



## Tale of Birle (Tales of the Kingdom Book 2)

By Cynthia Voigt



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*There are some who say that the Lady Fortune  
has a wheel, and all men are fixed upon it.  
The wheel turns, and the men rise, or fall,  
with the turning of the wheel.*

Birle has agreed to be wed to the huntsman Muir as an escape from the drudgery of life at her father's inn -- but the moment she looks into the bellflower blue eyes of the man she comes upon stealing one of her father's boats, Birle knows she cannot marry Muir. Even after she discovers the mysterious stranger is Orient, a Lord and as unreachable to an innkeeper's daughter as a star, Birle is determined to travel with him as far as he will allow.

Their travels take Birle to a world far from home, a world where Lords may become slaves, where Princes rule by fear, and where Fortune's Wheel turns more swiftly and dangerously than Birle could have imagined.

Newberry Medalist Cynthia Voigt's second novel of the Kingdom, set two generations later than *Jackaroo*, is a memorable combination of thrilling adventure and heart-stopping romance.

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Cynthia Voigt won the Newbery Medal for *Dacey's Song*, the Newbery Honor Award for *A Solitary Blue*, and the National Book Award Honor for *Homecoming*, all part of the beloved Tillerman cycle. She is also the author of many other celebrated books for middle grade and teen readers, including *Izzy*, *Willy-Nilly* and *Jackaroo*. She was awarded the Margaret A. Edwards Award in 1995 for her work in literature, and the Katahdin Award in 2004. She lives in Maine.

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The Tale of Birle

## Chapter 1

WHAT SHE SAW FIRST WAS a moving shadow. In the trees that bordered the meadow, among their dark trunks, something moved.

She heard nothing to alarm—not over the rush of water and the sweep of wind—but she saw a dark, crouched shape, moving.

The shadow, no more than a darker darkness in the night, crept out from the mass of trees, crept low across the long grass toward the docking place.

No man of the village would move so. A man of the village, come out to check a hastily secured boat, would carry a light. He would come along the path that ran from the village through the Innyard, the path she stood on. No fisherman would be setting off, not at this hour, not on a moonless night when all the stars shining together couldn't penetrate the dark, windy air. Birle stood motionless, watching.

She herself ought not to be out in the night. Da and Nan would not be pleased to know how she had left her small sisters asleep in the bed they shared, pulled on her skirt and overshirt, and latched the door stealthily behind her to tiptoe past the room where her brothers slept, past the room where Da and Nan slept, down the broad staircase, and across the empty public room. In the kitchen, where the banked fire glowed in its ashes, she had put on her boots and taken her cloak from its hook. The dogs, if they heard anything, knew her steps and took no alarm. Da and Nan, if they knew, would be mightily displeased, and they would lay angry words across her shoulders. Aye, they were counting the days left to the spring fair, when they would have her married and gone from their care. Aye, and Birle was counting them, too.

The shadow was human, she had no doubt of that. Only a man or woman would move so, hunched over, gliding along the edge of the river like a beast on the hunt among the long grasses. Watching, Birle let the wind urge her down the path to the docking place. Whatever else, the shadow was up to nothing lawful.

Soaking spring rains had turned the path to mud. Her boots made squishing sounds, so she stepped off the path into the grass. As soundlessly as the shadow before her, but more swiftly, she approached the river.

She should return to the sleeping Inn, she knew that, and rouse her brothers. At the least, she should turn and

call out an alarm, to set the dogs barking. But the mystery of the intruder, like the mystery of the night, which had called her from sleep, kept her from doing what she ought.

It wasn't that she hadn't heard the tales. There was no child who hadn't been warned. Some of the warnings spoke of robbers, dangerous especially to a woman, murderous to all; others told of servants so hard used, or so proud-spirited, that they fled their masters, fled even knowing that if the law caught up with them—man or woman—they might be hanged, or have branded on their right palm the mark of the renegade servant. This shadow, she thought, wasn't a robber. Robbers moved in bands, like wolves. Anyway, robbers were few, here in the remote southern lands of the Kingdom, where the cleared land was rich to farm and the goats and pigs fed to fatness; where even in the sharpest days of winter fish might be taken from beneath the ice of the river; where the forests were filled with game, and the Earl's huntsmen kept the pathways safe. This was no robber, she was sure of that.

If it was an escaping servant, Birle wouldn't be the one to return a man or woman to the servant's life. For all that she was the Innkeeper's daughter, her own life tasted more like service than freedom—and that was sour in the mouth. But it wasn't long now, she reminded herself, not many days and she would be wed and away.

Because she moved erect and quickly, she stepped onto the planks of the dock just as the shadow-shape bent over an iron cleat at the far end. The thick boards creaked in the river's currents. The boat tied there bounced and slapped upon the dark, wind-troubled water. The river was running high and fast, in its spring flood.

The wooden planks echoed her footsteps, making them even louder. The shadow heard her now, and now had arms she could see—gathering in the rope that pulled a boat's narrow bow to the dock. Secrecy lost, Birle ran to prevent the theft of the boat. The thief did not concern her. She had no desire to catch the thief.

It was too late. Just as she reached it, the shadow—turning an alarmed, pale face—jumped out into the boat and scrambled onto the rowing seat. It dropped its pack onto the floorboards, then bent down to pick up the oar handles. Its arms pushed out, rowing backward. The oars banged against the sides of the boats tied alongside. Not a fisherman, Birle knew, neither a boatman; someone who knew boats would let the current carry him free before trying to put his oars into the water. She stretched her hands out, kneeling on the rough wood, to catch the bow with her hands.

The oars found water, and dug into it. That stroke, aided by the swift current under the boat, was more than Birle could resist. She raised her head to call out, already knowing what they would say to her for not raising the alarm sooner. She filled her chest with air for a sound loud enough to rouse the dogs, who would then rouse the sleeping Inn—and felt her body pulled off-balance, pulled out over the black water, pulled up from the planks and dropped into the river.

Water rose up around her. Birle kept her head, and kept her strong grip on the bow of the boat. She could swim. She had no reason to be afraid. The rowing shadow made grunting noises and she knew why—with her weight at the bow of the boat, it would be hard work at the oars. Her boots filled with cold water, her cloak and skirt were logged down with it, her own weight pulled heavy at her arms. She could imagine how heavy a burden she was to the rower, and the thought pleased her. Slowly, hand over hand, she worked her way around the side.

An oar fell down upon her shoulder, just missing her head. She grabbed the blade with one hand, and held it. "Thief!" she cried. "Thief!"

The thief pulled at the oar, but she held firm. The cloaked shape turned to face her. She couldn't see the

riverbank, but she knew the boat was moving swiftly; the water pulled at her skirt and cloak and boots. She couldn't see the face but she guessed, from the way the figure sat and turned, that this was a man. His voice confirmed it.

"Let go," he grunted. "Let go! I've no wish to harm you but I will. I warn you. Go off, let go, go away now. You can swim, can't you?"

Water flooded into Birle's mouth and prevented her from answering. Her boots were filled with water, and if she had not had one hand on the side of the boat, it would have been hard work to stay afloat. She spat her mouth empty and realized the truth: "Aye, I can, but not dressed as I am." Because she had no choice, she let go of the oar to have both hands free, and started to haul herself up over the side and into the boat.

The boat rocked under her weight. The thief moved away from her—but for balance, she thought, not for fear. Birle rolled herself over into the boat, thumping down onto the floorboards. Once she was safely in, she moved to crouch in the bow, her legs under her in case she needed to spring. He was a dark shape at the stern, himself crouched.

"I wish you hadn't done that," he said, moving toward her. His voice sounded genuinely regretful. "You better take your boots off, because I'm going to have to throw you back into the river. But know this: I am no thief."

"Oh aye," Birle answered. She didn't need to say more. A man taking a boat that wasn't his was a thief. She tensed her legs and gripped the two sides of the boat. "Try to throw me into the water and you'll find you've tipped the boat as well, and yourself too."

He froze in place, considering. She was ready for whatever move he might make. "And you," she asked, "can you swim? I doubt it. It's not many who have the skill. I doubt you swim any better than you row. Thief."

"Believe what you like, I've told you true," his voice answered, out of the windy darkness. "Since you're kind enough to be concerned," he said, not meaning the words at all, "I'll promise you I can swim, and strongly."

Birle was sorry to hear that, but it wouldn't do to let him guess it. "Aye," she said, "and which bank will you choose? Or will it be the current choosing for you, and you helpless. You've your own boots to take off, that too, before they pull you under."

He moved, but only to sit down to the oars again. Facing her, he had to row with the broad, flat stern of the boat facing clumsily forward. "I'll take you to shore." The bow swung around.

"You'll not get rid of me without a fight," Birle promised him. He ignored her, and struggled with the oars. "And what if you lose the boat, with the bears come out from their winter sleep, coming down south where the grubs and berries are more plentiful, and the wolves behind them still carrying their long winter hunger. There's naught but forest here, one bank or the other, unless you know your way. A man alone in a forest is a sorry creature."

He lifted the oars out of the rushing water and Birle felt the bow swing, as the current caught it. She smiled to herself: That battle had been won. She stretched her legs out, settling herself more comfortably—if you could call this wet cold comfortable. He sat hunched over, thinking, the oars in his hands. Let him think. Let

him see where it would get him. He was a stranger to the river and she was not.

He lifted his head and once again put the oars into the water, once again turning the stern of the boat. She pulled her legs back under her, ready.

“There will be holdings along the river,” he said.

“No, none. Not in this part of the Kingdom, not in the forest. You’ve left the last village behind you.”

He didn’t know whether to believe her. He left the oars in the water but ceased his attempts to row. The boat swung around again. He ought to believe her.

The thick-growing trees made a dark wall on either side of the broad river. The boat moved swiftly, racing the waves that pushed it along. Birle wrung what water she could from her cloak, and waited. She could wish for a fire.

“All right then,” he asked, finally, “what would you do?”

She knew before she spoke it how her answer would anger him. “I’d take the boat to shore.”

“So. There are no bears, no wolves.”

“That I didn’t say. Do you want to hear what I’d do, or do you want to go along in your own unknowing way?”

“I always go my own way,” he announced. “But I’ll hear yours,” he said, for all the world as if he were the Steward listening to a man plea for lower taxes.

“I would tie up for the night,” she told him. “There will be a tree or a low branch at the shore. I’d tie up there, to await daylight—you can use the rope you loosed, when you were stealing the boat.”

“I have told you what I am not.”

He spoke too well for a robber, she thought, or a common servant. He was, at a guess, a city man, one of the Lords’ household servants. She couldn’t think why he would flee from the ease of such a life, but she assured him, “It’s only the boat I want.” She would let him go on his way southward and herself return the boat to its owner. She was shivering over her entire body, with cold. Tied up to the bank, she would at least have protection from the wind. “I’ll row,” she said.

“Thank you, no. I’m fine with it.”

He wasn’t fine. The little boat twisted and rocked with his clumsy rowing. “The work would warm me,” she said.

Without a word he moved himself onto the board that made a seat at the stern of the boat. Shivering, keeping low so as not to upset the balance, Birle settled herself onto the rowing seat, facing him. The oars waited for her hands. She brought the bow around, and pulled strongly for shore. These fishing boats were built to ride high and light on quiet waters, so it would have been foolishness to try to take it back upriver, against the waves and current. She made straight for the low bank. Close enough, she could see a young, straight tree

they might safely tie up to.

Up near the bank, the wind spent itself among the trees, and the heat of her body made the wetness of her clothes at least not cold. She left the oars and leaned out from the bow to loop the rope around the tree and then, quickly, before he might get up to mischief, turned back.

He sat watching her, silent.

She settled down into the bow. This was a double safety. He couldn't untie the boat without waking her, and should he decide to attack she could be out of the boat and in the shelter of the forest before he might do her harm. Bears were there, and wolves, that was true, but not many in this well-hunted forest. On the other side of the river, where no men had settled, such dangers were more common. Birle shivered again, along the whole length of her body.

"You might lend me your cloak," she asked. He lay on his back along the seat at the stern, with his pack to make a pillow under his head.

"And why might I do that?"

"Aye, my clothes are wet, and cold."

"Since that results from jumping into the river of your own free choice, it makes no persuasion," he told her.

"Aye," she pointed out, "I was chasing after a thief."

He didn't answer. Birle fumed: When light came she would be able to identify this boat, which belonged to one of the village fishermen, or might even be one of the Inn's boats. She tried to think of what to say to this runaway, to show her scorn of him, but no words came to her. Besides, she could hear in his silence that he had fallen asleep. It was easy for him to go to sleep, she thought, wrapped as he was in a dry, warm cloak.

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