PIPER'S CURLING ADVENTURES

Piper and the Extra Bit of Ice

BOOK SIX



Mary Deuhs

An illustrated chapter book

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CHAPTER 1

A Dragon in Slippers

Piper had drawn a very fierce dragon.

Unfortunately, she had given it slippers.

“They’re claws,” she told Dad.

Dad looked at the round pink shapes beneath its feet.

“Comfortable ones.”

Piper added points. Now the dragon appeared to be wearing slippers with forks sticking out of them.

She put down the pencil.

“It lives indoors.”

“That explains it,” Dad said.

The dragon was for the afternoon. Maisie, Nora, and Wren were coming to Piper’s house after lunch. Dad had checked with their grown-ups, and everyone had agreed on dropping off and picking up.

Piper had saved a small cardboard box. Dad had cut an opening in one side, and she had made a paper curtain. It was nearly a puppet theatre.

All it needed was puppets, a play, and someone who could make a curtain stay attached.

Piper expected her friends to help with all three.

First, they had curling.

Several ordinary practice Saturdays had passed since their away bonspiel. Piper knew which peg held the spare brushes. She could remember her warm-up without watching Dad. She still sometimes sent a stone much farther than she meant to, but now she usually had something she wanted to try on the next one.

The afternoon light was lasting longer too. Last week, they had left the club while the windows were still bright.

Piper folded the dragon carefully into her bag.

At the club, Maisie studied its feet.

“He needs a dressing gown.”

“He needs a name,” Nora said.

“Bernard,” said Wren.

Nobody knew why that was right. It simply was.

They left Bernard on the warm-room bench while they got ready. Helmets checked. Clean grippers secure. Warm-up finished, including a stretch that made Maisie say she could almost reach tomorrow.

Ben and Jo led them onto their usual junior practice lane. Granite waited near the house, the colored rings they aimed for. The little stones were ready.

For the first part of practice, everything was familiar. Wren wanted to work on sending the stone along the line of the target broom. Piper wanted a steadier start. Maisie made a draw into the rings and gave it a pleased nod.

Then Jo called everyone to the safe waiting place.

“We have another option today,” she said. “A slightly longer delivery, if you’d like to try it.”

Ben pointed to a spot a little farther from the same house. The coaches would move the portable hack, the foothold they used to start, when the lane was clear.

The extra patch of ice did not look enormous.

Piper looked again. It looked a bit larger the second time.

“We’ll use the same junior stones,” Ben said. “This is a practice experiment. No points or passing a test. We’ll finish back at our usual place.”

“You can keep working from here,” Jo added. “Or try the farther start with me. Tell us how it feels.”

Maisie leaned toward Nora.

“Shall we?”

Nora looked at the extra ice. “Yes.”

“Together?”

“Together.”

Maisie held out her fist. Nora bumped it with her glove.

Piper smiled at them. Trying something new with a friend sounded much better than looking at it by yourself.

Everyone stayed well clear while Ben and Jo moved and checked the portable hack. The rings and painted lines stayed exactly where they were.

Granite looked down the slightly longer stretch toward them.

“I can still see you,” he called.

“We can still see your eyebrows,” Maisie called back.

Granite touched one carefully.

“Excellent visibility.”

CHAPTER 2

The Extra Bit of Ice

From the new starting place, the house looked as if somebody had made it smaller.

Piper knew they hadn't. She had watched it the whole time.

Jo showed the girls the clear walking route and waiting places for this setup. Then she pointed out where she wanted them to finish letting go during the exercise.

"That's our release cue for this drill," she said. "I'm choosing it for the practice setup."

She checked each girl's balance and delivery support before her turn. Nobody had to make the stone reach the rings at any cost.

Wren tried first. Her stone stopped short, but it followed the direction she wanted.

"Could I work on that at the usual place afterward?" she asked.

"Certainly," Jo said.

Piper went next. She began too quickly and felt herself wobble. Jo helped her reset for another try.

The next start felt steadier. The stone still stopped before the house.

Piper looked at the extra ice with fresh respect.

It had been pretending to be small.

Then Nora settled at the hack.

Piper and Maisie were ready to sweep, with Ben nearby. Wren held the target broom while Granite

watched from a safe place beside the house. They were taking turns at the practice jobs.

Nora looked up, looked down, and began.

The stone traveled toward them with a quiet rumble. Piper matched its pace with careful steps. Maisie watched the space ahead.

“Sweep,” Wren called.

Their brushes moved together.

The red handle turned. The stone crossed into the front of the house.

“Up!”

Piper and Maisie lifted their brushes clear. The red stopped in the broad area Nora had been aiming for.

Nora’s mouth opened.

Then she grinned.

“That felt easy!”

Maisie grinned back. “It looked easy.”

Nora’s next try finished farther out to the side. She was still pleased. Once Jo had helped her up and her slider was covered, she came along the safe route to join Piper.

“I want to do more of those.”

Now it was Maisie’s turn.

She set herself carefully. Piper could see that from the sweeping position. Maisie took a proper look at the broom. She waited until Jo said the lane was ready.

Her stone went straight enough.

It stopped short.

Maisie pressed her lips together, then tried again.

This time she hurried at the beginning. Her shoulder twisted, and the stone wandered away from the target.

Jo spoke to her quietly. They practiced the start once without sending a stone.

“Keep your balance,” Jo said. “We can choose a distance that lets you work on the delivery.”

“I’d like one more from here,” Maisie said.

There was time for one.

Nora joined Piper to sweep. They watched the stone come along the ice, slowing before the rings. Wren called them to sweep. They worked until she called them up.

The red stopped short again.

Piper turned toward Maisie.

Maisie was looking at the house. She didn’t wave or shrug or tell the stone to grow longer legs.

Jo helped her stand.

“Your balance was better on that one,” she said.

Maisie nodded.

At the waiting place, Nora said, “We’ll have another go next Saturday.”

Maisie brushed a bit of ice from her glove.

“Maybe.”

“I want to see if I can get two in the same bit.”

Piper expected Maisie to suggest putting an address on it.

Instead, Maisie said, “You can already reach.”

“Sometimes,” Nora said.

“Well. You can.”

Ben called them together while the coaches restored their usual starting place. There was a little time for familiar deliveries before they finished.

Maisie’s first stone from the shorter distance went right through the house.

“Oh, now you go,” she muttered.

Piper nearly laughed, then saw her face and didn’t.

Maisie took her next turn more calmly. That red stayed in the rings. She had made plenty of useful stones from here before.

But when they left the ice, she looked back toward the farther starting place.

Piper noticed Nora looking there too.

For the first time that morning, she wasn’t sure they were looking at the same thing.

CHAPTER 3

Four Pairs of Shoes



At two o’clock, Piper’s hallway contained four pairs of outdoor shoes and an argument about dragons.

“They can have hair,” Maisie said.

“Where?” Wren asked.

“On their heads.”

“I meant which book says so.”

Nora set a packet of colored paper on the table.

“This dragon wears slippers. I don’t think we’re following a book.”

Their grown-ups had dropped them off, checked the pickup time with Dad, and left. Dad was in the kitchen.

He said they could use the rug and the low table, but the tape had to stay off the furniture.

Piper showed them the cardboard theatre.

The paper curtain fell down.

“That part happens quite often,” she said.

Wren knelt to inspect it. Nora spread out the paper. Maisie picked up Bernard.

He had acquired eyebrows since breakfast. They made him look worried about his slippers.

“He’s lost his hat,” Maisie announced in a deep voice.

Piper looked at the dragon. “Did he have a hat?”

“An excellent hat. Tall. Important. Gone.”

“Who’s taken it?”

“The Hat Thief.”

“Who is that?”

Maisie considered the blank paper.

“A turnip.”

Wren looked up from the curtain.

“A turnip has stolen a dragon’s hat?”

“It’s a very dishonest vegetable.”

Piper laughed. The play was becoming much better than anything she had thought of.

They worked on the rug with crayons, paper, blunt scissors, and a glue stick that preferred sticking to its own lid.

Nora drew the turnip. She added a curly moustache and enormous boots. Maisie gave it a voice that sounded suspiciously like someone trying to speak through a mouthful of toast.

Piper made a queen with a crown wider than her head. Wren drew a dog.

"What does the dog do?" Piper asked.

"Dog things."

"It's got to help catch the thief."

"It can smell turnips."

"That will be useful," Nora said.

Wren folded little tabs at the bottoms of the puppets so they could hold them behind the box. For Bernard, she taped on a wooden craft stick from Piper's supplies. Nora made several paper hats, because Maisie said a hat thief ought to have had some practice.

The curtain fell down again.

Nobody was surprised.

Piper went to the kitchen for more tape. Dad gave her the roll and asked if anyone wanted apple slices.

"The queen does."

"Has she checked with the dragon?"

"He eats turnips."

"I'll leave that to you."

When Piper came back, Maisie was trying to fit every paper hat onto Bernard at once. Nora was making one more, a tiny striped cap.

Wren had turned the box over. The curtain dangled against her knee.

"I can fix this if you stop performing in it."

Piper put the tape beside her and sat down.

For a while, all she could hear was paper snipping and Maisie's turnip voice. Curling seemed very far away. None of them had a helmet on. Nora's braids rested on her sleeves, and Wren's hair kept falling forward while she worked.

Piper liked having them here.

Then Nora set down the striped cap.

"I drew the new start in my notebook," she said. "I'm going to ask Jo to watch my next try."

Maisie took the hats off Bernard, one at a time.

"What for?"

"To see if I can do it like the first one again."

"I thought we were doing that together."

"We are."

"Except you're already doing it."

Nora looked at her.

Piper reached for the queen. She wished someone would ask what sort of voice a queen made. She had a very loud one ready.

Nobody asked.

"You could stay at the usual place with me next week," Maisie said.

Nora's fingers stopped on the little cap.

"But I want to try from farther back."

"Until I can do it, I mean."

"How will you do it if we don't try?"

"I don't know," Maisie said. "That's what I'm trying to work out."

Wren pressed the last piece of tape firmly down.

"The curtain works now," she said.

Piper was grateful to hear it.

She wasn't sure a working curtain was going to be enough.

CHAPTER 4

The Hat Thief

Piper put the queen through the theatre opening.

"Where is my royal hat?" she boomed.

"On your head," Wren said.

Piper lowered the queen.

"Oh."

Maisie made a small sound through her nose. It might have been a laugh.

Piper tried again.

"Where is my other royal hat?"

Behind the box, Nora held up the turnip.

"I certainly haven't stolen it," she said.

Three hats fell off its head.

This time Maisie laughed properly.

For the next few minutes, the play went very well. The dog chased the turnip. The queen ordered everybody to stand still. Nobody did. Bernard complained that the thief had taken his best hat and left him one that made his ears look enormous.

Then the dragon got stuck in the theatre opening.

His tail was too wide.

Piper pulled gently. Nora held the box. Wren told them that if they pulled any harder, there would be no theatre left.

"I can come in sideways," Maisie said in Bernard's deep voice.

The dragon came through sideways.

His slippers arrived last.

Piper laughed so hard that the queen tipped over.

Dad brought the apple slices and sat on the sofa while the turnip tried to explain why it was wearing everybody's hats.

"They fell on me," Nora said in a tiny, innocent voice.

"Several times?" Dad asked.

"It has been a difficult afternoon."

Dad took an apple slice. "Clearly."

He watched until Wren's dog caught the thief by standing on one of its enormous boots. Then he went back to the kitchen, leaving the girls to make the next part up.

Piper wanted to do it all again. This time the queen would arrive after somebody actually stole her hat.

But Maisie was staring at Bernard's paper feet.

"I don't want to be the one who always starts nearest," she said.

Nora sat back on her heels.

"You aren't."

"I will be if everybody keeps going."

"I'm staying at the usual place for some of mine," Wren said. "I want to get my line better."

Maisie nodded, but she kept looking at the dragon.

Piper said, "Maybe next week you'll reach, and then you can both do it."

"What if I don't?"

The queen was crooked in Piper's hand. She straightened the crown.

"I don't know."

Nora put the turnip down carefully.

"I liked trying it."

“I know you did.” Maisie pinched one of the paper slippers. “You said it was easy.”

“My first one felt easy. I didn’t mean everyone’s would.”

“Well, mine didn’t.”

“I saw.”

“That doesn’t help.”

Nora’s face went pink.

Piper wished she could put the theatre between them again. It had room for one dragon and a whole collection of hats. Surely it could manage this.

But Nora was already speaking.

“I don’t want to stop trying it because you can’t reach yet.”

Maisie went still.

Nora looked down. “That sounded horrible.”

“It did a bit,” Maisie said.

“I mean I want my turns too.”

“I wanted us to do the next thing together.”

They sat quietly for a moment.

Outside, somebody shut a car door. The glue stick rolled against Piper’s knee.

Piper picked it up before it rolled under the sofa.

“We still have the rest of the play,” she said.

It was a small thing to offer. She didn’t try to make it bigger.

Wren put the dog through the opening.

“It has eaten a hat.”

“Which one?” Nora asked.

“The queen’s.”

Piper made the queen shout. Maisie supplied a very large burp from the dragon, which confused everyone because the dog was supposed to have eaten it.

"Sorry," she said. "Wrong animal."

They laughed again, though it took a little longer this time.

When their grown-ups arrived, the play still had no proper ending. The turnip had escaped twice. The queen had bought a replacement hat. Bernard had decided he wanted a sandwich, and Wren refused to make a paper sandwich when there were apple slices available.

Nora helped Maisie collect the hats. Maisie handed her the tiny striped cap without being asked.

Piper put everything into the box.

"Can we bring it to show Granite?" Maisie asked.

Piper checked with Dad. He said they could bring it next Saturday if it stayed in the warm room.

At the door, Nora said goodbye to everyone. Maisie said goodbye back.

They sounded nearly ordinary.

Piper carried Bernard to the kitchen table. One slipper had bent underneath him.

She smoothed it flat with her finger.

She had liked the afternoon. She wanted another one.

She also wished she knew what would happen on Saturday.

CHAPTER 5

Saturday Again

All week, the theatre occupied one end of the kitchen table.

Dad asked if the dragon could move before supper. Piper moved him. By breakfast, he had somehow returned.

On Saturday, Dad carried the box into the club.

“Your dragon travels more comfortably than I do,” he said.

Piper tucked the curtain inside so it wouldn’t drag.

The warm room smelled of toast. Someone had put a pot of cheerful yellow flowers on the counter, well away from the bags. Through the window, Pebble was finishing his ice work.

Maisie was already on their bench.

“Did Bernard bring the hats?”

“All of them.”

“Good. I thought of a new crime.”

Before Piper could ask what it was, Nora arrived with Wren. Maisie shifted her bag to make room.

It was such an ordinary movement that Piper almost missed it.

They warmed up together. Ben checked their helmets and clean grippers. The theatre stayed on a shelf in the warm room, where a small cardboard turnip would not be a danger to anyone’s feet.

Jo explained the morning’s practice blocks.

They would start at the familiar place, have a short farther block for anyone who wanted it, take a water

break, then choose what to work on before some team play.

“If a setup needs adjusting, tell us,” she said. “We’ll see what is useful and safe.”

Wren chose to spend her first turns watching her aim. Piper practiced a steadier start and made one delivery that felt satisfyingly smooth.

Maisie’s first red reached the house. Nora’s went through.

“Nobody asked you to inspect the back,” Nora told it.

Maisie smiled a little.

When all the stones were still and the girls had cleared the lane, Ben and Jo moved and checked the hack for the farther block. Jo showed them the drill’s release cue again.

Nora wanted to try it. So did Piper.

Maisie stood with her brush against her jacket.

Then she said, “Me too.”

Her first attempt stopped short. Jo helped her settle more comfortably for the next one, checking her balance instead of asking for a harder shove.

The second traveled a little farther. It still didn’t reach the rings.

Piper was holding the target for that shot. She saw Maisie follow it with her eyes all the way to the stop.

When Piper’s own turn came, she reached the outer part of the house. The stone was wide of the target, but she was pleased with the start.

“Better,” she said when she came back.

Maisie nodded. “Looked steadier.”

She had noticed.

Nora tried next. Her first draw stayed near the front of the house. The next was short. She asked Jo about the difference, listened, and came back looking thoughtful rather than finished.

Maisie looked at Nora's red in the rings.

Piper waited until they were walking safely off the ice for water.

"Do you want me to watch anything on your next turn?" she asked.

"I don't know yet."

"Okay."

Piper didn't add that the next one would surely reach. She had already tried promising that sort of thing at home.

Maisie loosened her gloves on the dry side of the doorway.

"I don't want another three just like those," she said.

"Then let's see what you do want."

Nora came through behind them. She reached for her cup, then waited while Maisie found hers.

There were still turns left.

This time, they had to choose how to use them.

CHAPTER 6

The Place Between



Maisie drank half her water before she spoke.

“I thought if I tried really hard, I’d do it today.”

Piper looked through the glass at the ice. From here, all the practice places seemed close together again.

“You did try,” she said.

“I know.”

Wren was rubbing warmth into her fingers.

“I’m asking for the usual start again,” she said. “Granite said I looked away from my target before I began. I want another go at that.”

Maisie turned her cup between her hands.

“I want a bit of the extra distance.”

Nora looked up.

“Just not all of it,” Maisie finished.

She said it as if she was trying the idea out loud to hear whether it made sense.

Piper put down her own cup.

“You could ask.”

Maisie looked toward Ben, who was checking the time with Jo.

Then she looked at Nora.

“I still wish we could do the same one.”

“I liked when we decided together,” Nora said.

“Me too.”

“But I want to keep trying from back there.”

Maisie traced a drop of water on the table.

“I wanted you to come back until I caught up.”

“I know.”

It wasn’t a comfortable silence. Piper could hear another table’s chair scrape across the floor.

At last Maisie said, “You don’t have to.”

Nora’s shoulders loosened.

“Are you going to be cross when I do it?”

“Maybe a little bit in my head.” Maisie looked at her properly. “I won’t ask you to stop.”

Nora nodded.

“And don’t call it easy while I’m doing mine.”

“I won’t.”

“I liked your first one,” Maisie added. “Last week. Before I did mine.”

“I could tell.”

“I’d like to like the next one as well.”

Nora pushed the cup she had borrowed a little farther from the table edge.

“I want to see what you ask for.”

Piper picked up their empty cups. Nobody seemed to need her queen voice this time.

When the break was over, they put on their checked gear and returned to the safe waiting place with Ben. No stones were moving.

Maisie stepped closer to him, her gripper-covered feet steady on the ice.

“Can I try somewhere between the two starts?” she asked. “Farther than our usual place, but not as far as that one?”

Ben looked along the lane with Jo.

“Yes,” he said. “We can set a smaller step back. Jo can watch how it suits you.”

“Will I reach from there?”

“We’ll find out what your delivery does.”

Maisie considered that.

Piper had thought she might want a firmer answer. Instead, Maisie nodded.

“I want to try it.”

Jo worked out the remaining blocks with them. Wren could have her familiar-start turns first. Then the adults would move the hack to the intermediate place for Maisie and anyone else who wanted it. Nora could use her remaining tries from the farther place afterward.

They would all help with sweeping and targets, as before.

“There’s time for those blocks,” Jo said. “Then we reset for team play.”

Maisie turned to Piper.

“Will you sweep?”

“Yes.”

“Nora too?”

Nora nodded.

Maisie held out her brush toward them, then remembered they were all carrying brushes already. She lowered it with an embarrassed little grin.

“Good. That’s what I want, then.”

Nothing had happened at the new place yet. The hack hadn’t even moved.

But Piper knew which job was hers.

CHAPTER 7

One Turn at a Time

Wren went first from their familiar start.

She looked at the target. She kept looking while she settled. Her stone followed a good line and stopped farther than she wanted.

“Wrong amount,” she said. “Better direction.”

Granite watched the next one with her. Piper swept, then took her turn holding the target when Wren asked to try once more.

Waiting for someone else’s practice was easier when you had something to do.

When Wren’s block finished, the girls went to the clear waiting place. Ben and Jo moved the portable hack to the agreed intermediate position and checked it carefully. The same house waited at the other end.

Jo showed Maisie the release cue for this unscored exercise and checked her support and feet.

Piper and Nora stood ready to sweep. Wren held the target broom, with Granite beside the house. Ben stayed close enough to watch the sweepers.

Maisie took a breath.

Her stone came toward them.

Piper watched its speed. Nora kept her brush clear until Wren called.

They swept.

The stone slowed.

“Up.”

It stopped before the rings.

Piper looked toward Maisie.

Maisie studied the place where it had finished.

Then she asked Jo something. Piper couldn't hear the words, but she saw Jo nod and point back toward the start.

Once everyone was ready, Maisie tried again.

This delivery was smoother. Piper and Nora walked beside it, keeping their spacing. They swept when Wren called, then lifted safely away.

The red reached the front of the house and settled inside the outer ring.

Piper smiled.

Maisie was smiling too.

She waited for Jo's help standing, covered her slider, and came along the safe route.

"That felt much less like wrestling," she said.

"Who were you wrestling?" Nora asked.

"Myself. Very annoying opponent."

They had time for one more from that place. Maisie's stone went wide of the intended target and stayed outside the rings.

She made a face.

Then she looked back at Jo.

"Could I try here again next week?"

"Yes," Jo said. "We can plan for that."

Maisie nodded as if she had put something useful away.

Next came Nora's block. Again they waited until the lane was clear. The adults moved the hack back to the farther place, checked it, and showed the setup before anyone began.

Maisie and Piper swept for Nora.

Nora's first red went through the house. Her second stayed in the rings, a little farther out than the place Wren had shown her.

Piper lifted her brush at Wren's call. Maisie lifted hers beside it.

For a moment, Maisie simply watched the stone stop.

Then she turned toward Nora.

"In!" she called.

Nora raised one gloved hand.

Maisie raised hers back.

There was no enormous cheer. The next group was playing nearby, and Nora had one more question for Jo about her delivery.

Piper rested her brush against her shoulder while they waited safely at the side.

"Did you like it?" she asked Maisie.

"The one in the house? Yes."

"I meant Nora's."

Maisie looked at her.

"So did I."

Then she grinned.

"Mine as well, though."

CHAPTER 8

Back at the Usual Place

By the time Evie's group joined them, the adults had restored the familiar short-lane setup.

The girls checked the starting arrangement and had a familiar-distance warm-up delivery before play. Jo went over their usual beginner-game release instructions. The extra practice starts were finished for today.

There was time for one practice end against Evie's team. Two junior stones per player, taking turns with the other team, with coaches helping as usual. For practice, the coaches wanted everyone to play both stones, even if the winner was already clear.

The Too-Cold Club kept their usual jobs: Maisie first, Nora second, Piper third and vice-skip, Wren last and skip.

Evie's team won the coin toss and chose the last stone. Piper's team took red handles and would start.

"Good curling," Evie said.

Her purple shoelaces had been tied into exceptionally tidy bows.

Piper wished her good curling back and went to sweep with Nora. Wren waited at the house.

Maisie looked toward the target broom.

Piper remembered her red sailing through the rings when they returned to this distance last week.

This time Maisie took a long look before she began.

Her first stone stopped near the front of the house.

Nora tapped Piper's glove after they had lifted their brushes clear.

“That’ll do nicely.”

It didn’t stay closest. A yellow arrived nearer the middle, and later reds and yellows gave them several different places to look at.

Maisie’s second was short. Nora’s first went too far.

“Forgot where I was,” Nora said when she came to the waiting place.

Maisie pointed down at the ice beside her own feet.

“Here.”

“Thank you. Very detailed.”

Nora’s second draw stayed in the house, farther from the button than the nearest yellow. Piper and Maisie had swept it. Wren had called them up, and everybody’s brushes stayed clear.

Piper liked the sound of Maisie’s voice beside her again.

When it was her turn to deliver, she took a moment at the hack. Jo was there. The broom was ready at the house. She had a familiar start to make.

Her first red went wide. Her second was better and stopped in the rings, though yellow was still nearest.

Piper went to the house for Wren’s deliveries. Granite stood nearby while she checked where to put the target.

They chose an open way toward the middle. Wren nodded.

Her first stone stopped short of the nearest yellow.

After Evie’s next turn, Piper showed Wren the target again. Maisie and Nora waited to sweep. Ben was with them.

Wren's last red came on a good line. It traveled past the place they wanted and settled farther back.

Evie still had the final yellow. It also finished too far out to change which stone was nearest.

When everything had stopped, only one yellow was closer to the button than Piper's second red, their team's nearest. The teams agreed: one for yellow.

They shook hands. Evie told Maisie she liked her opening draw.

Maisie thanked her.

Then she turned to Nora.

"You're in Bernard's crime today."

"What crime?"

"Hat theft."

"I'm already the thief."

"There's been a development."

Piper collected her brush and followed them carefully toward the exit.

She very much wanted to hear the development.

CHAPTER 9

A Dragon at the Club



The theatre took up most of the warm-room table.

Dad said it could stay for a few minutes, as long as they packed everything away afterward. Jo had gone to help the next group. Granite came to see what the four girls were doing before his own next job.

“Is this a very small clubhouse?” he asked.

“A palace,” Piper said.

“Excellent. I haven’t visited a palace all morning.”

They sat in a row behind the box. Nora untangled the paper hats. Wren inspected her curtain repair, which

had survived the journey. Maisie found Bernard at the bottom, beneath the queen and the dog.

Piper held up her puppet.

“Where is my royal hat?”

Granite looked carefully at the paper crown.

Wren coughed.

“My other royal hat,” Piper added quickly.

Nora’s turnip appeared, wearing four of them.

Maisie’s dragon came through sideways.

“I am investigating,” he announced.

A fifth hat fell off his head.

There was a silence.

“The detective did it,” Wren’s dog said.

Piper stared at Maisie. Then she made the queen shout so loudly that Dad looked over from the bench.

Maisie tried to explain in Bernard’s voice that dragons needed a great many hats because their heads were very complicated.

Nora’s turnip demanded a lawyer.

Wren’s dog ate the evidence.

Granite laughed until his glasses slipped down his nose.

The curtain came down. This time, Wren had meant it to.

While they put the puppets away, Maisie asked Dad whether the intermediate starting place could go on next week’s practice plan.

“I’ll check the blocks with Jo,” he said.

Nora asked for more turns from the farther place. Wren wanted to keep working on her aim. Piper thought she would try both distances again if there was time.

Dad listened, then went to speak with the other coaches.

Maisie tucked Bernard into the box beside Nora's turnip.

"Could we do this at your house again?" she asked Piper.

"I'll ask."

"We need a better ending," Wren said.

"The dog could become queen," Nora suggested.

"He'd eat the crown."

"That would save us making another one."

Piper put the lid on loosely so the puppets wouldn't get bent. Through the window, the ice was bright. Her gloves were drying on top of her bag, and she could feel a small tired ache in her arms.

She had things she wanted to try next Saturday.

For now, she wanted to find out how a turnip could afford a lawyer.

Maisie picked up the box. Piper caught the curtain before it trailed on the floor.

"Careful," Nora said. "There are criminals in there."

Wren held the door for them.

"And one very well-dressed dog."