

The Letters at Blackwood Cove

Mailing 2 - digital reader sample

Claire's next letter

Blackwood Cove, Maine - autumn 2022

Sandy,

Okay, you're not going to believe what was in the box.

I made my coffee like I said I would, opened the curtains and sat down at Gram's desk. The tiny lock took a little fiddling with a kitchen knife, but I managed to get it open without damaging the box. In daylight I could see the grain of the wood and the little marks around the edge of the lid. I turned it toward the window to have another look at her name. Nora, etched right into the side. Somebody had really taken their time with it.

I thought there might be old pictures inside, or jewelry. Something she'd put away so she wouldn't lose it. I was half expecting to recognize whatever it was.

It was letters.

Folded pages, one under another, filling the little box. The top one was yellowed at the edges, and there was a thin worn line along the fold. I moved my coffee to the other side of the desk before I touched it. I know. For once I thought of that before spilling anything.

I was so careful opening it, Sandy. The paper felt as if it might tear where it had been folded, and I kept stopping to ease it flat with my fingers. Then I saw the handwriting.

It was Gram's. I recognized it right away. I still have birthday cards from her, and the N was exactly the same.

But this wasn't anything like a birthday card.

The first words were "My dear Caleb."

Not Henry.

I looked at the name, then down at the signature, as though that might explain it. Then I read the whole thing. And then I read it again, because I honestly couldn't believe this was my grandmother.

Sandy, it's a love letter.

And I mean a LOVE letter. Not “thank you for a lovely afternoon.” There's a kiss in it. A boathouse. Gram telling this man how she was looking at his mouth while he talked, and that she wants him to kiss her again.

My grandmother.

Obviously I know she was young once. She didn't spend her whole life making tea and reminding me to take a sweater. But knowing that and reading a letter like this are apparently two very different things. I sat here with the page in my hand, trying to picture her writing it. Not Gram at this desk with her glasses on, but a young woman who couldn't sleep because she'd been kissed by somebody called Caleb.

It's dated August 1959, the year before she married Grandpa. So this was before the wedding, not something that happened behind his back. I hope! I don't actually know when she and Grandpa began seeing each other. I need to keep that straight in my head instead of deciding I already understand it.

But I want to know who Caleb was.

And why she never mentioned him. And how a letter she wrote to him ended up here, tucked beneath the floor beside her desk.

There's a whole little pile. I've only read this one so far. I put the others back because I came straight to the laptop to tell you, which I realize means I'm keeping myself from finding out more. You can see how badly our no-texting arrangement was tested this morning.

I want you to read it, but there's no way I'm sending the actual letter. I barely trusted myself to open it. So I took a picture and printed a copy for you. I've also typed out what it says because some of the writing is faded, and I don't want you struggling to read the good bits. I haven't changed her words.

Taking a picture doesn't count as texting you, right? I printed it. I'm sticking to our deal, even though this would have been a very tempting time to break it.

Read her letter before my little note at the end. I want you to see why I'm making such a fuss.

The folders are still sitting where I left them. I should be dealing with the house stuff. Instead I've let my coffee go cold while I try to imagine Gram walking home from this boathouse, hoping nobody notices her face.

And honestly, it feels good to be excited about something. I still miss her. I had one of those moments again this morning when I wanted to ask her something and remembered I couldn't.

But for a little while, reading this, I wasn't only thinking about the fact that she's gone. I was wondering what she was like before any of us knew her.

Lots of Love,

Claire

August 1959 - Blackwood Cove

My dear Caleb,

You mustn't laugh at receiving a letter from someone who could walk to your door in ten minutes. I have tried to tell you these things twice now, but you are a dreadful distraction when I am trying to be sensible.

Writing seems safer. You cannot interrupt me by smiling.

I thought about yesterday all the way home. Every time I remembered you putting down your tools to kiss me, I started smiling again. By the time I reached the house, I was certain Mother would take one look at me and know. I went upstairs to wash my hands and brush my hair, although neither seemed likely to make any difference to my face.

She asked where I had been. I told her I'd taken a walk by the water, which was true, although I doubt she would have approved of how little walking we managed.

Do you remember the first afternoon I stopped outside the boathouse? I told myself I was only curious about the boat. You were bent over the bench with your sleeves rolled up, and I stood there rather longer than I needed to before you looked around.

"You can come in," you said. "I don't charge for looking."

I told you I hadn't meant to stare.

"Then I shan't hold it against you."

You were trying not to laugh. I remember noticing the little creases at the corners of your eyes before you smiled properly, and thinking that you knew perfectly well how handsome you were.

Then you moved your tools, made room for me to sit, and asked my name. By the time I left, you had made me laugh so much that I couldn't remember why I'd been nervous.

That was when you asked whether I really liked Boston or merely knew how to talk about it. I gave you the sort of answer I have given a hundred times at home. You waited until I had finished, then said, "But is that what you like?"

You make me want to give you the real answer, even when I haven't worked out what it is.

I have thought of any number of reasons to come back since. You must have known. Yesterday, when I appeared in the doorway, you looked up at once.

“I was hoping you'd come.”

You said it so simply. I had spent half the walk wondering whether I was making a fool of myself, and there you were, smiling as though seeing me was the best part of your afternoon.

Though I confess I was not listening very well after that.

There were cedar shavings caught on your sleeve. I brushed them away, and instead of moving back, you took my hand. You were so close that I could see where the sun had caught the side of your neck. I kept looking at your mouth and hoping you hadn't noticed.

Of course you had.

You put your tools down and said, “I've been wanting to do this.”

All I could manage was, “Then why haven't you?”

You laughed, just once, and put your hand at my waist. I stepped closer before you could draw me in. After all those afternoons finding excuses to sit beside you, I couldn't bear to spend another moment wondering whether you wanted to kiss me.

And then you did.

I had meant to be quite composed when it finally happened. Instead, I caught hold of your shirt and kissed you back as though I had been waiting much longer than a few summer afternoons. Your shoulders were warm beneath my hands. When you lifted your head, you stayed close enough that I could feel you smiling.

“You do make it difficult to get any work done,” you said.

I told you I could leave.

“I'd rather you kissed me again,” you said, and drew me back.

I have remembered that part rather often tonight.

Mother would be horrified by this letter.

There would be questions if she knew how often I find a reason to come down to the boathouse. Questions with the answer already chosen, and a great deal said about what is suitable for me. She would want to know what your family does and what you intend to do, long before she thought to ask whether I was happy.

You have begun worrying about those things yourself. That I am accustomed to a life you cannot give me. That this is a summer, and summers end.

But please don't decide what I need without asking me.

Yesterday, sitting beside you while the light changed on the water, I wasn't wishing I were somewhere grander. And when you kissed me, I wasn't thinking about Boston or what my family would say.

I was thinking that I wanted you to kiss me again.

I know I shall have to go home. Everyone keeps reminding me, as though I might forget. But when I try to imagine being back there, I can only think of all the things I will want to tell you and how long it will be before I can see your face again.

I hope we can see each other soon. If you're working when I come by, I shall try not to distract you.

I can just imagine the grin on your face.

Yours,

Nora

Claire's closing note - read after Nora's letter

Sandy,

“I was hoping you'd come.”

That's the bit I keep going back to. Not just the kiss, although obviously I read that part more than once. It's him looking up when she appears in the doorway. She'd spent half the walk wondering whether she was making a fool of herself, and he was pleased she'd come.

Mark used to look at me like that. Even across a crowded room, I'd see his face change when he spotted me. I never had to wonder whether he was glad I was there.

Lately, I get the feeling I'm catching him between things. A call he's just finished, an email he needs to answer. I know how much he has on. But I miss that look.

I hadn't expected to find myself thinking about any of this because of a letter Gram wrote at twenty-one.

Anyway, am I freaking out over nothing, or is this as extraordinary as it feels? Yesterday I was trying to decide which folders to start with. Now I've got love letters under the floor and a man I've never heard of kissing my grandmother in a boathouse.

Who was he? What happened to them? And why have I never heard a word about any of it?

I know you're not writing back. That's fine. I just needed to tell you, because I can't sit here with this and say nothing.

I'm going back to the box. I want to know what the next letter says.

Love,

Claire