

The Letters at Blackwood Cove

Mailing 1 - digital reader sample

Welcome to Blackwood Cove

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You step into the role of Sandy, Claire's closest friend. Over the coming mailings, you'll receive her letters and copies of the discoveries she chooses to share. Simply read along as her story unfolds.

This is an original fictional story told through the mail.

Sandy,

I made it. Eventually.

Between the traffic out of Boston and a stretch of roadwork that seemed determined to follow me into Maine, I arrived with a headache, an empty paper lunch bag on the passenger seat, and very little affection left for other drivers. But the moment my tires hit Gram's gravel driveway, my shoulders dropped, and I could almost feel my blood pressure coming down with them. There was the porch, just as I remembered it, and beyond the house I could hear the water. I turned off the engine and sat there with the window down for a minute. After all those hours in the car, I didn't want to move.

The air had that cool, salty smell I've never found anywhere else. I know that sounds ridiculous. Boston has an ocean too. But here I could close my eyes and almost believe I was arriving for the summer again, with Gram waiting in the kitchen and nothing more urgent to do than take my bag upstairs.

Then I looked at the house keys in my hand and remembered why I was here.

The kitchen was exactly the same. The little table by the window, the blue-and-white plates on the dresser, the row of mugs beside the kettle. I reached for a mug without even looking. My hand landed just right. That made me smile. Then I caught myself listening for Gram to call from the next room and ask whether I'd eaten.

I knew she wouldn't be here, obviously. But knowing it on the drive up was very different from standing in her kitchen with her mug in my hand.

I put the kettle on anyway.

The house has been looked after. Everything is clean and in its place, which somehow made her absence harder to take. There wasn't anything I needed to do before I could settle in. Just my bag in the hallway and all these familiar rooms with nobody in them.

This was always the summer house to me. Even when Gram and Grandpa started spending more time here after they retired, it was still the place we all came back to, not the place we lived all year. I walked upstairs to put my things away and found myself looking into the rooms as I passed, remembering who used to sleep where. I could almost hear us arguing over who got the room facing the water.

Now I'm the one with the keys and a folder full of things that need sorting out.

With my Mom and Dad in California and neither of them doing well, and my brother over in London, it only made sense for me to come. I know that. I just hadn't quite imagined what it would feel like once I was actually here.

I brought my laptop and the little portable printer for the house stuff. Papers to copy, things to sign, all the practical jobs that seemed manageable when I made the list on my phone. I've set everything up at Gram's writing desk in the small sitting room downstairs, just off the kitchen. I couldn't bring myself to spread the folders over the table where we all used to eat breakfast.

The desk still has that little ring where she put her cup. I ran my thumb over it while I was sitting down and remembered how I used to perch on the arm of her chair and watch her sort through the mail. She'd let me open the envelopes, and she didn't mind me tearing them.

I miss her. Even that stupid little mark on the desk got to me. I sat here for a while before I could look at the papers.

And here I am, actually writing you a letter.

I nearly texted you when I arrived. Had the phone in my hand and everything. Then I remembered what you said before I left Boston.

"Take a little time off the grid, Claire. Not from everything. Just from feeling you have to keep me and everybody else updated every five minutes. You've lost your grandmother, things with Mark have been rocky, and now you've got this house to deal with. Give yourself a chance to hear your thoughts."

Then came your suggestion. No running commentary by text, no calling just to tell you I'd opened another cupboard. Instead, you suggested I sit down and write you letters. Real ones, put in envelopes and mailed to you.

"Pretend you're writing a book of sorts," you said. "Tell me what happened. Tell me how you felt about it. I think it might be cathartic. And I won't reply. I'm just here to read your letters. Take this month for yourself. When you get back, we'll open a bottle of wine and talk about all of it."

I agreed, although I wasn't sure I'd last two hours without sending you a text or a picture. You might want to get a second bottle. There could be quite a lot to talk about.

I know you weren't laying down rules for me. You were trying to help me slow down, and I think it's working. I'm not watching my phone to see whether you've read this or wondering why you haven't responded. I can just keep writing until I've said what I wanted to say.

I'm actually enjoying this, Sandy. Way more than I expected. I was only going to tell you I'd arrived, and look how much I've written already. I think it's helping to get some of this out instead of carrying it around in my head.

Which brings me to Mark.

When I told Mark I was coming up here alone, he barely looked up.

“It's probably best you go by yourself,” he said.

Best how? For me? For him? Because he thought I needed time with the house, or because it made me one less thing for him to fit around work?

I nearly asked, but instead, I said, “Yes. Maybe it is.”

Maybe he thought he was being helpful. Giving me space. I don't know. But I wanted him to pause for a second. Ask if I wanted him to come. Act like a month apart was going to feel a little strange to him, too.

Anyway, he did send a message before I left. “Drive safely. Let me know when you're there.” I told him I'd arrived, and he said he was glad.

There's nothing wrong with any of that. It's just that I wanted him to ask what it felt like to come back. Whether walking into Gram's house without her had been harder than I expected.

He couldn't have known I needed those questions because I didn't tell him. That's part of the trouble, and I know it.

Most of what we say to each other lately is about who's doing what, what needs paying, whether we'll be home for dinner.

We used to talk about nothing and laugh for hours. We'd stay up when we both had to be up early, just because neither of us wanted to be the one to end the conversation. I miss that so much.

I'm all right here on my own. That's the strange part. There have been evenings at home when I've felt lonelier with him sitting right beside me, and I hate even writing that down.

Anyway. I don't want this whole letter to be sad. I've unpacked, made tea and eaten something that didn't come out of a paper bag. For the first time in a while, I don't feel I ought to be doing three other things at once.

Sandy, I found something.

I was moving Gram's chair and rolling back a corner of the rug so I could run the printer cord along the wall. When I leaned down beside the desk, one of the floorboards shifted under my hand. It wasn't anything you'd notice by looking. The rug had covered it, and the board sat level with all the others. But when I pressed near the end, it almost popped out.

I put the cord down and pressed on that end again. The other end lifted enough for me to get my fingers underneath and ease the board out. Beneath it was a shallow space with a small wooden box tucked inside.

Cedar, I think. Small enough to carry in both hands, with a beautifully fitted lid and a tiny golden lock. There was a little dust on the top, so I wiped it away with my sleeve. On the side, etched into the wood, was her name.

Nora.

Not a label stuck on the box. Someone had actually taken the time to etch her name into the wood. I turned it over in my hands, wondering what she'd wanted to keep down there.

Anyway it's on the desk beside the printer now. I'm pretty sure I can get that tiny lock open with a knife. Whatever's in that box has to be more interesting than these folders.

I'd love to have a look tonight, but honestly, I'm so tired I can barely keep my eyes open. It's dark outside, my tea has gone cold, and I think I've reached the point where trying to do one more thing will mean falling asleep in this chair.

Tomorrow morning: coffee, then the box. I'll see what's in there and write you about whatever I find.

Anyway, I'm here and I'm okay. Exhausted, but glad I came. This place still feels like home, even with all the things that are different.

And you were right about the letters helping.

Thanks, Sandy.

Love,

Claire