



JEANNE BIRDSALL

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About the Book

Summer is here and it's off to the beach for Rosalind . . . and off to Maine for the rest of the Penderwick girls with their old friend, Jeffrey.

That leaves Skye as OAP (oldest available Penderwick) – a terrifying notion for all. Things look good as they settle into their cozy cottage, but can Skye hold it together? Will Jane's Love Survey come to a tragic conclusion? Is Batty – contrary to all accepted wisdom – the only Penderwick capable of carrying a tune? And will Jeffrey be able to keep peace between the girls . . . these girls who are his second, and most heartfelt, family?

It's a rollercoaster ride as the Penderwicks continue their unforgettable adventures in a story filled with laughs and joyful tears!

The Jerwicks at Point Mouette



JEANNE BIRDSALL

RHCP DIGITAL

For Quinn

Chapter One

Going, Going . . .

The Penderwick family was being torn apart. The tearing wouldn't last long – only two weeks – but still it was uncomfortable. Mr Penderwick was the first to go, flying off to England with his new wife, Iantha, for scientific conferences and a bit of a honeymoon. With them went Ben, Iantha's son, who was too small to be without his mother, honeymoon or not.

That had been two days earlier, and now the remaining Penderwicks – four sisters named Rosalind, Skye, Jane, and Batty – were about to tear apart even more. Early the next morning, three of them would leave for Maine with the sisters' favorite relative, Aunt Claire, while the fourth headed to New Jersey with her best friend. The girls had never been apart for an entire two weeks, and though all of them were nervous about it, the one going off on her own was the most nervous. This was the oldest, thirteen-year-old Rosalind, and she was having a terrible time accepting that her sisters could survive without her.

Right now she was waiting in her bedroom for them to arrive. She didn't want to be in her bedroom – she wanted to be with five-year-old Batty, getting her ready for bed just like she always did. But tonight Skye and Jane, the two middle sisters, were helping Batty with her bath and pajamas. Practice, Aunt Claire called it, or a dry run. She'd thought it would calm Rosalind to see that indeed she wasn't absolutely needed when it came to Batty. And Rosalind would have been calm, except that the others were supposed to come to her room as soon as they were

finished, and that should have been at least ten minutes ago. How could a simple bath take so long? They knew she wanted to have one last MOPS – that is, Meeting of Penderwick Sisters – before Batty had to go to sleep. One last MOPS before they were all separated for two weeks.

'Two whole weeks,' groaned Rosalind, then looked up hopefully, because she heard footsteps in the hall. They were here.

But it was only one of them - twelve-year-old Skye, the second sister - and she didn't have the look of someone who'd just conducted a successful bath. Her blond hair was hanging in damp clumps, and there were wet spots on her T-shirt.

'It's not as bad as it looks,' she said. 'Batty's fine. She didn't drown or anything.'

'Then what happened?'

'Hound got into the tub with her.'

That explained why Skye was so wet. The Penderwicks' large black dog was clumsy and enthusiastic – getting him out of a bathtub would make anyone wet. But it didn't explain why he'd been in the bathroom in the first place.

'Hound always tries to get into the tub,' said Rosalind. 'That's why he's not allowed near Batty at bath time. Didn't you know that?'

'Nope, and neither did Jane. But we know it now, and we'll clean up the bathroom later. I promise.'

A dry run! The irony wasn't lost on Rosalind. She was determined not to scold, though, not this very last night. 'Where are the others?'

'Jane is helping Batty with her pajamas. They'll be here soon.' Skye shook her head violently, tossing droplets of water across the room. 'Where's your Latin dictionary? I need to look up revenge.'

'On my bookshelf, though I wish you wouldn't.' Rosalind knew why Skye was thinking about revenge, and that she'd been thinking of little else for the last twenty-four hours.

Which was absolutely not the best way to prepare for the next two weeks. With Rosalind off in New Jersey, Skye would be the OAP – Oldest Available Penderwick – and she needed to concentrate on taking care of her two younger sisters, not on carrying out revenge. 'Daddy says the best revenge is to be better than your enemy.'

'I'm doing that, too. Almost anyone could,' said Skye, leafing through the dictionary. 'Here it is. Revenge: *ultio* or *vindicta*. Then it says: to take revenge on is *se vindicare in*. *Se vindicare in* Jeffrey's loathsome mother. How do I say "Jeffrey's loathsome mother" in Latin?'

Skye's desire for revenge was justified – Rosalind knew that. Jeffrey was Jeffrey Tifton, a boy the Penderwicks had met the previous summer while renting a cottage at his mother's estate, called Arundel. By the time that vacation was over, Jeffrey was their excellent friend and honorary brother, and since then the sisters had seen him as often as they could, which was nowhere near often enough. He was always too far away – either at Arundel, a couple of hours west of the Penderwicks' home in Cameron, Massachusetts, or at his Boston boarding school, a couple of hours east of Cameron. It had been natural, then, for the younger three sisters to want Jeffrey in Maine with them, and with great hope they'd invited him.

After much dillydallying and back-and-forthing by his mother, permission had finally been granted, spirits raised, ecstatic phone calls exchanged – until suddenly, just that morning, a mere twenty-four hours before departure for Maine, the permission had been withdrawn. Jeffrey's mother had decided that he wasn't going with the Penderwicks. No reason had been given. He simply wasn't going anywhere. He was stuck at Arundel for the whole summer.

Even through their agonized disappointment, the sisters weren't all that surprised. Jeffrey's mother was capable of endless awfulness - the real surprise was that she had a

son as wonderful as Jeffrey. The Penderwicks' only explanation was that Jeffrey had inherited his good qualities from his father, but this was guesswork, since Jeffrey had never met him, nor did he know his name, or even if he was alive or dead. Which was all sad and terrible enough, but in the last year he'd also been saddled with a stepfather, the selfish and stupid Dexter Dupree.

'Loathsome. Here it is: *foedus*,' said Skye. 'Jeffrey's *foedus* mother, Mrs Tifton-Dupree, known to us as *foedus* Mrs T-D. I like it.'

'You need to use the feminine accusative form of the adjective,' said Rosalind, momentarily in the spirit of things.

'An unimportant detail.' Skye wouldn't study Latin until she started seventh grade in the fall. 'Maybe I should include Dexter. Help me translate this: To take revenge on Dexter and foedus Mrs T-D, I consign them to a life of guilt-racked agony, like a serpent in their entrails.'

'Guilt-racked agony! Did you write that?'

'No, Jane did, after you shot down her idea about voodoo dolls.'

'As well I should have. And I think we can skip the serpent in their entrails, too.' Rosalind shut the Latin dictionary and slid it back onto the bookshelf.

'But we have to do something, Rosy - it's Jeffrey!'

'I know. I'm sorry.'

Skye stomped around the room. 'I suppose I have to be a good example and all that while you're gone.'

'Yes. And please stop stomping. Thank you,' said Rosalind. 'Now let's think. Have I told you everything you need to know about Batty? Like brushing her hair?'

'You've told me about Batty's hair a hundred times,' said Skye with great dignity. 'And I do know how to brush hair.'

Of course she did, thought Rosalind. It was just that Skye's own blond, straight hair was so easy to take care of, and Batty's dark hair – just like Rosalind's and Jane's – was

thick and curly, and needed serious attention. Especially now that it was getting long, which was Rosalind's own fault, because she was growing her own hair long, and Jane, then Batty, had decided to follow suit. And Batty seemed to get knots in hers even when standing still, and then she hated having the knots brushed out, so much that sometimes she even cried.

'Oh, Skye, you will be careful with her in Maine, won't you? You won't ignore her while you think about math or stars or whatever it is you think about? And you won't get frustrated or lose your temper when she cries?'

'I've been working on my temper, and I promise to be careful with Batty.' Skye's dignity was even greater now. 'If you'd like, I'll get my Swiss army knife and take a blood oath.'

'No blood, but thanks.' Rosalind did trust Skye to do the best she could. And of course Aunt Claire, that most wonderful of aunts, would be there, too. Though since Aunt Claire had never had children of her own, her practical experience was limited. While no one had actually expired under her care, when the girls were small, Aunt Claire had once brushed Rosalind's teeth with shampoo and dabbed Skye's scraped knee with toothpaste. And she had never quite gotten the hang of putting on other people's shoes – the right and left were often mixed. Oh! Rosalind had a terrifying image of Batty limping around Maine, shampoo foaming from her mouth.

The bedroom door opened again, and again it was only one sister - this time, Jane. She was even wetter than Skye, her dark curls wild, and she was carrying a pile of books.

'Where's Batty?' asked Rosalind sharply.

'Right here.' Jane looked behind her, but the hall was empty of five-year-olds. 'Oh, now I remember. She said she needed to go to her room first. Rosalind, do you think Iantha would mind if I borrowed some of her books to take to Point Mouette?'

Rosalind looked through the books. They were barely suitable for her, let alone for Jane, who was only eleven.

'You're not old enough for any of these. Besides, why would you even want to read' - Rosalind picked a particularly odd title - 'Bilgewater?'

'It's about love. They all are,' answered Jane, as though that explained it perfectly.

'She's doing research for a new Sabrina Starr book,' said Skye, her hand over her heart like a fainting heroine in an old-time movie. 'She thinks it's time for Sabrina to fall in love.'

Sabrina Starr was the heroine of many books Jane had written. Rosalind had never thought of her as the falling-in-love type. She'd always been too busy rescuing anyone who needed it, from a groundhog to an archaeologist. And Rosalind thought that Sabrina should continue the rescuing for a while longer. She didn't want Jane doing research on love while in Maine. She wanted her being a good backup OAP.

'Yes, I think Iantha would mind you borrowing these books. Wouldn't Sabrina be better off rescuing a moose or something?' She took the books from Jane and put them on her desk. It was time – past time – for the MOPS, and the littlest sister was still missing.

'I'll get Batty,' Rosalind said. 'Nobody wander off.'

She went down the hall to Batty's room, hoping to see Batty there, neatly pajamaed and ready for a MOPS. Here is what she saw instead: an open suitcase on the floor, empty except for Asimov – the Penderwicks' orange cat – who had curled up inside and fallen asleep. The clothes that just hours ago had been folded into the suitcase were now in untidy heaps on the bed. Also on the bed was a still-wet Hound, happily chewing on the new hairbrush that Iantha had bought specially for Batty to take to Maine.

And Rosalind saw one more thing - the door to the closet seemed to be trying to shut itself.

'I know you're in there, Batty,' she said.

There was a long silence, then: 'How do you know?'

'I just do. Batty, it's time for the MOPS. Skye and Jane are waiting for us.'

'I don't need to go to the MOPS, because I'm not going to Maine.'

Rosalind picked up a red-striped bathing suit from the floor, refolded it, and put it back into the suitcase next to Asimov. 'Is it because of the bath Skye and Jane just gave you?'

'No, that was fun. Hound jumped into the tub.'

'I heard.' Next into the suitcase went a half dozen shirts. 'And you're not upset about Asimov again, are you? Because we've gone over that. He has to stay home, and Tommy's going to take very good care of him. You trust Tommy, right?'

Tommy Geiger was Rosalind's boyfriend, who lived across the street, and though sometimes he could drive her crazy, he was quite good with Asimov.

'Yes.'

'And I know you're disappointed about Jeffrey not going to Maine.' That blow had fallen hard on Batty, already devastated at being separated from Ben. She'd been the youngest in the family for so long – even Hound was a year older than she was – that the addition of a little brother had come as a delightful relief. 'And I could understand you wanting to stay home if Ben were here –'

'And Daddy and Iantha.'

'- but they're in England and won't be back until you're home again from Maine.'

Rosalind took hold of the hairbrush Hound was chewing and tugged until he let go. The damage was minimal, so she wiped it down and put it into the suitcase, too. This woke up Asimov, who leaped gracefully out and onto the bed – steering clear of the wet dog – where he immediately fell asleep again. The space he'd left behind was just the right

size for a pile of shorts, two sweatshirts, and another bathing suit.

'Rosalind, are you still there?'

'I'm still here.' Socks, underwear, an extra pair of pajamas, more T-shirts, and the suitcase was once again full. 'Why don't you come see me?'

The closet door opened itself back up, and out crept Batty, well scrubbed and pajamaed, yes, though Rosalind noticed with a pang that the shirt was inside out.

'You're packing my stuff again,' said Batty, her forehead scrunched with concern.

'Listen to me.' Rosalind knelt beside her on the floor. 'I'm so sorry that I'm not going to Maine with you. I promised Anna to go to New Jersey with her, and then it was too late to change the plans. You know all that, right? I know this is the longest you and I will have ever been apart, and I've told you over and over how much I'll miss you, so you must know that. Tell me you know how much I'll miss you.'

'I do know.'

'Here, let me fix your pajamas.' With a minimum of wriggling, the shirt was turned right side out so that the dolphin showed. 'Now you look better. Do you think you're ready for the MOPS now? Good girl. Go tell Skye and Jane I'll be there in a minute.'

Batty left, with Hound trailing along after her. Asimov stayed behind, waking up in time to see Rosalind tuck a yellow sunhat in with the rest of Batty's clothes, then pull down the lid of the suitcase and shut it tight.

'Meow,' he said.

'I am not crying,' she answered. 'Come on, let's go to the MOPS.'

Back in her room, Rosalind found the others seated in a circle on the floor. She sat down with them, pulled Batty onto her lap, and waited politely while Asimov gave Hound a friendly swat on the nose, then stretched out beside him.

'MOPS come to order,' she said.

Skye seconded the motion, Jane and Batty thirded and fourthed it, and Rosalind went on. 'All swear to keep secret what is said here . . . Actually, we can skip the bit about secrets. This isn't that kind of a MOPS.'

'So we don't need to swear?' asked Batty, who liked that part.

'No swearing.' Rosalind now took a moment to gather herself. She'd been thinking about this MOPS for days and wanted it to go just right. She had a list of rules to go through, and some cheering thoughts, and she'd end with a brief statement about how much she trusted Skye. 'As you all know, early tomorrow morning I'll be handing over my OAP responsibilities to Skye. Before that happens, I want to give you some rules to follow in Maine. Rule One is . . . '

She stopped, and it seemed to the others as though she'd gone a little green.

'What is it?' asked Skye.

'I've warned you about the rocks, right? How Maine has huge rocks along the coast, and in some places people have built seawalls to keep the ocean away from the land, and if anyone falls off a seawall, they would smash onto the rocks.'

'You have indeed warned us about the rocks,' said Skye.

'And the seawalls,' added Jane. 'By the way, you're squashing Batty.'

'Sorry.' Rosalind relaxed her grip on Batty, who started breathing again. 'I've mentioned drowning, of course. Maybe I should start with the next-to-last rule.'

'How many rules are there?' asked Skye.

'Six.' Rosalind reached under her bed and pulled out a bright orange life preserver. 'Rule Five: Batty wears this whenever she's near the ocean.'

'We're staying on the coast. Batty is always going to be near the ocean.'

'Then she will always wear it.'

'Even when I sleep?' asked Batty.

'Of course not, honey.' Rosalind buckled the preserver onto Batty and felt safer just seeing it there. Many dangers might lurk for Batty in Maine, but drowning wouldn't be one of them. 'All right, I'll start over. Rule One: Help Aunt Claire with meals and cleaning up. Rule Two: No squabbling with each other. Three – What, Skye?'

'We've already worked this stuff out.'

'We made pacts about no fighting,' added Jane. 'And we've divided up the meal chores. I'll help with cooking. I know I'm not much good at it, but Skye is worse. Sorry, Skye.'

'It's true, though, so I'll do the cleaning up.'

'And I'm going to set the table,' said Batty. 'Skye said I could.'

'Oh, well, good.' Rosalind took another moment to gather herself all over again. 'Rule Three: Don't let Hound eat things he shouldn't, but of course you already know that. What about Rule Four? Be polite to strangers, because you're representing the Penderwicks in Maine, which is an entirely new state for us.'

'We hadn't thought about meeting strangers,' said Jane. 'That's a nice idea, Rosy.'

'We've done Rule Five. Rule Six -'

She was interrupted by a clunking sound, which turned out to be Asimov diving into Rosalind's wastebasket in search of who knew what. Feeling left out, Hound tried to go in after him, but only his nose fit, which was quite enough to annoy Asimov, and soon the floor was littered with old tissues and such, and Asimov had been banished to the hallway and Hound told to stay still or else.

'It's because they'll miss each other,' said Batty.

Rosalind tossed the last tissue back into the wastebasket. 'Now, where was I?'

Her answer was the sound of the doorbell, announcing a visitor at the front door. Rosalind knew exactly who'd arrived, because she'd asked him to come to say good-bye.

She had a list of rules for him, too, though she knew better than to give them to him.

'Tommy?' asked Jane.

'He's a little early.' Rosalind started talking more quickly. 'Rule Six: No revenge on Mrs T-D or Dexter, either the magical or actual kind.'

The doorbell chimed again.

'Go see Tommy,' said Skye.

'For your romantic farewells,' added Jane.

Rosalind was determined to keep control over her own MOPS, but even Batty seemed to be against her, yawning suddenly.

'I'll put her to bed,' said Skye. 'You can say good night to her after Tommy goes.'

'You'll tell her a story?' asked Rosalind piteously.

'Jane will, won't you, Jane?'

Jane nodded, and Skye declared the MOPS officially closed. Defeated, but happy to be on her way to Tommy, Rosalind left the room. Listening to her clatter down the steps, the others sat quietly, missing her already. Only Hound went on as if nothing important had happened, sneakily shoving his nose back into the wastebasket.

'No revenge,' said Jane after a while. 'Didn't she like the curse I wrote for Dexter and Mrs T-D?'

'The part about entrails upset her.' Skye stood up. 'Let's get Batty to bed.'

'Nrgwug,' said Batty in a strangled sort of voice.

She'd tried to get out of the life preserver without unbuckling it and was now hopelessly entangled, her face hidden and her arms sticking out of all the wrong places. Freeing her took a while, what with her hair catching on one buckle and Hound tugging unhelpfully on another, and by the end all three sisters were grumpy. Skye was the worst.

'This is going to be a very long two weeks,' she said, and no one contradicted her.

Chapter Two

Gone

In the morning Rosalind departed for New Jersey, leaving her younger sisters waving their good-byes from the front yard. Hound was also there, trotting anxiously from one sister to another, determined to prevent any more Penderwicks from straying.

'Now I really am the OAP,' said Skye faintly.

She hadn't wanted to be. Taking care of anyone, especially Batty, had never been a skill of hers - why would that change now? She'd told her father and Iantha so when the plan for separate vacations had first come up, and when they'd insisted that she had their absolute trust, Skye called Aunt Claire and explained it all over again. Surely, she'd thought, Aunt Claire would take measures to stop this calamity. After all, if Skye made a mess of everything in Maine, Aunt Claire would be the one cleaning up.

Aunt Claire, too, had let Skye down. 'You'll do fine as the OAP,' she said. 'You'll find it in you,' she added, and Skye went off to research multiple personalities, hoping she could find a new person inside who would be good at caring for Batty. When she discovered that extra personalities couldn't be ordered up on demand, she considered locking herself in the basement – or maybe faking a coma – until everyone had gone away to New Jersey, England, and Maine without her.

It was while she was working on slowing her heart rate for the pretend coma that her father came to her and asked her to please buck up and gracefully accept OAP-dom. He explained that the separation would be good for Rosalind, that she'd been in charge of her sisters for too long and badly needed a vacation. He also hinted that if Skye – and Jane and Batty, too – could convince Rosalind they'd be fine on their own, it would be easier for her to have a good time in New Jersey. How could Skye say no to that? Rosalind had indeed been in charge for a long time – more than five years, ever since the girls' mother had died of cancer – and she'd done it well and without complaints. So Skye canceled her coma, presented a carefree exterior to Rosalind, and told Jane to do the same.

However, agreeing to be the OAP wasn't the same as having the knowledge to do so. If she'd been paying attention over the years, there would have been nothing to learn. But Skye hadn't paid attention, and though she was trying hard to do so now, none of it seemed to stick. Geometry theorems, or the names and positions of constellations – these she could memorize effortlessly. But how to care for Batty? Impossible. So secretly she began to make a list. Everything her father did or mentioned, or Rosalind, or Iantha, went onto it. By the end, the list was six closely written pages, and Skye kept it with her at all times.

It was in her back pocket now, which Skye patted, trying to reassure herself that she really had gathered all the information she needed to keep Batty alive and undamaged for two weeks. The reassurance didn't come.

'We're doomed,' she said.

'No, we're not,' said Jane. 'Batty and I have complete faith in you, don't we, Batty?'

'I guess so.' Batty snuffled and wiped her nose.

To Skye, the sound of that snuffle heralded disaster. It meant that Batty was crying about something, probably Rosalind. And since neither Skye nor Jane was good at stopping Batty's crying once it started, they were in for a painfully tearful drive to Maine. But then – oh, miracle – Batty sneezed! She wasn't crying but only truly snuffling.

Maybe it was a sign, thought Skye, that they weren't doomed after all. Onward, then. She told the others that it was time for the final countdown to departure, and that they should go to their rooms and make sure they hadn't forgotten anything. Skye herself went through the packed car, stuffed to its limit with suitcases, boxes of books, Batty's life jacket, Hound's food and water bowls, several soccer balls, and Skye's own personal necessities – a pair of binoculars and *Death by Black Hole*, a book that explained certain fascinating aspects of the universe. Then she went inside to the kitchen, where Aunt Claire was making lunch for the trip. Asimov was there, too, glaring balefully into his full-to-the-brim food bowl. He did this often, in the hope that someone would take pity and give him a piece of cheese.

'I've been the OAP for ten minutes now, and Batty is still fine,' said Skye.

'Congratulations.' Aunt Claire was wrapping up peanutbutter-and-jelly sandwiches. 'Don't give that cat any more cheese. I've given him two pieces already.'

Insulted, Asimov began to knock the food out of his bowl, one piece at a time.

'You still think I'll be able to handle this responsibility?'

'Yes, Skye, I do. Besides, you keep forgetting that you won't be doing it all alone. Jane and I will be there, too.'

'I know.' Skye got a piece of cheese out of the refrigerator for Asimov. She couldn't help it. She was going to miss him. 'I checked the car. I think everything's packed.'

'Everything but this food and us. Are you ready to go?'

Skye gave Asimov one last rub on the head. 'As ready as I'll ever be. I'll get the others.'

Their destination in Maine was Point Mouette, a tiny slip of a peninsula jutting into the Atlantic Ocean. To get there, they had to drive across Massachusetts, cut through a corner of New Hampshire, and wander more than a hundred miles up the coast of Maine. It was too long a drive for people not to get weary and cranky. Added to that were a few incidents that tried everyone's patience, like when Hound fell in love with a poodle named Penelope at a rest stop and refused to leave until he was given half a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, and when Batty suddenly decided she'd left Funty, the blue elephant, at home and was so upset that Aunt Claire pulled over to the side of the highway to allow a full-out search for Funty, who was found hiding in a box with a soccer ball and a large inflatable duck. But before anyone actually murdered anyone else, Skye spotted the sign that said to POINT MOUETTE, and they were turning off the state highway and onto the peninsula. Now they had only a few miles left to go, and all of it downhill.

Weariness and crankiness flew away as they gazed avidly around, trying to drink in everything at once. Tall trees crowded the sides of the road, except where brightly painted houses sat in clearings of well-tended grass, and where – even better – the trees parted briefly for quick glimpses of the glistening ocean below them. Although everyone wanted to stop and explore each new sight, especially the rambling wooden Moose Market with a colossal stone bull moose out front, his dignity not at all impaired by the fresh pies sign hanging off his antlers, they wanted even more to rush on, eager to see where they'd be living for the next two weeks.

So on they went, until they came to the road that skirted the end of the peninsula. This was called Ocean Boulevard, a fancy name for a narrow road only a few miles long. Most of it was off to the left, but Aunt Claire turned right and a minute later pulled into the last driveway, just before Ocean Boulevard dead-ended at a pinewood. The driveway was short and narrow, with barely enough room for the car, and in front of it was their house.

'It's called Birches,' said Aunt Claire. 'I hope you like it.'

Birches was tiny – not much bigger than a garage – and looked even smaller, nestled as it was next to a half dozen of the tall white-barked trees for which it was named. The girls had been prepared for its lack of size, but not for how charming it was, like a dollhouse, with gray clapboards, red shutters, and window boxes full of bright pansies. And it had a screened porch that the girls had already heard all about, where Skye and Jane would sleep.

'It's great, Aunt Claire,' said Skye. 'Thank you.'

'I've always wanted to sleep on a porch,' added Jane. 'I will be one with nature.'

'How about you, Batty?' asked Aunt Claire. 'Do you like our little house?'

But Batty was busy rolling down the window to give Hound a breath of fresh air, and all at once the car was filled with the wild scent of salt, seaweed, marsh grass, and a breeze that had been around the world a thousand times, and the sisters were gripped by ocean fever. So when Aunt Claire said that she was going to explore Birches, and did they want to come with her, they all said no, thank you, because they had to get to the water as quickly as possible.

There was a delay as Skye and Jane maneuvered a protesting Batty into the orange life jacket, buckled it the wrong way, then had to do it over again, but before too long the sisters and Hound were following a flagstone path to the tiny green lawn behind Birches. And there was the ocean, sparkling blue and spread out before them in its vast glory, and above the ocean and vying with it for splendor was the summer sky, just as blue and filled with great heaps of white clouds. When the sisters had looked at all that, which took a long time, they could pay attention to what was on the water – small boats, some moored and some in full sail, and farther out a cluster of islands, most

of them just big enough for a clump of trees and a house or two.

Skye hadn't forgotten Rosalind's warnings about seawalls. Indeed, at the edge of the lawn was a low wall, built from rock and wide enough to sit on. Nothing frightening there, except when Skye peered over it, she saw a six-foot drop to a jumble of ominous gray boulders, certain to smash any Penderwick who fell. She mentioned this several times to Batty, until Batty broke away to race Hound around the lawn and up to the deck – Birches had a wooden deck, perfect for picnic dinners – and back down to the lawn, but neither of them jumped onto the wall, for which Skye was grateful. Meanwhile, Jane had discovered steps at one edge of the yard, and she called the others over. Aunt Claire had told them there was a beach, and here it was.

Down the steps they ran. At first look, it wasn't much of a beach, just a narrow strip of sand that ran along the seawall for about forty feet. Skye knew about tides, though, and could tell that the tide was high. When it went out again, the beach would be a decent size, with plenty of room for soccer and anything else three girls and a dog could come up with. And no matter how small the beach was at high tide, they could still take off their shoes and wade into the shallow wavelets. The water was so cold that Batty screeched and Hound barked, but that made it all the more exhilarating, and just what everyone wanted after those long hours in the car.

Skye not only wet her feet, she splashed the cold water onto her face, reveling in the salty smell. She liked this place – and they had it almost all to themselves. Off to the right, the pinewood marched down to the rocks – they would have no company from that side. In the other direction, Skye could see a red house, half hidden by the birches, with its own set of steps leading down to the