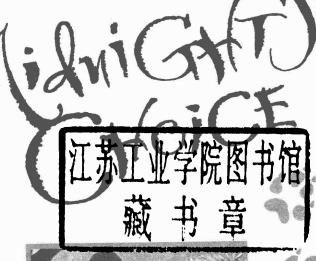
KATE THOMPSON

MIGHT GOICE THE STORY CONTINUES.

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KATE THOMPSON







For Oisin

A Red Fox Book

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CHAPTER ONE



The white rat watched as the two golden birds rose up into the night sky and disappeared from view. A few minutes ago, one of them had been his owner, Tess. Then she had seen the other bird on the tree outside her window, and she had shimmered, changed, and flown away. For a moment or two the rat remained still, staring into the empty darkness in perplexity, then he twitched his whiskers, washed his nose with his paws and jumped back on to his exercise wheel.

As she soared up high above the park, Tess had no thought of what she had left behind her. In her young life, she had used her secret ability to Switch to experience many different forms of animal life, but she had never been a phoenix before. All her attention was absorbed by this new and exhilarating experience, and until she had become comfortable with it, she could think of nothing else.

She followed the other bird faithfully as he rose through the night sky, higher and higher. Each sweep of her golden wings seemed effortless, and propelled her so far that she felt almost weightless. Behind her, the long sweeping tail seemed to have no more substance than the tail of a comet. It was as though the nature of the bird was to rise upwards; gravity had scarcely any power over it at all.

Up and up the two of them flew, not slowing until they had risen well clear of the city's sulphurous halo and into the crisp, cool air beyond. Then the three-toed phoenix began to drift upwards in a more leisurely way and eventually came to a halt. Tess slowed down and began to hover beside her friend, using her wings to tread the air as a swimmer treads water. But when she looked at him, she noticed that he wasn't using his wings. He was merely sitting on the air, floating without any effort at all. With slight apprehension, she followed suit and stilled her wings. It worked. The two of them floated there, weightless as clouds, looking down on the city of Dublin below.

Back in Tess's bedroom, the white rat's wheel was spinning so fast that its bearings were getting hot. He didn't understand what had occurred when Tess had Switched and taken flight but it excited him, and the only way he had of expressing that excitement was in movement. So he ran and ran, the bars of the wheel becoming blurred as they passed beneath his racing feet, again and again and again.

A faint breeze moved the curtain and reached the rat's cage. He paused in his stride, then stopped so abruptly that the flying wheel carried him right round inside it three times before it fell to swinging him back and forth and finally came to rest. The white rat was frozen to the spot, every nerve on edge as he

strained his senses to understand what that mysterious breeze had brought with it. He waited, and was just about to return to his futile travels when the message came again. There was no mistaking it this time. Somewhere in the city streets, someone or something was sending out a call which Algernon had no power to resist. He hurled himself against the side of the cage, scrabbling with his paws and biting the bars. When this failed he began to dig frantically against the metal floor, throwing food and sawdust and water in all directions in his desperation to escape. But the cage was too well made. The message grew weaker until at last the white rat resigned himself and curled up, exhausted, among the disordered bedding in the corner.

Once Tess had become accustomed to the strange sensation of floating, she turned her attention to her friend. Everything had happened so quickly that she hadn't even greeted him yet; not properly, anyway. There was so much she wanted to know, so much news to catch up on. There was no need for them to recount their adventures in the Arctic when they had fought the dreadful krools; nor was there any need to remember the awful moment when Kevin had Switched just a moment too late and got caught by the flying napalm. The last time she had seen him he had been a small bird, burning, tumbling into the flaming forest below, and there had seemed no possibility of hope.

She could understand the leap of imagination that had enabled him to escape by turning into a phoenix and rising again from his own ashes, but a lot of time had gone by since then and she was impatient to know where he had been and what he had done.

She turned to look at him, but when she caught sight of his golden eyes, all her questions suddenly seemed to be without meaning. Her mind stilled and became peaceful, merging into his in a kind of featureless calm. All at once, Tess felt that she knew all there was to know about the nature of the phoenix. It was ageless, timeless, the essence of all that was pure and beyond the reach of mortal concerns.

Far below, the life of the city continued despite the lateness of the hour. The last buses returned to the station and parked; taxis picked up party-goers and brought them home; lovers stretched the evening on into the small hours, strolling slowly home. Beneath the roofs, nurses worked night-shifts, presses rolled with the morning's newspapers, babies and small children woke and cried, bringing their parents groggily from bed. And still further down, in their own subsystem of homes and highways, hundreds of thousands of city rats were awake and going about their business. From her great height, Tess perceived it all happening. It was her city, her home, and yet she was so detached from it that she might as well have been looking down on an ants' nest. She sank into the ecstasy of the experience and all her cares melted away.

When Tess returned to her bedroom shortly before dawn and resumed her human form, the sense of joyousness remained with her. It was as though all the worries of the last few months had vanished and been replaced by a calm certainty that the future was assured. The choice of the final form that she would have to take when she reached her fifteenth birthday seemed to have been made for her.

Nothing that she had ever been before could

compare with the serene, weightless existence of the phoenix, and she could not imagine ever wanting to be anything else. Already she was beginning to miss it.

Although she wasn't particularly tired. Tess got into her pyiamas and snatched a couple of hours' sleep before breakfast. So it wasn't until her father woke her and she began to get into her school uniform that she noticed the state of the white rat's cage. There was always a certain amount of clearing up to be done there in the mornings, but Tess had never seen anything like this before. The water bowl had been knocked over and the floor was a mess of soggy food and sawdust. The top of the chest of drawers where the cage stood and the carpet underneath it were both littered with debris that the rat's scrabbling feet had thrown out, and the shredded paper of his bedding had been pulled out of the nest-box and slung over the wheel like festive streamers.

'What on earth have you been up to, Algernon?' said Tess.

In reply, the white rat hopped into the wheel for a morning stroll, but before he had done two turns the paper strips caught up in the axle and jammed it.

Tess tried to speak to him in the visual language of the rats that she had learnt during her adventures with Kevin.

'Sunflower seeds and shavings all over the place, huh? White rat digging, huh? White rat angry, huh?'

Algernon twitched his nose in bewilderment. Tess finished dressing, then took him out of the cage and put him on the floor while she sorted out the mess. He was his usual timid self, never straying far from Tess's feet and investigating her school bag with the utmost care, as though something large and aggressive might leap out of it and grab him. By the time she had emptied the contents of the cage into a plastic bag and replaced it with fresh food and bedding, he was standing up against Tess's shoe, sniffing the air above him and longing to get back home.

'Tess!' came her mother's voice from the kitchen.

'I'm coming,' she called back, releasing the wheel from its bearings and starting to unwind the tangled paper. It broke in her fingers every time she tried to pull it clear of the wheel, and looked like taking a lot longer to unravel than she had expected.

'Tess!'

'Yes!'

'Your breakfast is ready!'

'All right, all right, I'm coming!' Irritation was apparent in her voice, and she felt disgusted with herself, aware of how rapidly the righteous mood of a few hours ago had passed. She made one more attempt to free the wheel's axle, then threw it down in disgust.

'Cage with no wheel in it,' she said to Algernon in Rat as she picked him up from the floor, a little roughly.

'Huh?' said Algernon. He loved his wheel. Apart from eating and sleeping, it was the only pleasure he had in life. But Tess had one eye on the racing clock and was growing angrier by the minute.

'White rat with no brain,' she said. 'White rat with hairless baby rats in nest.' She shoved him into the cage and closed the door.

'Huh?' he said again. 'Huh?'

Tess ignored him. She tied a knot in the top of the

plastic bag and turned her mind to what she was likely to need in school that day. They would be playing camogie: that would mean helmet and hurley...

'Tess! You're going to be late!'

She ran downstairs and snatched a hasty breakfast, then raced for the bus. As it brought her through the streets of the city she looked up into the sky, hoping to catch a glint of gold; some sign that it hadn't all been a foolish dream. Clouds had gathered since the early hours, and from time to time a ray of sunshine broke through them, but she knew that it had nothing to do with the phoenix.

The phoenix. As she thought about him, and about the time they had spent up there above the city, Tess realised that, although the bird undoubtedly was Kevin, it wasn't the friend she had known. In all their previous adventures together, no matter what form they had taken, they would recognise each other instantly. Rats, goats, dolphins, even mammoths and dragons had not served to disguise the individuality of the person who dwelt within them. But the more Tess thought about it, the harder she found it to identify the Kevin she knew and loved with that lofty. ethereal bird. When she remembered the way it had felt to be with him, the sense of joyous detachment and freedom, she longed to be back there again. away from the smoggy trundling of the traffic and the dreary day ahead. But it was, she realised, because of the delight of the phoenix nature and not because of any sense of companionship. The joy of that experience ought to be sustaining her, but instead it was being nudged aside by doubt. Where was Kevin? Where was all the rest of him, the mischievousness and the moodiness and the flash of anger that came

to his eyes? There was no sign of any of those things in the phoenix. It was like some kind of divine being, capable of nothing except existing; just radiating light and goodness.

Her mind wandered and returned to the problem of Algernon and his unusual behaviour. When she remembered how unkind she had been to him, she was sorry. Poor creature. He wasn't very smart, it was true, but he had the sweetest temperament imaginable. He was incapable of an unkind thought. How could she have been so cruel to him?

She closed her eyes and leant her head on the back of the seat. Taking a deep breath, she tried to think herself into the mood of perfect understanding that the form of the phoenix had given her the night before. But the only revelation she received was that she had, after all, forgotten her helmet and her hurley. She was going to be in big trouble.





CHAPTER TWO



Tess had a lousy day at school, and not only because she had forgotten her camogie kit. Her mind refused to apply itself to the work in hand, and at every opportunity she sank into euphoric day-dream memories of the previous night. Only when she was ticked off by one of the teachers did she return her attention to the present. Her class-mates found her even more strange and dreamy than usual, and one or two of the more cynical ones took the opportunity to tease her.

'Look at Madam Tess with her head in the clouds.'

'Oh. Better than the rest of us, that one. Wouldn't bother trying to communicate with her.'

'You'd need to be on your knees to do that.'

'You'd need a priest.'

'Come on, exalted one, hear us, we pray.'

'Oh, stuff it, will you?' she said at last.

'Stuff it, stuff it. Hear ye, the almighty one has spoken. We must stuff it, one and all.'

Tess moved away, but the harsh laughter continued to ring in her ears long after the other girls had forgotten the incident. She knew that they could never understand what she was going through, but their reaction made her uneasy all the same. Glorious as it was, the phoenix experience seemed to be increasing her sense of loneliness and isolation.

At home that evening, she went straight up to her room. The white rat popped his head out of the nest box where he had been sleeping away a dull day. He looked for his wheel, still bewildered by the change in his circumstances, then stood up against the bars of the cage, whiskers twitching, pink eyes peering around ineffectually for Tess.

She opened the cage door and lifted him out. He fitted snugly into the crook of her arm as she stroked his sleek coat and apologised to him for her impatience that morning.

'Poor Algernon. It wasn't your fault, was it?' Her mind drifted back to the skies above the city and she turned to the window. It was January and already dark, but she hadn't drawn her curtains yet. Although she could see nothing beyond the black squares of the glass, she knew that somewhere out there the phoenix was waiting for her. It would be another year before her fifteenth birthday, another year before she had to decide once and for all what form the rest of her life would take. But what was there to say that she couldn't make that decision sooner? Why shouldn't she make it tonight, if she wanted to? She could be free of school and home and all those human concerns that dragged at her existence. She could be

out there with her friend and not a worry in the world. Once again the memory of the night before crept back, filling her with that glorious sense of lightness and well-being.

'Tess?'

Tess jumped. Her mother was standing in the doorway. 'Your tea is ready. Are you all right?'

'Yes. Just day-dreaming.'

'Anything wrong?'

'No. Nothing at all.' Tess stood up and slipped Algernon back into his cage, then followed her mother down the stairs.

As soon as she had finished her tea, Tess started on her homework, but when her father came home two hours later she was still struggling with a simple history project, unable to make her wandering mind concentrate. She put it away unfinished and joined her parents for dinner, the one meal of the day when they all sat down together.

The meal seemed to take for ever. Tess pushed her food around the plate and sighed a lot. Her father tried to chivvy the conversation along but it was a thankless task. As soon as she could, Tess made for the peace and quiet of her own room and settled herself to wait; she could do nothing safely until her parents were asleep. She could hear their quiet voices in the room below, and she wondered if they were talking about her, discussing her uncharacteristic loss of appetite or her dreamy mood. She wished, as she had done many times before, that she was not the only child, that she had sisters or brothers to share the responsibility with her.

The night was cold and windy, but Tess opened the window anyway and peered out. The darkness above the park was muddied by the street-lights, whose orange radiance leaked upwards like escaping heat. But beyond it, Tess could just make out a few faint stars appearing and disappearing as heavy clouds moved across the sky. As she watched, it seemed to her that one of them was a little brighter than the others, and golden in colour. She fixed her eyes on it, unsure whether it was drawing closer or whether her imagination was playing tricks. The star seemed to blink and turn. Was it moving? Did it have a tail which streamed out behind it, even a short way?

Tess's concentration was abruptly broken by a loud scratching noise from Algernon's cage. She turned and saw him trying to burrow into the corner where his wheel had been, throwing sawdust all over the cage and out through the bars.

'Poor old Algernon,' said Tess and then, in Rat, 'Wheel, huh?'

Algernon made no reply, but turned his attention to another corner of the cage and continued to scrabble away desperately. It was uncharacteristic behaviour, and it worried Tess. She picked up the wheel and began again to unravel the wound-up paper from around the axle. She had done most of the work that morning, and it didn't take long to free it and clear the last few shreds which were draped between the bars.

'Here you go, Algie. Is this what you want?' Tess opened the hatch in the top of the cage and reached in with the wheel in her hand. Before she could react, before she could even blink, Algernon had run up the bars of the cage, out through the hatch, and down Tess's legs to the floor. Tess stared at him in amazement. She had never seen him behave like that before. Something must have happened to him. His timidity was gone, and instead of bumbling round

short-sightedly he was scuttling into the corners of the room and scratching at the carpet with his claws.

Quickly, Tess refitted the wheel and checked that it was spinning freely. Then she tidied up the floor of the cage, picked the stray shavings out of the foodbowl, and replaced the dirty water with fresh from the tap.

By this time Algernon was at the door, poking his paws into the narrow gap beneath it and gnawing at the wood with his teeth. When Tess reached down to pick him up, he jumped in fright, as though he had been taken by surprise. He had never done that before, either. He wriggled and squirmed as she pushed him through the small door of the cage, and threw himself against it when she closed it. Tess hoped it was the loss of the wheel that had upset him, and that once he found it back in its place he would settle himself down. His behaviour disturbed her more than she liked to admit, and she wondered if she should take him to the vet.

'White rat in pain, huh?' she said to him. 'White rat afraid of sore head? Sore belly?'

Algernon paused in his restless scurrying and looked at her. 'White rat go,' he said, his thought images dim and poorly formed. 'White rat go under city.'

His pictures of the rats' underground system were whimsy, like a young child's drawing of a fairy-tale land. But it was the first time he had used that image, or even given any intimation that he knew such a place existed.

'Brown rats in tunnels,' said Tess. 'Brown rats tough, fierce, biting white rat.'

'White rat go,' said Algernon stubbornly, his restlessness returning. 'White rat go, white rat go, white rat go.' He began to chew with his yellow teeth at the bars of the cage.

Tess sighed. 'Teeth worn down,' she said to him. 'Sunflower seeds won't open, white rat hungry.'

Algernon took no notice whatsoever. Tess returned to the window, but it was impossible for her to relax with the sound of Algernon chewing and scratching and rushing around his cage. Eventually she picked up a book and went downstairs, hoping that he would settle down in her absence. If he was still the same way tomorrow she could bring him to the vet.

Her parents were glad to see her coming down, and her father made room for her on the sofa beside him.

'Everything all right?' he said.

'Just Algernon. He's a bit restless. It's not like him.'

'I expect he needs a pal,' said her mother. 'What about getting another one?'

'As long as it's not female,' said her father. 'There's enough rats in the world as it is without breeding more of them.'

Tess laughed, reassured. The TV programme was humorous, the room was warm, and she had no premonition at all of the dramatic changes that were about to come into her life.

When the evening film was over, Tess brought an apple upstairs to share with Algernon as a bed-time treat. The rat however, had other things on his mind. The room was cold when Tess came into it, and the first thing she did was to go across and close the window. There was no sign of the phoenix beyond it, and she turned her attention to Algernon. He was upside down, hanging by his paws to the wire roof and gnawing on the metal clasp which kept the