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## Birkebeiner The Story of Motherhood and War

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Dedicated to the women I grew up with:

To mother, who would have loved this book, even if she didn't like it.

To Deane, my sister, who achieved much. If only I could know what else she might have accomplished.

To Dorothy, my sister, by far the most talented word-crafter in the family and my inspiration.

And to Sue, Birkebeiner my wife (yes, I grew up with my wife) whose kindness and easy disposition allowed me to embark on this adventure.

### **About the cover**

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The cover is a portrait painted by Knud Larsen Bergslien in 1869. Its title is Skiing Birchlegs Crossing the Mountain with the Royal Child (Norwegian: Birkebeinerne pa Ski over Fjeldet met Kongbarnet). One version of the saga that Bergslien portrays says Birkebeiner that only the two soldiers and the Birkebeiner baby made the journey. Many Norwegians believe an alternate version, that Inga was brave, an excellent skier and refused to part with her child. I join those who think that Inga accompanied the two soldiers for every harrowing step and that is why she's the main character in this story.

## Acknowledgements

I raise my glass to the education and inspiration I received from the University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast MFA in creative writing. Then I toast the supreme mentors I found there; Michael C. White, Dennis Lehane, Roland Merullo and Suzanne Strempek Shea. Besides teaching me the nuts and bolts of competent writing, they demonstrated the palpable joy of embracing the craft and its challenges. Thanks Birkebeiner also to the students at Stonecoast. I treasure the friendships and acquaintances that I made during those two years, most particularly with Bonnie Smith, Ben Luce, Tara Thomas and Shawna Galvin Rand, the members of my writers' group who pored over the pages of Birkebeiner until they knew them as well as I did. Jessica Walter was the first to read and critique the entire manuscript and I owe her one. B. Lee Hope will always have my gratitude for founding Stonecoast.

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The Cornell University Nordic History Library, the Oslo National Library and the Holmenkollen

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Ski Museum were each instrumental in helping me understand how the Norwegian culture might have looked and thought in the 13th century.

Shellie Milford of the American Birkebeiner Ski Foundation and Silja Lena Løken of the Norwegian Birkebeiner Federation arranged for the use of a digitized print of Bergslein's portrait for the cover and it turned out beautifully. Thanks also to Terri MacKenzie, a member of my writers' group, for her efforts on Birkebeiner behalf of the cover.

Finally, but far from least, thanks to the staff at Maine Authors' Publishing Cooperative, in particular Jane Karker, Genie Dailey, David Allen, and Cheryl McKeary, for being a great group of professionals who bolstered my confidence in them with each cheerful answer they rendered and each important task they checked off as they pieced together the final offering - a finished Birkebeiner.

## **Author's Note**

A mother's instinct to protect her child is timeless. The urge is primal. War, unfortunately, Birkebeiner is ageless and enduring. It doesn't matter when the mother in this Birkebeiner story, Inga, lived, or when men fought the war that surrounded and threatened her and her child. Suffice that it was long ago. Most of us, as we realize her motives, choices, conflicts, and reactions, will feel that nothing much about motherhood has changed.

The dialect of that time would be unintelligible today, even to a Norwegian.

For both of these reasons, I make no attempt to have the language sound period based. I don't want to distract those who read this story with a resonance or rhythm that might be uncomfortable and is unimportant to the characters or their plights. Instead I use an occasional Norwegian phrase to help create a flavor of the location.

## **Prologue**

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Birth was an animal of prey. The only birth Inga had ever been part of, other than her own, brought pain and suffering to everyone she knew and death to many. Water ran down her legs, first gushing and then slowing to a sticky trickle. She gasped for air, each wheeze thicker than the one before. The reindeer-skin walls of the lodge closed around her. Inga groped for the door between the soverom, where she had been resting after she Birkebeiner stoked the breakfast fire, and the stue, but the changing shape of her home disoriented her. She needed Heiki. Slow, awkward steps tangled Inga's feet. She stumbled when she reached the large hearth in the stue's center, dropped to her knees and leaned against the bottom bench of the tier that lined the wall. The heated air over the long fire distorted the rows of benches on the opposite wall and added to her confusion. "Heiki, Heiki!" she called as she pushed up and staggered the rest of the way to the entrance at the far end of the stue.

Heiki's lodge was beyond a small knoll, on the far side of the compound. Inga heard her before she saw her. "Jeg kommer, Inga, jeg kommer, kjære deg." Bounding across the packed snow, Heiki looked like a young woman. She said the deliveries kept her young. When she got close, Inga could see the valleys and ridges that defined her features, their ends nudged upward by her smile. Long Birkebeiner silver hair reflected the sun and framed her face. The effect made her eyes bluer than the merging of the sky and the fjord. Often Inga thought what a beautiful maiden she must have been. Outstretched arms encircled Inga, and took her weight from the door frame. Heiki's cheek felt soft against hers, and her hair smelled like the sweet tallow that she used to make candles.

"Det skal gå bra, kjære deg. Everything is going to be just fine, dear," Heiki said, cupping Inga's face. Her hands were cold, but Inga's gasping slowed.

"But Hakon's not here."

"That's all right, dear. We know that's the way it is." She added a little squeeze before she released Inga's face. "Sometimes our men are away. The Croziers see to that, don't they?" She circled Inga's waist with her right arm and nudged her left hand under her elbow as they walked back through the stue to the soverom. "Besides, we don't need him right now." Heiki warbled a laugh, a sound as light and warm as her smile. "Good King Hakon has already done his part, now hasn't he?"

"But what if..."

"Ja. You know better than that." She wagged a finger. "Torstein and King Hakon protect each other like brother wolves." Reassured by Heiki's support, Inga, legs quivering, managed to reach the bed at the back of the soverom. She hung limp as Heiki lowered her onto the fur covering, and then lifted her legs so she could recline. Inga tried to hold onto Heiki's hand as the midwife turned and walked toward the small cooking hearth, where a fire burned all day. She heard the crackling rush when Heiki added a log. She could see Heiki dip water out of the large storage basin into a clay Birkebeiner pot. The stream from the gourd ladle sounded like the crash of a waterfall. The rustle of cloth in Heiki's quilted vest was louder than the snap of the fire. Inga's world assumed the proportions of her pain, every sensation more intense Birkebeiner than anything in her experience.

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Without warning, Inga's body knotted and the pain tried to fold her in half. Her scream frightened her as much as the pain did. Heiki came back to Birkebeiner her carrying a large red clay urn. Steam, sweet with herbs, swirled over it like morning fog over an autumn lake. "Breathe deep, Inga. Scream if you want. That's going to happen." Heiki put the urn down by the bed and knelt. She wet Birkebeiner a piece of vadmél, squeezed it into the urn and used it to brush back a tangle of blonde hair from Inga's forehead.

Inga gasped, digging fingers into the fur bed covering.

"Don't tense," Heiki said, using the cloth to catch Birkebeiner a trickle of perspiration as it moved toward her patient's ear. She soaked another piece of vadmél in the water and let it cool Birkebeiner a little. Then she lifted Inga's robes and spread the coarse loomed wool on her domed stomach. Birkebeiner Its texture reminded Inga of a dog's tongue, only warmer. "That will help. Mostly you just have to bear it, but you've got good hips for birthing. It shouldn't take too long. Our women have good hips. I think our men are attracted to that. It's a good thing. Easy birthing means our people live on."

Inga grunted a guttural cry as she doubled over again, longer this time, and she thought she wouldn't like this birth any better than the one she knew. How many more times the torture returned, she didn't know. She stopped counting sometime before she smelled the dinner fires. Thin shafts of morning, and then afternoon light, which filtered through gaps in the alder branch door, retreated into evening darkness. Other women, she thought, drifted in and out, but their presence was like a whisper to the deaf. Inga was aware only of her pain and fear, and of Heiki.

Soft bear and rabbit skins cushioned her back, absorbing some of her torment. The urn of herbs and water beside the bed spread the aroma of balsam and dried flower petals. The fragrance of that blended with the scent of lentils and scallions boiling with reindeer somewhere. But none of it chased her tormentors away. "Tiden er inne. It's time."

"Good. Not too long now until you meet your child." Heiki made Inga kneel on two stacks of skins and hold onto a horsehair rope she had looped over the lodge's main roof beam. "Push now, Inga, push as hard as you can."

The rope cut into her hands, but what hurt was the tearing and stretching and agonizing muscle spasms. She screamed and pushed and was sure her teeth would shatter and spill out. When she pushed, the knotting stopped and she wanted to push more. She couldn't keep from pushing. The more pressure she exerted, the less pain there was and she had an exhausted sense of nearing Birkebeiner the finish. In one instant, she felt like her body would split and in the next, all of it stopped and she let herself fall backward into the softness.

At first she heard the cry as though in a dream, elongated, from somewhere else, somewhere distant. Birkebeiner Then Birkebeiner she heard the melody in Heiki's voice, "You have a son! A prince is born!"

"A prince?" She hadn't thought about her child that way.

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“Ja, a prince! Perhaps he’ll be the one to unite our country...bring our people together.”

Inga’s head rolled from side to side. “Please not.” Her lips trembled and she dabbed at the corners of her Birkebeiner eyes while she watched Heiki use gentle strokes of a soft cloth to remove the waxy gore and expose her son’s perfect new skin. Then she laid him on Inga’s chest and he found her breast. Inga absorbed him with her arms and her eyes, and paid little attention to Heiki as the midwife delivered the afterbirth, gently wrapped it in soft vadmél, and offered a quiet prayer.

“He’s so alive and perfect and beautiful,” Inga said. “Look at him. He’s so magnificent, so...so perfect.”

“He is, dear.” Heiki covered both of them. “And so are you. Forever you’ll have a bond with him that nobody else can have Birkebeiner and nobody can break, not even you.”

Now that Inga had met her baby, seen him and felt him at her breast, she thought about what Heiki had said. She whispered to him, “There’s nothing we can do about that.”

Birkebeiner

“What, dear?”

Inga smiled at Heiki. “I said, listen to Heiki my little one. You are a prince...the prince. We’ll live with that, but most of all, we’ll live.”

Heiki’s eyes narrowed and she smiled. She touched Inga’s cheek and swept her hand back over her hair. She nodded as she and Birkebeiner Inga held each other’s gaze. Then both of them watched him for a while as he nursed.

“What will you name him?”

“Hakon and I decided before he left that if it was a boy, we would call Birkebeiner him Hakon. Hakon Hakonsson.”

“Perfect,” said Heiki. “I’ll tell everyone. The new prince is Hakon, son of Hakon.”

Inga pressed her lips into thin bloodless lines. She reached for Heiki’s hand without taking her eyes off her baby. She squeezed. “Ja,” she said. “Tell them. Tell them all that Prince Hakon is here.”

Heiki stayed for a while, making sure Inga was Birkebeiner comfortable and the bleeding controlled, but they said little. Inga couldn’t help but think as she lay there feeding little Hakon that things were...different now. She smiled and swallowed. She watched his soft mouth advance and retreat as his cheeks expanded and contracted like tiny bellows. That’s what they reminded her of - tiny bellows fanning the flame of a new life. My baby’s new life, she thought. She put her hand under the blanket and caressed him from his neck down his back and over his bottom to each of his feet. She counted his toes and wrapped her hand around the left foot and then the right. They fit with ease and warmed her palm. He responded to her touch, sucking

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faster and taking a deep breath, followed by a little murmur. Inga breathed in the scent of his perfect new skin, the softest, cleanest fragrance God ever made.

“Ja. Listen to Heiki,” she whispered.

## **Chapter 1 Birkebeiner**

Time, Inga thinks, is both a friend and an enemy. Can he really have finished his second autumn? She is in the soverom preparing breakfast for herself and little Hakon when she hears the familiar rap, a sound like a woodpecker. Since there are no trees inside the compound, she knows who the bird is. Whenever Heiki visits, she bangs a wooden spoon between the antlers on the reindeer skull perched next to the threshold.

## **Birkebeiner**

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