

EVIE'S LEGACY

CHAPTER ONE

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Monika Publications

First published 2020 by Monika Publications

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Australia

www.monikapublications.com.au

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-publication data:

☐Creator:☐Rotondo, Louise, author.

☐Title:☐☐Evie's Legacy

☐ISBN:☐☐9780987269270

☐Dewey Number: A823.4

The characters in this novel are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

One



STORM

Half a dozen gulls were crouched on the grass, the wind ruffling their feathers as they waited for the impending storm. The raised voices coming from inside the cottage didn't bother them, nor did the crash and tinkle of breaking glass. They took to the sky, however, wheeling on the wind when the cottage door crashed into the outside wall. Evie appeared a moment later, careless in her urgency to be gone. A random gust wrenched the door away from the wall before slamming it back. Deaf to anything except her own grief, Evie didn't notice the crack that rent the air as the wood splintered.

Five steps from the cottage she paused and drew in a bracing breath before taking off across the grass barefoot, the wind whipping the skirt of her cotton dress about her legs. Ten more steps brought her to the edge of the road and blinded by tears, she dashed across without regard for anything, crushing grief coursing through her body. She noticed neither the brief squeal of tyres nor her neighbour's hasty exit from the car as she continued to run.

Alex stood beside the Land Rover's door, holding it against the buffeting wind. He watched Evie's progress, concern crinkling the edges of his eyes. The weather had taken a turn

for the worse and it was a time for hunkering down to ride it out, not visiting the beach in a summer dress. He turned his eyes to the cottage Evie shared with her husband and a low growl escaped from him. Bracketed in the doorway were Evie's husband, Neil, and another woman. The woman wore a red cardigan, her arms crossed across the front of her, stretching it around her body.

A snort erupted from Alex as he folded his long frame back into the car. He bet she was uncomfortable, and rightly so. None of the locals had ever been able to understand what Evie had seen in Neil when the pair had moved here. It was no great surprise either, if he was jumping to the correct conclusions, that faithfulness wasn't Neil's strong suit. With a final glance at the couple as he drove carefully off, a slow smile tugged at the corners of Alex's mouth as he watched the woman turn on Neil and give him a head-jerking slap across the face. In his opinion, he deserved that and more, but at the moment Alex's primary concern was making sure no harm came to Evie. Unease sketched lines in his forehead as he watched her disappear down the slope in the direction of the beach.

The increasing wind whipped Evie's long hair about her face, the ends stinging her eyes. She took off down the slope, legs pumping furiously, fighting against the fabric that entangled them. The sharp stench of ozone could be smelt as her feet fought against the undergrowth that blanketed the sand dunes at the top of the beach, yet on she ran. Evie stumbled slightly as the vegetation gave way to soft sand and her heavy foot falls sank. A hasty arm shot sideways and she regained her balance, doggedly continuing on her way, albeit in a slower and more ungainly manner.

By the time she hit the hard sand at the waterfront, her lungs were burning, unused as she was to running. She paused for a moment, her body bent forward, her hands resting on her knees. She sucked in large lungfuls of air trying to quell the

light-headedness. The storm was bringing with it a pervasive mist and she could taste the salty tang, the wind causing it to whisper about her skin in an other-worldly manner.

Evie straightened and looked out at the sea that was quickly becoming obscured by the rolling mist. The weather here in Orkney was so different from what she was used to back in Australia. She'd grown up beside the Great Barrier Reef where the beaches were long and golden and the waves gentle. With the exception of a vicious cyclone every decade or so, ferocious weather never touched the North Queensland coast.

Thinking of her hometown brought a debilitating pang of loneliness and she closed her eyes against it. She'd been so eager six months ago to be coming to a new life in Orkney. Everything had been new, fresh and exciting; a world away from what she was used to. She opened her eyes and a watery smile appeared. She loved it here. Despite her funny accent and the fact that she was an incomer, the locals had accepted her as one of their own. Sure they made fun of her differences, and she was sure on occasion they thickened their accents and threw in Orkney dialect to intentionally confuse her, but laughing at herself came naturally to her and nothing they did had malice behind it. Unlike her husband it seemed.

Hardness set in Evie's eyes and she drew in a ragged breath as the tears started again. Her lying, cheating husband. She turned to face the other end of the beach and resumed running. Her lying, cheating husband who had a partner living in Aberdeen. She had only taken a few steps before the first sob was ripped from her body. A partner living in Aberdeen and two children, which explained the weekly absences that she'd been led to believe were for work. It had never crossed Evie's mind that her husband could be leading a double life. A lunchtime visit to surprise her husband had irrevocably changed things. Ironically, the surprise had been hers, or rather hers and the other woman's. She'd been wronged in this too.

The sobs came in earnest now. Her idyllic life had just crashed at her feet as she realised their life together was a total fabrication. Neil's life before meeting her was nothing like he'd told her. The glamorous stories were just that—stories. Fiction. Make believe. He'd made up a life to impress her. Bigger fool him though, as she was the last person who needed to be impressed by anybody. Evie had always prided herself on her acceptance of people for who they were. She didn't need the stories of famous people, academic achievements or incredible jobs. And when it came to Neil, she had no idea who he was now that all the lies had swept away everything she'd thought she'd known about him.

Fat raindrops started to fall, and caught up by the wind, stung where they hit Evie's skin. On she ran, regardless of the mist that was making it harder to see or the abrasiveness of the wet sand under her feet. When the rain became heavier, she brushed away the wet tendrils of hair, which hurled by the wind, were plastered to her face. It didn't take long before she was soaked through, the wet fabric of her skirt impeding her progress. Yet on she ran, her sobs being lost to the furiously swirling mist.

Rognvald stood in the doorway, his attention fixed on the storm rolling in. This was the cottage he was born in and he'd been living and fishing these waters for all of his eighty-nine years. Most days he felt more weathered than the rocks below, yet each vicious storm that rolled in still gripped him. Nature at her most powerful and most perverse, each show still stunning in its uniqueness. He was also man enough to admit to himself, if not to anybody else, that there were still enough of the old stories running through his blood to make him wonder at it all.

His eyes widened in disbelief as he noticed movement in the mist. He squinted and made out a figure making its way up the beach. Nobody in their right mind would be out in this

weather. He reached to his right and grabbed the binoculars that he kept hanging on the wall. Lifting them to his eyes he struggled to clearly see and his breath hissed out when he realised it was young Evie. She'd have no idea of what was coming, only having been on the Mainland for six months.

He hesitated for a few seconds as he cursed her worthless rogue of a husband before deciding there was nothing else for it, he was going to have to make his way down and bring her back. It was a gamble as the rocks would be slippery and with the fog rolling in there was no guarantee he would be able to find her. Still, he couldn't just stand here and let her go to certain death. He grabbed his mack off the peg on the hall stand and headed out into the foul weather, hoping that the wee fool didn't get them both killed.

Evie could hear the angry waves beside her. They were obscured from her view even though she was close to the water's edge. She heard one crash with a mighty impact somewhere behind her, making her skin tingle. A spray of white spume arched over her head and she squealed in fright. Evie stopped dead in her tracks, logic and fear jostling for pre-eminence in her thoughts. Her chest was heaving erratically as she looked about her. Water swirled about her bare feet and she twitched from the sudden cold contact, goose pimples rippling her flesh.

Evie swung her head about frantically. She had no idea where she was. She turned her back to the sea, peering through the mist, but it was no good. She couldn't see any further than a foot in front of her and she had absolutely no idea where she was. In an effort to calm the rising panic, Evie attempted to slow her rapid breathing and focus. She needed to get off the beach and somewhere safe, she knew that much.

Another wave furiously crashed close behind her and she jumped involuntarily. Her heart was beating rapidly. She was in a precarious position and her senses were on alert. A mo-

ment later something hard made contact with her ankle and she let out a high-pitched shriek in fright. Cautiously looking down she noticed a small wooden box was responsible for her shock. Evie bent over and pulled it out of the swash. It was covered in intricate carving and would be well worth a closer look when she had time. It fitted neatly into her palm and she closed her hand around it, holding it tightly. Examination was for later. Right now she needed to get off the beach.

She had only taken a couple of steps in what she hoped was the right direction when a fierce gust of wind knocked her off her feet. Holding tight to the box, she pushed herself upright, only to be hit from behind by a rogue wave. The force of the water sent her sprawling and a scream was wrung from her. A second massive wave followed quickly on the first and Evie found herself completely submerged. She fought the water and the waves and sat up, wrenching her head free and gasping for air.

The force of a third wave completed what the first two started. It completely covered Evie tumbling her around as it did so. Still gripping the small box tightly she again fought to be free. This time though, she couldn't find her way out and the water continued to swirl around her face. Evie's lungs were burning. As the turmoil of the situation faded and her thoughts slowed, Evie found herself focusing on the soothing movement of her hair brushing against her face, lulled into semi-consciousness as the water receded. The world around her became fuzzily disjointed yet she sensed an indistinct fluttering move past her ear, words whispered in its wake, "You're the daughter of a Norse princess. Tell my story." A small smile curved Evie's mouth at the impossible words.

Rognvald made it down the rocky track in record time, slippery as it was. The storm was advancing more quickly than he'd expected. He cursed the weather and the silly actions of the girl as he made his way down the beach, head hunched

against the violent wind. He stood still for a second, trying to decide the best course of action. He had no idea where the girl was, and the pervasive fog made it impossible to see.

He heard a brief squeal from somewhere nearby. He turned his head in the direction that he thought it had come from, although his experience of this part of the world had taught him that with gale force winds, the probable origin wasn't necessarily the true source of the sound. Squinting his eyes against the spray and bracing himself against the wind, he started in what he hoped was the correct direction.

A piercing scream was muffled by the fog and Rognvald quickened his steps, hopeful that he was indeed headed for Evie. The wind was buffeting him strongly and although he couldn't see it, he could hear the sea's fury. He sent up a prayer to Njörður the god of the sea and wind, that he could find her quickly and get them both to safety before he made his way further into the fog.

He started when he nearly stood on her form in the water a few moments later. After sending up a brief thanks, concern marred his brow when he realised she wasn't moving. He hauled her roughly away from the water before dumping her a short way up the beach.

'The Finfolk canna have ye yet lass.'

As Rognvald's fingers moved to the side of her neck to see if she had a pulse, Evie's head lurched sideways. His shoulders sagged with relief as water and the meagre contents of her stomach were ejected onto the beach.

As soon as she'd taken a couple of rasping breaths, Rognvald wasted no time in reaching down, collecting her up and throwing her over his shoulder. A feeble protest came from Evie.

'We've nae time lass. Be quicker like this.'

A lifetime of living here provided the knowledge Rognvald needed to get them home and despite the fog he strode in the direction of where he knew the track to be. Frustration fuelled his progress. The state of the lass meant he couldn't go back

up the way he'd come down. He'd have to go the long way and hope they reached his cottage before the worst of the storm hit. He cast a quick glance over his shoulder and quickened his pace. Quite frankly, he didn't like their chances and he hoped the gods weren't too angry at him for removing their prize.

Alex was frantic. He'd driven along the road that ran parallel to the beach as far as he could before taking his dilapidated Land Rover across the fields but he'd lost sight of her. The heavy fog that had rolled in, along with the wind-driven rain, had made visibility almost impossible. He bashed the palm of his hand against the top of the steering wheel, frustration radiating off him in waves. His eyes were still frantically searching even though logic told him he wouldn't be able to see her.

He roughly thrust the gear stick into first gear and slowly started moving across the grass. He didn't really think she could have made it this far, but there'd been no sign of her at any of the preceding tracks that led up from the beach. He furrowed his brow as he wondered the best way to go about this. There wasn't a large window of time. If Evie wasn't off the beach soon, nobody would be able to help her. The storm was approaching rapidly and furiously. He didn't have that long himself if he were going to shelter safely through the worst of it.

He allowed the car to keep inching slowly along. Suddenly he saw a figure outlined in the fog in front of the car. Alex hit the brakes, his heart thudding in his chest. Whilst he'd been looking out for Evie, he hadn't expected to actually find her, nor had he expected anybody else to be out in this weather. When the figure took a step closer, he still couldn't make out who it was, but he did notice what appeared to be another person slung over the shoulder of the stranger.

Without thinking about it, he jerked the car into neutral, pulled the handbrake on and was out of it in a flash. He had to hold hard to the door as a gust of wind threw it against him.

The figure finally appeared out of the fog and he was relieved to see it wasn't a stranger after all, but Rognvald and that it was Evie slung over his shoulder. Alex slammed the front door shut and wrenched the back door open, holding it against the wind to allow Rognvald to place Evie into the car. She looked briefly at Alex as Rognvald moved past him. Her face had a beatific look to it as she spoke to him.

'You've come for me Erik.'

Alex had no time to wonder at the question, or the form it took as Rognvald hurriedly climbed into the backseat after her pulling the door closed.

No sooner had Alex's weight hit the driver's seat than the other man was exhorting him.

'Drive man. We've nae got time.'

Even after two years of living on the Mainland, Alex still found broad accents like Rognvald's a little hard to follow. If the other man had said what Alex thought he had, then he agreed wholeheartedly—they didn't have time. He slammed the car into gear and took off across the wet grass in the direction of Rognvald's cottage. It was the closest of any of their homes and it would have to do. The storm and the fog made visibility almost impossible and Alex hoped that there was nobody else stupid enough to be out in this weather as he hurtled along the road as fast as the conditions would allow, grateful that he was well acquainted with the area.

Alex skidded to a halt on the loose gravel in front of Rognvald's house. He'd pulled up as close to the front door as he could. Rognvald was halfway out of the car, dragging Evie across the seat towards him instantly. He caught Alex's eye.

'The door to the hoose.'

Alex nodded and hunching himself against the wind, made his way across to open the door. Rognvald was close on his heels and Alex was stunned at the speed and agility of the man, given his age. Alex closed the door behind them and collapsed against it, relief flooding his body. Rognvald deposited Evie on the couch before shrugging out of his mack and hanging

it back on the peg. He absently ran a hand through his wet, shaggy hair before striding over to the wood stove.

He quickly filled the kettle and placed it over the hottest part of the stove, before turning to Alex, his face serious.

'Am grateful to ye. We would surely hae perish'd.'

Rognvald's attention was caught by the ferocity being unleashed by nature outside his window. He gestured with his head in Evie's direction.

'Let's get the lass oot o her wet things 'fore she fetches her daith.'

He nodded in Alex's direction.

'An ye too.'

Alex pulled himself up off the door, nodding as he did so, glad that one of them was thinking straight.