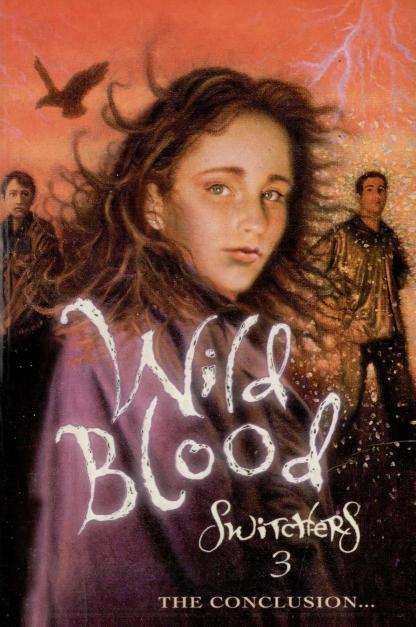
KATE THOMPSON





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Also by Kate Thompson

Switchers Midnight's Choice

For Sara Jane

I would like to thank The Tyrone Guthrie Centre at Annaghmakerrig, the Ennistymon Library and Jane Tottenham, who have all made work space available to me at crucial times.





CHAPTER ONE



When her parents told her their summer plans, Tess waited for the right moment, then turned herself into a swift and flew out over the city to visit her friend Lizzie. Human again, sitting at the old woman's fireside, Tess poured out her troubles.

'They're going on holiday without me!' she said. 'They're sending me to stay with my cousins in Clare. For three weeks!'

'I don't know what you's complaining about,' said Lizzie. 'The country is a great place for children.'

Tess stifled her irritation. 'I'm not a child, Lizzie.'

'Maybe you is and maybe you isn't. But you's still a Switcher, and that's all that matters. You'll have a great time down there in Clare.'

'I'm still a Switcher, all right. But not for much longer. That's why I came to see you. I'm going to have my fifteenth birthday while I'm down there.'

'Hmm.' Lizzie rubbed the chin of the tabby cat on

her lap. 'That is a bit sticky, I suppose.' The cat began to purr like a soft engine.

'There's no way of telling them how important it is, you see,' said Tess.

They fell quiet, each of them mulling over the problem in her own mind. At the dawn of their fifteenth birthdays, all Switchers lose their power to change their shape, and have to decide on what form they'll take for the rest of their lives. Lizzie knew that, because she had been a Switcher in her younger days, but Tess's parents knew nothing of their daughter's powers or her problems.

'Has you decided yet?' asked Lizzie. 'What you'll be?'

Tess shook her head.

'Then maybe it'll be easier for you without them around,' said Lizzie. 'And maybe Clare is the best place you could be.'

'Why?'

'You has wild blood in your veins, Tess. All Switchers has. And you might get a bit of help from your ancestors down that way.'

'My ancestors?'

'Be sure to give them my regards if you happen upon them, you hear?'

'What do you mean, my ancestors?'

The cat on the old woman's lap had been joined by two others, and three different purrs were creating guttural music. Lizzie seemed to be orchestrating it, with a stroke here and a rub there. Tess thought she had nothing more to say, and knew better than to try and push her. But eventually Lizzie looked up. Her sharp old eyes were full of life and humour.

'Does we believe what we sees, eh?' she said. 'Or does we see what we believe?'





CHAPTER TWO



On her first night in her aunt's country farmhouse, Tess had a strange and frightening dream. In the dream she was in a dark and magical place and she was watching Kevin, who had turned into a rat. Strange beings, huge and vague, hovered in the background, watching them. Tess knew that Kevin was afraid but she didn't know what to do, and a terrible urgency pervaded the dream so that a feeling of terror washed through her, again and again.

The fear woke her and she sat up in the bedroom she shared with one of her cousins. There was a strange, roaring sound which seemed to be coming from all around her, and for a long moment Tess lay frozen, holding her breath. Then, with a flood of relief, she realised what it was. Rain. It was thundering down on to the roof above her head, streaming into the gutters, sloshing away in the down-pipes and the drains. She breathed out.

The dream made no sense. Kevin was well past fifteen and could no longer Switch. Whatever dangers he might encounter in life, becoming a rat again wasn't one of them. Tess snuggled back into the bed and wrapped the covers around her. Gradually the fear receded and the sound of the rain was like music, lulling her back to sleep.

The following morning Tess woke to the sound of the cattle in the field beyond the yard grumbling together as they waited for their breakfast. The rain had stopped. In the other bed, her cousin Orla was still asleep, wheezing slightly with the asthma that had tormented her for most of her eleven years. Although Tess saw her cousins regularly when they visited Dublin, it was many years since she had visited them at their own home, in the wilds of County Clare. The sounds and smells of the countryside were so delightful that she forgot, for the moment, that she didn't want to be there and was still annoved with her parents for going off on holiday without her. She stretched luxuriously and languished for a few minutes, listening to the birds. Then she got up and went down to help her Uncle Maurice with the milking.

A white cat with sky blue eyes was sitting on top of the oil tank in the yard. It watched Tess closely as she crossed to where her Uncle Maurice was letting out the dogs, Bran and Sceolan. He was surprised to see her.

'You're up early,' he said.

'Can I help?' asked Tess.

'You can, girl, indeed you can.'

He was heading for the feed-shed as he spoke, and Tess followed. But when he opened the door he stood frozen to the spot. Despite his large bulk in the doorway, Tess could see all that she needed to. The floor of the shed was strewn with dairy nuts, spilled from the paper sacks which were stacked against the wall. The smell of rodents was almost overpowering and Tess wasn't at all surprised to see that Bran and Sceolan weren't in any hurry to go in there. Indeed, a moment later they turned tail and fled, as Uncle Maurice's temper erupted.

'Damn and blast those flamin' rats!' he yelled, striding into the shed. As Tess watched, rooted to the spot, he punched feedbags, kicked walls, opened the infiltrated feed-bins and slammed their wooden lids. Even the restless cattle stopped complaining and waited politely, fearful that the violence might be turned upon them. But at last it abated. In silence, Uncle Maurice filled buckets and emptied them into the mangers. In silence, Tess helped. But her uncle's anger still resounded in the slamming of bolts as he opened the door of the milking parlour, and the cattle gave him a wide berth as they came in to take their places.

The sun was climbing high in a cloudless sky by the time the breakfast dishes were washed and put away. Tess asked if she could go out for a walk, and her Aunt Deirdre consented. The two boys, ten-year-old Brian and three-year-old Colm had already gone out to try to catch the bad-tempered little Shetland pony that grazed among the cattle, but for a few awkward moments it seemed likely that Orla was going to tag along as well. To Tess's relief, her aunt wouldn't allow it.

'What would you do if you couldn't catch your breath out there, child? What would poor Tess do?'

Before Orla could appeal the decision, Tess slipped out of the back door and headed off quickly across the broad, green meadows of the farm. She was delighted that she hadn't been made to come up with an excuse for wanting to be alone. It was never easy to lie about it, but it was vital that she had time to herself.

To her annoyance, Sceolan, the younger of the two dogs, attached himself to her heels, and no amount of stern instruction could persuade him to go back. But before they had gone too far he spotted Bran and Uncle Maurice gathering sheep and raced off to make a nuisance of himself. Tess pretended she hadn't seen them and walked on, climbing gates and walls until she came to the end of the clean meadows. The highest of them had been bulldozed in the distant past and the piles of cleared stone made untidy walls. Beyond, the rough land began; the area that Tess couldn't wait to explore.

She looked back at the house. She had already covered a good distance and it was unlikely that anyone was watching, but she could still see Uncle Maurice and hear him swearing at Sceolan, and she felt much too exposed to Switch. So she walked on, over ground that became rockier and more difficult at every step. Beneath her feet the limestone was full of fossils. Here and there huge flakes of it broke away and revealed the shapes of shells or mud patterns; the rock's own memory of its origins, deep beneath some ancient sea. The sense of great age gave the whole place a mysterious air, and a thrill of adventure coursed through Tess's bones.

Ahead of her the land rose gradually for another quarter of a mile, then reared up abruptly in a towering cliff face that her cousins referred to as The Crag. At its foot she could see ash trees stretching out of a forest of hazel; a perfect place to explore and try some of her favourite animal forms, perhaps for the last time. She quickened her pace and before long she had come to the edge of the woods.

But they looked quite different from close quarters, and not friendly at all. Before moving to Dublin, Tess had spent most of her life in the countryside, but it had been broad, rolling farmland; small, closely-tended fields surrounded by straggly hedgerows. This was quite different. This was a wild and alien place. Small blackthorn bushes stood like squat sentries at every entrance, challenging her to brave their sharp weapons. Beyond them the interior of the wood was darkly green, full of shadows and silence.

Tess stepped back and made her way along the awkward stony ground at the woods' edge, hoping for an easier way to get in. Sometimes a stone wobbled or a stick cracked beneath her feet, and it seemed to her that she heard corresponding footsteps inside the woods. She stopped. The silence was complete. But as soon as she walked on she could hear them again, quite clearly this time; whispering footsteps on the soft woodland floor.

Again she stopped; again there was silence. Just ahead of her an entrance seemed to present itself; an opening like a dark tunnel, not obstructed by thorns. Tess hesitated. A blackbird gave an alarm call, a panicky rattle that seemed to tail off into a sinister laugh in the dark interior. Afterwards the flutter of bird wings sounded more like bats, and made Tess's skin crawl. She breathed deeply, trying to collect herself. It was only a wood, that was all. A quiet wood at the foot of a mountain. It couldn't possibly be dangerous.

But at that moment, as though to prove her wrong, something moved, gliding swiftly and silently among the shadows. Tess stepped back, unsure what she had seen. Whatever it was had walked on two legs, upright like a person. But it was vague and shadowy, too tall to be human and much too fast. What was more, it seemed to have antlers on its head.

Tess had seen enough. Her courage failed her and she began to walk quickly back the way she had come. glancing round frequently, her nerves on edge. Not until she was safely inside the boundaries of the farm meadows did she relax enough to stop and look back. From where she stood she could hear the anxious complaints of the gathered sheep and the irritated tones of Uncle Maurice's voice. The mountain was silvery-grey, its flowing lines graceful and soft, the woods at its feet grey-green and innocent. Tess wondered how she could have been so stupid. Surely there couldn't have been anything in those woods. It must have been her imagination. What was worse was that she had just wasted one of the last opportunities she was likely to have to make use of her Switching powers.

She would have gone back in the afternoon, or perhaps taken another route into the mountains, but her aunt, perpetually overstretched, collared her to look after Colm while she brought Orla to a local homeopath. Tess wanted to take Colm out for a walk or a game of football, but he was determined to stay in and watch his new Star Wars video, and when it was finished he wanted to watch The Empire Strikes Back as well. Tess watched with him, enjoying the films despite herself, and after lunch Uncle Maurice went out to meet someone on business and Brian

joined them in the sitting-room. Colm didn't appear to understand a word of what was going on, but it didn't matter to him. He loved the little robot R2D2 and curled up with glee every time it uttered its electronic language of squeaks and bleeps. Tess laughed at his pleasure. There were worse things than having small cousins. Nonetheless she was uneasy. Time was running out.

That evening, Uncle Maurice was in an unusually cheerful mood. When he had finished his dinner he pushed his plate aside and said, 'Well, I've cracked it.'

'Cracked what?' said Aunt Deirdre.

'The sale of that piece of land. There's a developer in Ennis who is going to buy it off me to build a holiday village.'

Orla was always slow at eating, and this evening was no exception. Her plate was more than half full, but she put down her knife and fork in a very conclusive way. She looked across at Brian who, it seemed to Tess, had suddenly gone pale. He glanced back at his sister, and Tess thought she detected an expression of alarm in his eyes.

'You know. A place where tourists can come and buy a house, or rent one,' Uncle Maurice went on. 'Great spot for it. I'll be getting the deeds from the solicitor in the next couple of days. I'll need your signature, Deirdre.'

Aunt Deirdre nodded passively. But Orla said, 'Do we have to sell it, Daddy? Can't we keep it?'

'That piece of land is no use to us at all,' her father replied. 'You know that as well as I do. And think what we could do with the money!'

'But what about Uncle Declan?' said Orla. 'Couldn't we...?'

She got no further. If looks could kill she would have shrivelled in an instant beneath her father's furious stare.

'I'll not have that name mentioned at this table,' said Uncle Maurice, his voice conveying a growing danger. 'And as for the land, when one of you is running this farm let you run it as you want. In the meantime I'll make the decisions.'

His statement met with silence. Tess couldn't understand what was going on, but it was fairly clear that it was not a good time to ask. Her aunt was as white as the wall behind her. The rest of the family prayed that the fuse would go out before it lit the powder. And for once, it did.

After dinner, Tess went with Uncle Maurice and Brian to do the evening milking. Tess put out the nuts while Brian let the cows in. Bran and Sceolan made little rushes at their heels, but it was only for show. The cows knew exactly where to go and needed no encouragement. When the first lot were all in their stalls, Tess went round with the bucket of udder wash. Brian came along behind her, attaching the cups. Uncle Maurice stayed up near the machine's motor, checking that everything was going smoothly and doing a chemical test on the milk.

When the machine was set up and doing its work, Tess leant against the railings beside Brian.

'Why was Orla upset?' she asked. 'About your dad selling the land?'

Brian looked at her searchingly, as though he was trying to decide whether she was trustworthy. 'I suppose she thinks it's our land as well,' he said.

Tess nodded. 'Is it a big piece of land?'

Again Brian looked at her strangely, as though the information he was about to give was privileged in some way. He glanced around him, then shrugged.

'He has been wanting to sell it for years. Ever since he took over the farm from his father.' But if Brian planned to say more he didn't get round to it, because at that moment Uncle Maurice came marching towards them.

'Are you checking them?' he asked, knowing that they weren't.

Brian moved off and Tess followed, making sure that the cups were properly in place. The conversation had left her with more questions than answers, but her uncle seemed to be keeping a close eye on her and she couldn't get close enough to Brian to ask more. Some of the cows had finished their nuts, and turned to look at her as she worked around them. And although she had never found it very interesting to be a cow, she found their placid temperaments calming and she enjoyed their dry, philosophical humour. They had no language as such, but their expressions and movements told their stories. Best of all, Tess enjoyed the secret she learnt; that although Uncle Maurice considered himself to be their lord and master, they regarded him fondly as a rather bossy calf, who drank more milk than he ought to but was, like all young, ignorant things, tolerated.

When they had finished with the first lot of cows they moved quickly on to the second, and then the third. It wasn't long before the milking was over, and afterwards, while Brian and his father hosed down the floor of the shed, Tess went out into the yard.

The sun had dropped on to the horizon, where it sat like a vast, dazzling headlight. It lit the mountain