

KATE THOMPSON



Switchers

... HAVE POWERS YOU
HAVEN'T EVEN DREAMED OF



KATE THOMPSON

RED FOX

*For Clio and Dearbhla,
my two Switchers*

A Red Fox Book

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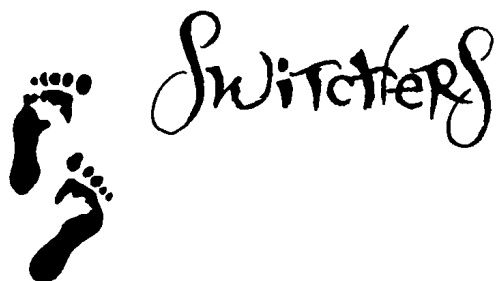
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‘I know about you,’ he said. ‘I know what you do.’

A cold chill ran up Tess’s spine. She stopped and turned back. Kevin was standing still and his face showed the tension he was feeling, but for the first time he was looking her straight in the eye.

‘What do you mean?’ she said.

The chill spread, prickled through the base of her brain and up into her temples. She was trapped by the intensity of his gaze, and for a moment she was helpless and afraid. Leaves swirled around in the breeze.

‘I won’t tell,’ he said, ‘but you must help.’



CHAPTER ONE



The bus seemed to take hours to crawl through the Dublin traffic. Tess looked out of the window at the passing streets, but she wasn't really seeing them. She was hoping that the boy would not be waiting for her when she got off the bus. She didn't want to have to face him again.

He had been there for the first time on Wednesday, and then again yesterday, and both times he had done the same thing. He had started walking when she got down from the bus, keeping pace with her on the opposite side of the street until she turned into her own road at the edge of the park. She could feel his eyes on her almost constantly, but every time she had glanced across he had looked away. If she quickened her pace, he quickened his. If she stopped and pretended to examine something in the hedge, he stopped as well, always watching. It was almost as if he were teasing her and it unnerved her.

Tess sighed, pulled the band from the end of her french plait and teased it out, releasing her long dark hair from its confinement. It was Friday, and there were two whole days of freedom ahead. She wanted to enjoy the walk home in peace, so that she could make plans.

‘Want a piece of chewing gum?’ said the girl sitting beside her. Tess smiled and shook her head. In a sense it was dishonest. She would have liked a piece of chewing gum. What she did not want was the embarrassment of someone trying to make friends with her. It was easier to stay out of it from the beginning, rather than face the disappointment which inevitably followed. Because she had been through it too often now to believe that things could ever be different. All her life her family had been on the move. A year here, two years there, following her father’s promotions wherever they took him.

Tess had found it difficult at first but she had come to accept it as the years went by. Her parents encouraged her to make new friends wherever they were, and had even gone as far as arranging parties for her, but they didn’t understand. They couldn’t. She went along with their parties and sometimes went as far as to invite someone home for a weekend, to please them. But it was the best she could do. She had long ago come to realise that she would never really be able to make close friends. She was different and that difference was something that she would never be able to share with anyone.

The girl beside her got up as her stop approached. ‘Bye,’ she said. ‘See you Monday.’

‘See you,’ said Tess. There were still a few girls, like this one, who were making an effort, but it wouldn’t last long. Soon she would be forgotten and

ignored, dismissed as a swot or as too stuck up to bother with. That was painful sometimes, but it was easier than having to pretend to be like everyone else.

The bus stopped and the girl got off, pulling on her gloves. Students from the local vocational school were about on the streets. They didn't have to wear uniforms, and they looked relaxed and human compared to the girls in her school with their matching gaberdines and hats and shoes. Tess had wanted to go to the vocational school instead, but her parents said they wanted the best for her. She might have put up a stronger protest, knowing that they felt guilty about moving yet again, but she couldn't argue too hard. She had already used up all her influence insisting that they get a house beside the Phoenix Park. It had been vital. She could not have survived in any other part of Dublin.

The city traffic was always at its worst on a Friday evening, but at last the bus reached her stop and she got down, and walked a few yards along the main road. It was bitterly cold again and she cursed herself for forgetting her scarf. This freak weather had been going on for some time now, and there was no excuse for forgetting. She pulled up her collar and braced herself against the icy autumn breeze.

As she turned off the main road into the tree-lined avenue which led to her road, she groaned inwardly. He was there, leaning against the wall, waiting for her. There was no one else about. Tess walked quickly, looking firmly down at the ground. Today she would not be drawn. She would not look over and give him the satisfaction of catching her eye. She watched the paving stones intently and said to herself: 'He doesn't exist. If I don't look at him, he isn't there.'

But he was there, and today he was more there than ever. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him crossing over the street towards her, pushing his fair hair away from his eyes in a gesture that was already becoming familiar.

Her first instinct was to run, but she knew that it would be useless. She was strong, despite her small and wiry frame, and given the right circumstances she would be hard to beat over a short distance. But today she was wearing narrow shoes with heels, part of the ridiculous uniform, and her schoolbag was heavy. If he wanted to catch her she wouldn't have a chance and if he didn't, if he was just trying to unnerve her, then he would have succeeded, and she would look and feel a fool. So she carried on walking, but looked determinedly away from him, towards the houses.

He walked on the very edge of the footpath but even so, Tess moved in towards the walls and hedges they were passing, as far away from him as possible. The street seemed endless.

'Cigarette?' he said.

'No.'

'Ah. Don't smoke?'

'No.'

'Very wise.'

Tess glanced at him. He was holding a very crumpled pack from which he extracted an even more crumpled cigarette. She noticed that he had no gloves and wondered how he could bear to have his hands out in the cold. In the brief instant that she looked at him, he caught her eye with a sly, sideways glance. His eyes were slate grey and very hard. They gave her butterflies.

Tess raised a hand to her hair, aware that it was

still crinkly from the pressure of the plait. 'What do you want?' she said.

'Oh, nothing much,' he said. 'What's your name?'

'None of your business.'

He stopped, abruptly, to light his cigarette, and quite automatically, Tess stopped too. She caught herself and went on again immediately, but it was too late. He would take it as a sign of acceptance and encouragement, and that was the last thing she wanted.

The strange weather was bringing an early autumn to the country. Leaves swirled in the wind, many of them still green. Even with her fleece-lined gloves and thick tights, Tess was feeling the cold. The wind stung her cheeks, giving them a colour that they usually lacked. She stuffed her hands into her armpits as she walked.

The boy caught up with her in a few strides, light-footed in his worn trainers. For a while he said nothing, puffing at his cigarette, concentrating on getting it going. Tess sneaked a glance out of the corner of her eye. He wore an army parka, frayed around the cuffs, and a pair of dirty jeans with holes in the knees. He was older than she was, fourteen or fifteen perhaps, but he wasn't any taller. If he was going to give her any kind of trouble she thought she could probably hold him off until someone came out of one of the houses. Assuming they did. But what could he possibly want with her, anyway? Money? He certainly looked as if he was short of it.

'It might be, and it might not,' he said.

'What?'

'It might be my business and it might not.'

Tess glared at him and he looked nervously away.

'Your name,' he went on. 'Mine is Kevin. Or Kev. Take your pick.'

'No thanks.'

He laughed then, a high-pitched, musical laugh. Suddenly, Tess had had enough. She stopped in her tracks and turned on him, no longer uncomfortable, just furious.

'What do you want?' she shouted. 'Why don't you just leave me alone?'

He jumped and stopped dead. Tess took advantage and walked quickly away, but he caught her up. They were getting close to the edge of the park where Tess's road began.

'Don't be like that,' he said. 'I just want your help, that's all.'

'Well you can't have it,' she said, more confident now that she had turned the tables. 'I don't have any help to offer.'

The corner drew nearer. She would soon be home.

'Perhaps you do,' said Kevin, walking closer now, and Tess thought she detected a hint of urgency in his voice. She noticed that he seemed to be constantly glancing around him, as though he was afraid of being seen. She wondered if he was on drugs, or if the police were after him.

'If you want help so badly,' she said, 'you should ask my father.' As she spoke she heard herself using a tone she despised, the snooty little rich girl, the spoiled brat. But she couldn't stop herself. She turned towards him, her dark eyes taking on an expression of disdain, and said: 'Or shall I ask him for you?'

They were at the corner. On both previous days the boy had parted from her there and turned in the opposite direction. She knew he wouldn't follow her.

But as she made to swing around the corner, he caught hold of her arm. She shook herself free, but he darted round and stood in front of her, his hair flopping into his eyes again.

‘Wait,’ he said.

She stepped aside and went past him.

‘And what if I told your father about you?’ he said.

A cold chill ran up Tess’s spine. She stopped and turned back. Kevin was standing still and his face showed the tension he was feeling, but for the first time he was looking her straight in the eye.

‘What do you mean?’ she said.

‘I know about you,’ he said. ‘I know what you do.’

The chill spread, prickled through the base of her brain and up into her temples. She was trapped by the intensity of his gaze, and for a moment she was helpless and afraid. Leaves swirled around in the breeze.

‘I won’t tell,’ he said, ‘but you must help.’

Tess turned away. ‘I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about,’ she said.



CHAPTER TWO



On Saturdays it was traditional for Tess to go shopping with her parents. It was supposed to be the high point of the week, to wander around whatever town they were in, buy what they needed and have a slap-up lunch at the best restaurant they could find.

Tess's parents often spoke about money being short, but Tess didn't really know what that meant. She knew only that from time to time she was embarrassed by the fact that she was one of the better-off girls in her school. Her father was hard-working and well paid. If there was something that Tess wanted, she generally got it.

On the whole, however, she didn't want all that much. Her parents saw her as a quiet child, perhaps too quiet, who was given to reading in her room after school and taking long walks in the countryside at weekends. During the holidays they saw little of her. She would set out on her walks after breakfast, what-

ever the weather, and return when she felt like it, often quite late, though seldom after dark. She didn't talk much about these walks, but her parents were proud of her knowledge of nature and in particular of wildlife. The last house they had lived in was on the edge of a small town in the south-east. It had faced out into the open countryside, but backed on to the built-up area. Tess had loved it there. The park was a poor substitute, but it was better than nothing.

For Christmas one year her parents had bought Tess a bicycle and often she set off cycling instead of walking. They had offered her riding lessons, too, with a view to buying her a pony of her own, but she had declined. 'Ponies are such fun,' she had said. 'I couldn't bear to sit up on top of one and boss it around.'

So they had dropped the idea and left Tess to her own devices. They saw no reason to do otherwise because she seemed, despite her lack of friends, to be quite content with life. When they learnt of the imminent transfer to Dublin, they both knew that it was going to be hard on Tess, but even so, they were unprepared for the strength of her reaction. She burst into tears when they told her, and locked herself away in her room. When she came out, she refused to speak to them at all for several days, and her mother came as close as she ever did to losing her temper about it. Instead, as usual, she became angry with Tess's father, and the house was full of slamming doors with bristling silences in between.

Eventually, Tess capitulated and agreed to move to Dublin on condition that they get a house either on the outskirts or beside the park. It wasn't easy, but they managed it. It was just as well, because Tess would have gone out of her mind if she had been

made to live hemmed in by houses. Her 'walks' were the only thing that made the difference between happiness and misery in her life.

On that particular Saturday, her father had some work to do and told her that they would not be going into town before mid-day. Tess hid her delight. Now she would have the morning to herself. An unexpected bonus.

'All right if I go for a walk, then?' she said.

'Are you sure?' her mother asked. 'It's bitterly cold out.'

'I'll wrap up,' said Tess.

She put on jeans and her new puffa jacket, hat, scarf and gloves, and went outside. The wind wasn't strong, but it was colder, if anything, than the day before. Tiny particles of ice drifted in it, not quite snow yet, but a warning of it.

Tess looked up and down the road. During the summer holidays, there wasn't a parking space to be had for miles along the edge of the park, but today there were few cars. One or two stalwart owners were walking their dogs, and a few determined-looking families were playing soccer or frisbee, but mostly the park was deserted. In particular, to Tess's relief, there was no sign of Kevin. If he wasn't there today, the chances were that he hadn't been there on other Saturdays either. And if he hadn't, then he couldn't have followed her to the secret place she had found, and he couldn't have seen what she did there.

She began to relax a little as she walked across the bare fields of the park. She had always been careful, after all, very, very careful. It was vital that no one should see her and she had always made sure that they didn't. Kevin had just been bluffing. It was a

clever bluff, too, because what teenager has not done something in their life that they would prefer their father not to know about? But a bluff was all it was, she was sure about that. If he tried again, she would invite him to come home with her and see what he had to say to her father. There was no way he would come.

She felt better, even light-hearted, as she came to the rough part of the park where her place was. Sometimes, when people were around, it was a little awkward getting in there without being seen, but today there was nobody within sight at all.

It was an area of small trees, ash and elder, with plenty of brambles and other scrubby undergrowth to provide cover. Tess looked around carefully. A woman had come into view, walking an Irish wolfhound which bounded with graceless pleasure across the open space of the park. Tess knew how it felt. She had tried a wolfhound once.

To be extra safe, Tess walked around her favourite copse and peered into one or two of the neighbouring ones as well. Well trodden paths ran between them all, and there was always a chance that somebody might be approaching, hidden by the trees. She stood still and listened for a long time. She knew the ways of the birds and small creatures well enough now to understand their voices and their movements. There was nothing to suggest that anyone apart from herself was making them uneasy.

She looked around one last time, then slipped into the copse. It was a place where she would not care to come alone at night. Even in broad daylight it was dark in there, and a little eerie. There were light paths through it that were clearly used quite often, and scattered here and there throughout the undergrowth

were fast food wrappers and empty cans and bottles. Tess went on towards the middle, standing on brambles which crossed her path and ducking beneath low branches until she came to a place where the trees thinned a little. Here the undergrowth had grown up taller and thicker because of the extra light. A long time ago, a fairly large tree had fallen here, and the brambles had grown up around its remains. The smallest branches had rotted away, but the bigger ones were still intact and made a kind of frame.

Tess looked and listened one last time before she stooped and crawled into the narrow passage which led into the dark interior. Once inside, she was completely hidden from human eyes by the dense growth of brambles which covered the carcass of the tree. When she came out, she was a squirrel, full of squirrel quickness and squirrel nervousness, darting and stopping, listening, darting again, jumping.

Everything and anything in life was bearable as long as she had this. What did it matter if she had to wear that absurd uniform and go to that snooty school? At the weekends she could be squirrel, or cat, or rabbit, or lolloping wolfhound or busy, rat-hunting terrier. What did it matter if that vain and hungry boy was pestering her, trying to scare her? What did he know of the freedom of the swift or the swallow? What did he know of the neat precision of the city pigeon, or the tidiness of the robin or the wren? She would call his bluff and let him bully someone else. But just now, she would forget him as she forgot everything when she was squirrel, because squirrel hours are long and busy and full of forgetfulness.

The sun poked through the branches above, and if it wasn't the warm, autumn sun it might have been, it

still didn't matter so much. Its bright beams added to the dizzying elation of scurrying about and jumping from branch to branch, and Tess was too busy to be cold.

Squirrels do as squirrels must. It didn't matter that she would not be there to hibernate during the winter. Autumn was collecting time, so collect is what she did. But because she wouldn't have to eat her store of foodstuffs in the winter, it didn't particularly matter what she collected. Some things, like rose hip seeds and hazel nuts, seemed urgent, and could not be resisted. She stuffed the pouches of her cheeks and brought them to her den. Other things, like sycamore wings and the mean, sour little blackberries that the cold, dry autumn had produced, were less urgent, but she brought them anyway because they looked nice, and there wasn't anything else in particular to be done. If the other squirrels found her habits strange, they were too busy with their own gathering to give her their attention. The only time they bothered about her was when she ventured too far into someone else's territory, and then a good scolding was enough to put her right.

She knew most of the other squirrels. Earlier in the year, before school started, she had often spent time playing with them, engaging in terrific races and tests of acrobatic skill. She always lost, through lack of co-ordination or lack of nerve, but it didn't matter. It was sheer exhilaration to move so fast, faster than her human mind could follow, and to make decisions in mid-air, using reflex instead of thought. She remembered some of those breathtaking moments as she encountered particular squirrels, but there was no time for that kind of thing now. Life was rich with