

Chad

What to paint? The whole rocky shoreline disappearing into the mist? Or one of the rocks close up? One with orange lichens clinging to it maybe, or one with crusty barnacles clustered on its side. Or the rocks farther out? Being low tide, they look like someone has thrown a soggy shag carpet over them. I can't decide.

The rhythm of the sea wraps around the Fish House, rolling to shore in louder and louder waves, then receding, calm, and then building again.

I open the box and look at the rows of coloured tubes, hoping they'll tell me what to paint this morning. I choose a grey, mix it with a lot of water on a large clam shell, and brush it onto the paper. I still haven't decided what I'm painting, but this grey is too dark, whatever it's going to be. I try watering it down, but all I get is a puddley mess.

I take a fresh piece of paper, wipe clean the shell I'm using for a palette. I have an idea now. With a clean brush I stroke water onto the paper, then squish a blob of Purple Madder Alazarin onto the palette, and a blob of Cerulean Blue. I dab the colours onto the paper, but the way they run together isn't right. I try again, but I'm getting nowhere. There's no flow to what's happening, no magic. It's nothing like when I painted here last year.

What ever made me think I can learn to paint as well as my mom and carry on where she left off? She lied about how good I was, trying to make me feel good. This is worse than the crap I've been doing at school. I fling the pad of paper off my lap and slam down the lid of the oak box.

Maybe it's just as well. Like Gramp said last night, it's not a very secure field to go into, for anybody. And just 'cause you want something, want to be something, doesn't mean you can.

I rinse the paint out of the brush, squeeze the bristles between my fingers.

But this can't be the last time I'll feel the wet smoothness of a brush. Or the magic of being lost in a painting. The pattern the running colour is making on the damp paper *is* kind of interesting. I won't give up.

Below me the door rubs open. Dad. I stop breathing. Don't find me here.

He won't. Nobody ever comes up here.

But there's the ladder. He has to see it. Then he'll know.

The sea whispers in my ears for what feels like minutes. I must have been hearing things. No one was awake when I left the house, so how can there be anyone down here now?

The top of the ladder jiggles.

"Hello?" A girl's voice.

I rush to the ladder. Kneeling by the hole, I look down.

She's standing very still, like someone posing for a portrait. She has one hand on the ladder, the other in the pocket of her denim jacket. Her dark brown hair flies loose around her upturned face. Dampness clings to it like mist to a spider web. Her eyes are so dark and so deep, it's like you could fall into them. She's said nothing more than hello. But in her eyes there is sadness, hope, and fear.

"Who are you?"

Jill

As soon as I see the little house perched on the rocks I know it's where I want to stay. Forget Sheila's cottage – it wasn't a real invitation anyway. I just convinced myself it was when I needed somewhere to go.

A crash of waves flattens out on the lumpy seaweed, reaching long arms toward the grey building, then trickling away to get swallowed up