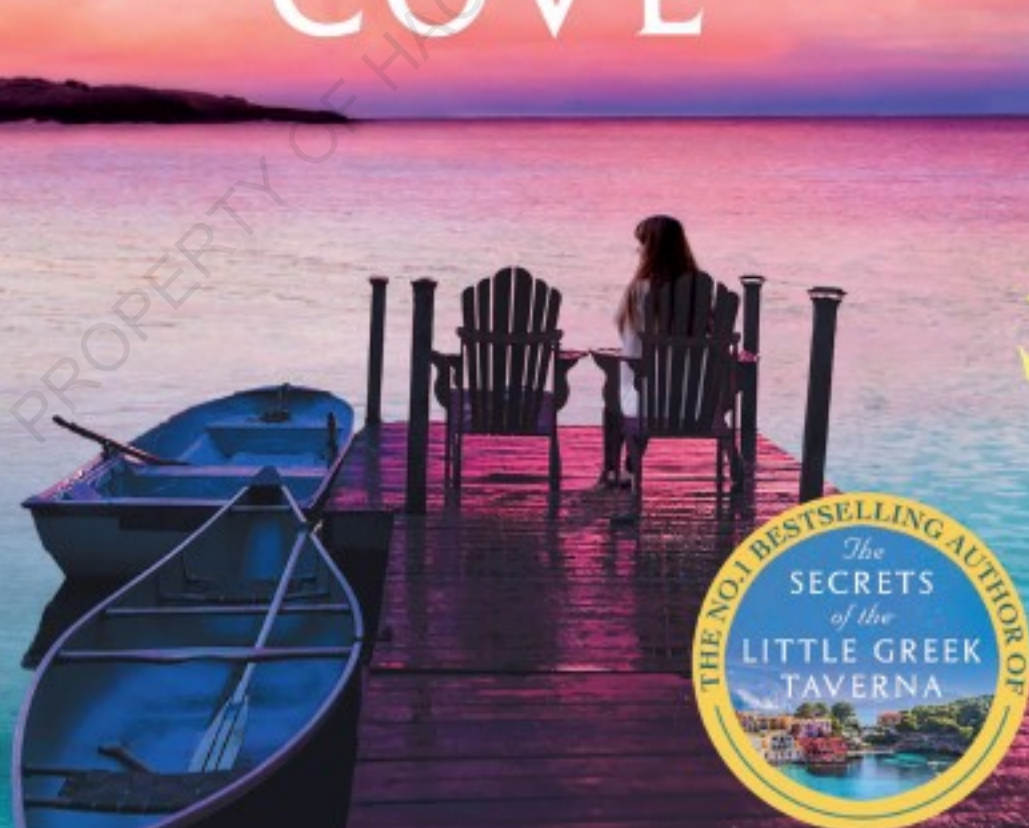


ERIN PALMISANO

The
SECRETS
of
MAIDEN'S
COVE



Chapter One

Grace woke with the sun, the light making prisms in her eyes as the sun rose over the bay. She unfurled her body from the love seat on her front porch, marvelling again at the fact that her childhood dream home was now hers.

It was old – a charming two-storey cottage that looked like it was out of a painting, with white siding and windows framed in blue shutters. A large porch wrapped around the house and faced the little beach where Grace now stood. She walked through the screen door and into the kitchen of yellow wooden cabinets with light all around. Her last home in Phoenix had been decorated by Richard, who loved modern style and blacks and greys. Over the past two months since she and Bayla had moved into Brixton Cottage, she'd turned the beautiful space into a home. It was

light and airy, filled with rustic old furniture Grace loved to hunt for at the antique shops. Everything about her home was welcoming and warm and just stepping inside made her feel safe and happy.

‘Mom, did you sleep outside?’ Bayla asked, putting down an old book. Her eyebrows furrowed as she looked to her mother and the door from where she came.

‘I went for a late night swim and fell asleep on the porch,’ Grace said, winking at Bayla, who looked inordinately pleased by her mother’s carefree antics. Ever since they moved to Maiden’s Cove, Bayla had been searching for magic in everything. Grace couldn’t blame her – she felt the same way every time she looked around her home, or felt the bay breeze that filtered through the always-open windows, smelling like summer. Even the way the water lapped up onto their beach, hinting at a secret beneath the surface – in comparison to their life in Phoenix, it all felt a little bit like magic.

She walked past and tousled Bayla’s head, pouring herself a cup of coffee. ‘Thanks for putting the coffee on, sweetheart.’

‘No problem,’ Bayla answered, delving back into the very large book she’d had her head buried in.

‘What are you reading?’ Grace asked.

The book that Bayla held up looked vaguely familiar.

‘Where did you get that?’ Grace asked, leaning forward to have a closer look.

'In one of the boxes I got from Gloretta's house. I found it in the basement. It had "Grace's books 2000" written on the side, so I figured you'd have been about my age and reading it at the time. So, Mom, listen to this and tell me if it sounds familiar.' Bayla began to read slowly.

"Maiden's Cove's founder was Eyefane Grip-hone." Bayla pulled her eyebrows. 'Is that right?' She pointed to the name on the page, Ifan Gryphon.

'It's Welsh. You pronounce it like Eevan Griffon,' she said, writing it down phonetically. 'And the next funny-looking one is said like Kill-drithe Mor-Win-Yon.'

'Weird language,' Bayla said, and continued. "Ifan Gryphon, a fisherman from Wales, founded the town as Cildraeth Morwynion, but over the years the simple fishermen on whom the town was based translated it into English and it has been Maiden's Cove ever since.

"Ifan was lured into the Cove after his ship had wrecked in the Atlantic by a beautiful woman of the sea, who rescued him and brought him to a forbidden shore. She was cast out by her people for helping the human, and she became his wife on the land for many years, even producing a daughter, as the town began to build and grow with local fishermen. One night, in the year 1714, on the first of June, green lights sparkled on the bay. The whole town saw the lights but knew not what they meant,

but in the morning, Ifan, Isolde, and the small girl, Isla, were gone, and never returned. Frightened, the townspeople feared the merfolk had lured them to the water with the lights, calling for their own to come home.

“The following year, on the first of June, the new mayor of the town, Ludlow Cleary” – Mom, that’s us, right? Cleary?” she asked excitedly.

Grace nodded warily and opened her mouth to interrupt but Bayla continued reading.

“Ludlow Cleary began a new tradition, holding the Festival of Lights at the start of each fishing season and the Maiden’s Cove Festival at the end. At the Festival of Lights, every Maiden’s Cove inhabitant would light a candle to bring the fishermen home, and not be tempted by the green lights that lit the water every year at the same time. It was whispered then that the Clearys could call the mermaids. This is the history of Maiden’s Cove and the Festival of Lights.”

‘Your grandad liked to call that story hogwash,’ Grace said.

‘That’s a funny word,’ Bayla said, laughing. ‘Hogwash.’ She giggled again. ‘I wish I remembered Grandad, but I was too little the last time we were here.’

Grace sighed, regret and sadness coursing through her. ‘You were just a toddler then. I wish you would have known him better too, sweetheart.’

'It can't be all hogwash though,' Bayla said. 'The whole town is decorating for the celebration! I can't wait to see the lights tonight. Do you really think there are mermaids out there, Mom?'

Grace laughed. 'Well you know what Grandad would say. There are some beautiful lights called bioluminescence – it's algae in the sand and it glows. But you'll see it all summer so you should go to the festival with Sylvie and let me pick you up later. It would be fun!'

'Nope, you promised you'd pick me up after work. Can't I come work at the restaurant with you? Please!'

Grace hesitated. She loved that Bayla wanted to spend her days in the restaurant she herself grew up in, to be a part of the legacy of the Cleary family she hadn't even known until a few months before. She marvelled at her daughter, at how adaptable she was since they'd moved back to Maiden's Cove two months before.

Bayla was eight years old and had left her life in Phoenix – her father, school and her friends – without much warning, to cross most of the country to an old and slightly dilapidated but charming cottage in Maiden's Cove. But instead of being sullen or anxious, she suddenly whistled and got up early, embraced a new fashion sense, and seemed overall truly happy.

And the only explanation Bayla had ever given her was a shrug, as though it were obvious. 'We are where we belong,' she

had said when they arrived at the cottage, and began to unpack and put everything away like she'd simply been waiting to arrive.

Grace pulled Bayla in for a hug. 'I love it so much that you want to spend the summer at Cleary's Crab Shack. But it's my first summer back in a long time and today is the re-opening of Cleary's since Grandad passed away. Things are not quite as ready as I hoped they would be, and I need to be prepared for any glitches. Maybe next week you can come in and I'll show you the ropes, okay?'

The toaster popped and Bayla put two toaster strudels onto separate plates, handing one to Grace. 'Is it still a "right shitshow" in there?'

'Bayla!' she cried, biting her lip to try to stop laughing. 'Where did you hear that phrase?'

'When you were on the phone with Cohen,' she said. Cohen had been Grace's closest friend in Phoenix and had helped them get the car to drive in the middle of the night back to Maiden's Cove. Cohen had always loved hearing her stories about Maiden's Cove and when she called him crying with the news that her beloved restaurant was in the red and she'd have to close if she didn't get it back on track this summer, he showed up within days of her call to help. For the past few weeks he'd been working tirelessly with her to get the restaurant ready for today.

'Sorry about the bad words,' Grace said, and then sighed. 'We still don't have a head chef, so that's the biggest problem. Jimbo and Della are holding the kitchen together and Gigi is doing amazing things with the pastry section, but without Dad leading the kitchen team we are still short-staffed. I've done some upgrading as well . . .' She stopped when she realised that Bayla was listening intently and not eating her breakfast and Grace swallowed guiltily. The last thing she needed to do was add any extra stress onto her young child. 'We'll get there, hon. I promise. Don't you stress. You're still a kid, you know?'

Bayla considered the words closely, her eyes shrewd and her head tilted. Finally, she nodded. 'Okay. After all, I am eight and I should really enjoy the first day of summer.'

Grace laughed. 'You should indeed. But it's not actually the first day of summer until June twenty-first. Which is the summer solstice, the longest day of the year.'

'In New Zealand, June first is the first day of winter. Did you know that?' Bayla asked. Grace shook her head. 'And *December* first is the first day of summer. Their seasons are the opposite. But they also like the first of the month to be the first of the season, so they ignore the solstice and make up their own dates. Uncle Ben has a friend that lived in New Zealand and he says New Zealanders can really do anything because they are so far away, who's going to pay attention anyway?'

‘You’ve been spending time with Uncle Ben?’ Grace asked, surprised but pleased.

‘Sometimes Sylvie and I pop into his shop. I think she has a crush on him even though he’s like, way old.’

Grace laughed.

‘He tells fun stories and lets me play on the kayaks when it’s not too busy. He said he always wanted to travel but never got around to it. I think I might like to travel when I’m a grown up.’

‘I think you might do anything you want as a grown up,’ Grace said, kissing Bayla’s forehead.

‘Do you think I can be a mermaid?’

Grace and Bayla walked from their cottage on Chelsea Bay and crossed the little footbridge to the village of Maiden’s Cove. The ‘island’ on which the town was built was not actually an island at all, but a peninsula, but during the higher tides the water covered the sand so that it did, indeed, look like an island. It was protected by the mainland with bays and neighbourhoods on either side. Chelsea Bay was on the west side of the Maiden’s Cove peninsula, their cottage just on the tip so that they had the sunset until the moment it disappeared over the horizon. Grace always thought that Chelsea Bay was the most beautiful

place in the world, with its hidden sandy beaches, historic houses like hers, and the long, tall grasses of the marshlands that seemed to sway like they were dancing with the sunset, when the fireflies came out and the sand began to glow with the bioluminescence.

It was said that many things could pass to and from when the tide was in over Maiden's Cove. Even the locals would admit there was something 'just a bit peculiar' about it, but they couldn't quite say what.

Or so it was said.

There was already traffic with tourists coming in early to find parking for the Festival of Lights, though the main events weren't until the evening. Grace's heart swelled with pride as they walked through town. While some places decorated their towns at Christmas, Maiden's Cove put on her finery for the summer, starting on Festival Day. There wasn't a streetlight or lamppost that wasn't covered in fairy lights with mermaids at the top that lit up in the night. Shops opened their doors and lined the windows with mermaid souvenirs – wood-carved, glass-blown, hand-painted. Special glowing candles to put in your windows that burned all night to bring the fishermen home. Large seashells that you could hear the ocean in, sea-glass artwork and workshops too, where you could take a guide to the hidden coves and search for sea glass yourself.

Everyone they passed turned and waved to them, smiling and calling out, 'Good luck today, Grace!'

In the town square the stalls were being set up for the evening festivities. Food stalls with caramel popcorn and funnel cakes, corn dogs and cotton candy. French fries with vinegar, fried oyster po-boys and massive crab-dip coated pretzels. Then there were the rides – the swings and a Ferris wheel, the Matterhorn and a carousel. There were games – the water-balloon popping and goldfish pinball – and a portrait artist doing charcoals of your face on a mermaid body.

The town was alive, thriving. Bayla's mouth was agape as she pointed out different stalls to her mother, her voice and face filled with joy, and Grace knew she'd made the right decision bringing Bayla here.

'Opening day today, Grace?' a voice called from atop a lamppost.

Grace looked up to see Ole Pete, one of the fishermen from when she was a child who used to bring in fish to Cleary's.

'Dad would have wanted us to be open for Festival Day,' she said, smiling up at him. 'It was his favourite.'

'He'd be right proud of you, Gracey, right proud.' He looked at Bayla. 'You going to work with your mom, Miss Bayla?'

'I tried but she won't let me. Thinks I should be a kid,' she called up, rolling her eyes.

'Ha! Never knew a kid who needed to be more a kid than your momma when she was your age. Spent every day at Cleary's

until that friend of hers finally showed up. What was her name again? Henry's girl?' he asked.

Grace's heart skipped a beat. There hadn't been a moment since she'd arrived back in Maiden's Cove she hadn't thought about her best friend from her childhood summers and wished her home in her heart. 'Isla,' she answered.

Bayla's head snapped back to Grace, her eyes wide. 'Like Ifan's half-mermaid daughter? From the history?'

'I think it's called a legend, kiddo,' Grace said. 'But yes. The same name. It's very popular these days,' she finished lamely.

'Well, have fun being a kid today!' Ole Pete called as he turned back to hooking up the lights.

'Thanks! Hey, Mom, look, Uncle Ben is just opening. I can see him pulling out the kayaks. Uncle Ben!' Bayla called, running down to Paddle Cove, her uncle's hire shop.

Grace followed, her stomach in knots. She and Ben had been so close when they were younger. Sure, in their teenage years they'd argued like any other brother and sister, but they were still family, until the year Grace came home after Bayla was born. Ben had seen something in Richard then that Grace didn't at that time. He'd been high-handed and demanding and they'd fought terribly.

That was the last time she'd been in Maiden's Cove. Her dad came out to visit once shortly after, but she was never allowed back home. By the time she realised that she was in a controlled,

mentally abusive and unhealthy relationship, she was too embarrassed to say anything to her father or Ben, and too afraid to leave. She and Ben hadn't spoken for years until she showed up two months ago.

'Uncle Ben! Can me and Sylvie take a kayak out today? She's babysitting me while Mom goes to open Cleary's again,' Bayla said excitedly.

He smiled at her with obvious affection but shook his head. 'It's a big day here too, kiddo, and everything is rented out. All the kayaks, canoes, rowboats and jet skis.'

'Sounds like business is going well,' Grace said with false cheer as she approached. Ben smiled but it was a tight smile, like it had been since she returned. It made her angry and then sad, and then she realised that he didn't know the truth, he didn't know anything, and until she confided in him, their relationship would be tense. But there was nothing tense in the way he spoke with Bayla, and for that she was eternally grateful.

'Everyone wants to be on the water in the summer on the Bay,' he said modestly. 'Hey, did you still need a chef over at Cleary's?' he asked as he started pulling more kayaks down from the racks.

'Yeah. Have you become one overnight and are offering to help?' she asked with a laugh.

'Naw, sorry. Luke just got back home though, from New Zealand. You remember Luke McCann?'

Grace's stomach did an unexpected flip. How could she *not* remember Luke McCann. Her first crush. Her *only* crush until he went away to college and she met Richard. Ben's best friend. She and Isla and Ben and Luke had been quite a group of explorers before they all became teenagers.

'Of course I remember Luke,' she said, rolling her eyes when she noticed him smirking. 'He was only your best friend for, like, ever. What's your point?'

'He's a chef,' he said simply.

'Oh,' Grace said, surprised. 'Well, tell him to pop in anytime that is not today. Is he any good?'

Ben shrugged. 'No clue. Didn't you guys work together at Cleary's?'

'Yes, but he was a bartender then,' she said and glanced at her watch. 'Shit! Bayla, come on, I'm going to be late!' She glanced back at Ben, who was looking at her like he wanted to say something else but turned instead back to the kayaks. She sighed and started to walk away.

'Good luck today,' he yelled to her at the last minute.

She turned and gave him a faint smile. 'Thanks.'



'Whatever is that delightful get-up you are wearing, Miss Bayla?' Sylvie called, as Bayla started pulling on her rollerskates.

‘Found it in Mom’s old trunk at Gloretta’s!’ she yelled back. ‘Isn’t it super cool?’

The ‘delightful get-up’ was an old green and blue glittery dress with spaghetti straps Grace had worn to her eighth-grade dance. She’d bought it because it was sparkly like the sand when she’d met Isla the summer before. It caused a stir at the dance and fed the rumours of the ‘mermaid caller’ even more. Grace had been thrilled.

Bayla, who was much smaller at eight than Grace had been at thirteen, wore it with leggings and cinched the dress around her waist with a rhinestone belt. She looked ridiculous but adorable. Richard had always insisted Bayla went to a school with a uniform, and outside of school had strict rules on what was acceptable for each of them to wear. So being able to wear whatever she wanted right now while she was exploring her slightly flamboyant fashion sense made Bayla joyful.

Sylvie turned to Grace, who had brought Bayla’s backpack up to the house. ‘Who’s Gloretta?’

‘It’s Bayla’s name for Loretta, her grandmother. Loretta is over the moon to have a cool grandmother name,’ Grace said wryly. ‘And be wary – Bayla is obsessed with anything out of her grandad and Gloretta’s house. She’s confiscated all of Dad’s Elvis CDs, Gloretta’s lipsticks, and anything and everything from our Cleary history and the history of Maiden’s Cove, especially if it’s about me.’

'Sounds like she's a little curious about where she came from. She must be so excited to come to a home that is all quirky and magical like Maiden's Cove,' Sylvie said. 'I guess we all take it for granted.'

Grace looked out and around, shaking her head. 'I never did, you know? Take it for granted. I loved my home more than anything in the world. I never wanted to leave.'

'Why did you then?' Sylvie asked.

Grace didn't answer, just stared out at the bay in a reverie until Sylvie cleared her throat. 'Sorry, Sylvie,' she said, coming back to the present. 'Lost in memories.'

'I can imagine,' Sylvie said.

Sylvie had the kind of mousy brown hair that was neither straight nor wavy, with soft brown eyes and braces, and skin that just hated being sixteen. She was awkward-looking but there was a confidence and humour about her that made you forget the flaws and want to be her friend then and there. Bayla adored her.

'I asked Bayla the other day if she wanted to go to the festival tonight, but she said no, she wanted to be able to see the lights proper,' Sylvie said, shrugging. 'What did she mean by that?'

'Don't ask unless you want a mythology lesson on Maiden's Cove.' Grace sighed. 'I'll be back by six, plenty of time for you to get down to the festival.' She walked down the driveway, catching Bayla on her skates and giving her a kiss on the cheek.

‘You sure you don’t want to go with Sylvie to the festival tonight? I could pick you up later?’

‘Nope,’ she said, wheezing slightly on her skates. ‘The Festival of Lights keeps the mermaids from coming *in* to the cove, which is exactly where I want them. Apparently from our side of the bay you can see the bio . . . um . . . no, the lamination? The green lights, and I want to see them. Also,’ she said, grabbing Grace to stop her from going downhill on her skates, ‘someone is coming, I can feel it.’

Bayla sped off down the street on her skates as Grace’s heart began to race. Did she mean Richard was coming? She opened her mouth to call out but Bayla was already down the road. Bayla still talked to her father on the phone once a week and he knew they were here in Maiden’s Cove, but so far he hadn’t spoken to Grace and it unsettled her, the way he was making her feel like he’d just let them go that easily, without a fight. No tears of regret for his actions this time. No begging her to stay. Just silence. A shiver went up her spine and she turned quickly, but no one was there.

‘Come on, Grace, keep it together. It’s Festival Day,’ she said over and over as a mantra, looking around once more before heading to the restaurant.