PIPER'S CURLING ADVENTURES

Piper and the Too-Cold Club

BOOK ONE



Mary Deuhs

An illustrated chapter book

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Story by Mary Deuhs

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CHAPTER 1

A Bad Place for Toes

The first thing Piper learned about curling was that her father could be wrong.

"It'll be fun," Dad had said.

Now she stood inside a building that felt like the vegetable drawer of a refrigerator. Her nose was cold. Her ears were cold. Somewhere inside her shoes, her toes were making plans to leave.

Through a big window, Piper could see long lanes of ice. Red and blue circles lay at both ends. People in jackets slid round stones along the lanes, then followed them with brushes.

Piper watched a woman shout at a stone.

The stone ignored her.

"Do they always do that?" Piper asked.

"Call to each other? Quite often."

"I meant put a whole winter inside a building."

Piper tucked her hands under her arms. "I hate curling. It's too cold."

Dad grinned. That was annoying. It was difficult to make a proper complaint when the other person kept grinning.

His name was Ben, but almost everybody they had passed called him Benny. A woman behind the counter had waved a spoon at him. A man carrying a broom had asked whether he was coming back to coach the juniors.

"Helping out," Dad had said. "Granite's in charge."

Piper knew Dad had curled when he was young. There was a photograph at home of him wearing a jacket three

sizes too big and holding a little silver cup. He had shown it to her that morning.

She had been polite about his hair.

On the bench beside the window, Dad opened their bag. Out came Piper's clean indoor shoes, gloves, a fleece, and her helmet.

"I've already got a jacket," she said.

"You can wear the fleece underneath."

"Can I wear the building underneath?"

"We'll start with the fleece."

Piper wriggled into it. Dad helped untangle her brown ponytail from the collar, then checked the fit of her helmet. She could still hear things perfectly, which was a shame. She had been hoping not to hear the word fun again.

"You only have to try today," he said. "Then you can tell me what you think."

"I can tell you now."

"Tell me afterward too."

Beyond the window, a thin man with gray hair walked slowly over the ice. He carried a tank with a hose and a little metal sprinkler. As he swung the sprinkler, water droplets glittered in the light.

Piper pressed closer to the glass.

"Why is he watering the ice?"

"That's Pebble. He makes it ready for us."

"Does it grow?"

Dad opened his mouth. Before he could answer, someone behind them said, "Not if we're careful."

Piper turned.

A gray curling stone stood beside the bench.

He had a red handle on top of his head, thick black rectangular glasses, and white eyebrows so bushy they almost qualified as hats. A matching moustache sat above a smile. His navy jacket was zipped up neatly, and his white gloves were tucked together in front of him.

Below his round stone body were two navy, red, and white sneakers.

Piper looked at the shoes. Then at the ice. Then back at the shoes.

"Do you get cold feet?" she asked.

"Dreadfully," said the stone. "I complain about them every Tuesday."

"It's Saturday."

"I'm trying to become more organized."

Dad laughed. "Piper, this is Coach Granite."

"Granite is fine." He held out a gloved hand. "Welcome."

Piper shook it. His glove was much warmer than she expected.

"I don't think I like curling," she told him.

Granite considered this. One eyebrow rose. The other stayed where it was, apparently saving its strength.

“Have you tried it before?”

“No.”

“What have you tried so far?”

“Being cold.”

“Ah. You’ve started with the difficult part.”

He nodded toward the window. Pebble had finished sprinkling. He was carefully checking something beside a row of stones.

“We’ll be on shortly,” Granite said. “First we have a very important job in the warm room.”

“What job?”

“Finding out whether your father can still march without looking like a chicken.”

Dad put a hand to his chest. “My marching has always been excellent.”

Piper looked at Granite. Granite looked at Piper.

Neither of them said anything.

For the first time that morning, she wanted to follow someone farther into the building.

CHAPTER 2

Penguin Business



Two girls waited in the warm room. One wore a yellow jacket and had dark curls that sprang out below her helmet. She was swinging her arms in enormous circles.

“I’m Maisie,” she said. “We’re being windmills. You can have this bit of wind.”

She moved sideways to make room.

The other girl had a straight black bob, a teal jacket, and a serious expression. She was rolling her shoulders.

“I’m Wren,” she said. “We were windmills. Now we’re shoulders.”

“I’m both,” said Maisie.

Piper stood between them. “I’m Piper.”

“Excellent,” said Granite. “We were short of Pipers.”

They warmed up on the rubber floor. They marched, bent their knees, and stretched tall. Dad demonstrated the marching.

Piper had to admit it was quite good.

Then Granite asked him to march like a chicken.

That was even better.

By the time they sat to check their shoes, Piper’s cheeks felt warm. Dad fitted rubber grippers over both of her clean soles. They looked like little black boats.

“Those help your shoes hold the ice,” he explained.

Maisie stretched out her feet. “Mine are tugboats.”

“Mine are ordinary shoes,” said Wren.

“Very sensible boats.”

Piper wiggled her toes inside hers. They seemed willing to postpone leaving.

At the ice entrance, Granite gathered them close. He showed them how to step down carefully and take short, steady steps. They would walk, stay out of the path of moving stones, and wait where a coach showed them. Nobody would lift a stone.

Piper was happy about that last part. Even the smaller stones lined up for their group looked heavy enough to have opinions.

Dad stayed by the entrance as they stepped down one at a time.

The ice felt strange under Piper’s shoes. Not quite as slippery as she had expected, but slippery enough to make her notice every part of her feet.

She kept her knees a little soft, the way Granite had shown them.

“Lovely,” said Granite. “Now, Penguin Post.”

“Are we penguins?” asked Maisie.

“Postal penguins.”

“Do we have bags?”

“Imaginary ones. Mine contains an extremely important letter to a sardine.”

They followed him along a clear stretch of ice, taking careful little steps. When he said “Postbox,” everybody stopped.

“Postbox!”

Piper stopped.

Maisie stopped with her mouth open.

Wren stopped looking exactly as she had looked while moving.

Granite inspected them. “Excellent. Not a single letter dropped.”

“You didn’t give us any,” Piper pointed out.

“You’re right. Terrible organization. Ben, remind me to hire someone.”

“Have you got sardine experience?” Maisie whispered to Piper.

“Only eating them.”

“Don’t put that on your form.”

They went a little farther. Then they turned carefully and came back. Granite gave them different letters to carry: a birthday card for a whale, a bill for a very cross crab, and an invitation to tea for a seal who always arrived early.

Piper carried a complaint to whoever had ordered all the cold.

Granite received it gravely.

“I’ll pass it on,” he said. “The cold has a very large office.”

After the penguins, they tried a balancing game. Dad showed Piper a low support with a handle that she could hold while learning to slide. At the practice hack, he helped put a slider under one foot. The other foot kept its gripper.

“That foot stays steady until you push,” he said. “This one can slide. I’m right here.”

Piper looked at the smooth slider. It seemed to have completely different plans from the rest of her.

Dad helped her get into position. Granite demonstrated beside them, bending his short legs and settling low.

“Now that,” Maisie said, “is a very small chair.”

Piper pushed gently.

Her sliding foot went forward. Her back leg stretched out. For one wonderful second, everything worked.

Then her knee flopped onto the ice.

“Oh,” she said.

“That’s your stopping place for now,” Dad said. “Let’s get you up.”

He helped her rise and covered the slider before she walked away.

Wren slid a little farther. Maisie got tangled in her own feet before she even pushed and laughed so hard she had to start again.

Nobody looked like the woman Piper had watched through the window.

That was comforting.

On Piper's next turn, her knee stayed up for an extra second.

"There," she said, before she could stop herself.

Granite nodded. "I saw."

Piper tried to look unimpressed. Her toes had begun complaining again.

"This should be called the Too-Cold Club," she said.

Maisie's eyes widened. "Can I join?"

"I wasn't making an actual club."

"I would join," Wren said. "My thumbs are cold."

Granite rubbed his white gloves together.

"Finally," he said. "A club with sensible requirements."

CHAPTER 3

The World's Slowest Delivery

The Too-Cold Club's first meeting took place beside three little curling stones.

They were real stones, just smaller than the ones the grown-ups used. Their handles were red. Small black numbers told them apart.

Piper liked number seven. One little speck in its gray surface looked like an eyebrow.

She did not tell anyone. Liking a speck was quite different from liking curling.

Granite pointed toward the rings in their practice lane. The coaches had set up a much shorter distance than the grown-ups used.

"The circles are called the house," he said. "Today, we're delivering parcels."

"What's in them?" asked Maisie.

"You decide."

"Elephants."

"Small parcels," said Granite.

"Baby elephants."

Wren thought for a moment. "A book."

Piper looked at the bright rings. "A heater."

"A popular choice," said Granite.

The coaches showed them how to get a stone moving without lifting it. First came a gentle push from a steady position. The sliding part could wait until each girl was ready to put the pieces together.

Piper liked that. Her body had only just learned where its knees belonged.

Ben placed number seven for her and checked her feet. Granite stood safely to one side farther along the lane, holding his broom where she should aim.

"Try sending it toward my brush," he called.

Piper held the handle. It was smooth under her glove.

"Go on," she whispered. "There's a heater in you."

She sent the stone forward.

It slid.

It slowed.

It stopped.

The house was still a very long way away.

Maisie tilted her head. "Maybe it forgot the address."

"That," Piper said, "was an extremely heavy heater."

Ben collected the stone after it stopped. Wren took a turn. Her book parcel went farther than Piper's heater, but wandered to the side.

Maisie's baby elephant traveled straight for a while, then curved away.

"It's going to the zoo," she said. "It knows where it lives."

Granite showed them a small, gentle turn of the handle as the stone left his hand. His stone traveled toward the house and slowly bent along its path.

"That's the curl," he said.

Piper leaned forward to watch. She had thought the stones went straight unless someone made a mistake.

So apparently the stone was allowed to turn, but you still had to make it go to the right place.

This seemed like a rule invented by a stone.

“Did you help make this game?” she asked Granite.

“Sadly, no. I would have included a biscuit interval.”

On her next turn, Piper pushed harder.

Number seven went much farther. It passed the place where it had stopped before. It passed Wren’s parcel. It kept going past the house.

Ben was waiting beyond the target to deal with any stones that traveled too far.

“Wrong house,” Piper said.

“Possibly the next town,” said Maisie.

Piper folded her arms. One push was too little. The next was too much. She had not discovered any pushes in between.

Granite came over while Ben helped Wren.

“What did you notice?” he asked.

“That the stone is difficult.”

“Anything about your push?”

“The second one was bigger.”

“It was.”

“How much bigger should the first one have been?”

Granite looked toward the rings. “That’s what you’re finding out.”

Piper would have preferred a number. Four pushes. Six pushes. Something she could put in her pocket and use.

She tried again.

This time, number seven went farther than the first stone but nowhere near as far as the second. It stopped short of the house.

Still short.

Piper looked down at her hands. The cold had crept right through her gloves while she waited.

“Can we go in now?”

Ben crouched beside her. “Yes. Warm-up break.”

“But my elephant hasn’t arrived,” said Maisie.

“It can wait,” Granite told her. “Elephants are excellent at waiting. They’re very bad at fitting through letterboxes.”

Inside, Piper wrapped both hands around a cup of warm water. Wren sat beside her and peeled a banana. Maisie sat on the other side, explaining how an elephant could help deliver its own parcel.

Piper listened. She even suggested that it might carry its own stamp.

After the break, they had one more short turn on the ice. Piper’s last stone stopped a little closer to the blue ring. It still didn’t reach.

Then it was time to go.

As they changed shoes, Maisie said, “Next time, I’m sending a giraffe.”

“Why?” asked Wren.

“So it can look over the house and see where the elephant went.”

Piper laughed before she remembered she was cold.

In the car, Dad turned on the heater.

“Well?” he asked.

Piper held her hands in front of the warm air. “The building is too cold. The stones are too heavy. And the house is in the wrong place.”

“Anything else?”

She watched a little curl of mist disappear from the window.

“Maisie is sending a giraffe next time.”

Dad nodded as though this was useful information.

He didn’t ask whether she wanted to see it arrive.

That was good.

Piper didn’t know the answer yet.

CHAPTER 4

Return Address

On Monday, Piper found a glove in her coat pocket.

The other glove was under the car seat.

On Tuesday, she drew a giraffe on the back of an old envelope. Its neck came out so long that she had to bend it around the corner.

On Wednesday, Dad asked if she had seen his blue fleece.

“Are you going curling?” she asked.

“On Saturday. Granite asked me to help again.”

Piper added spots to the giraffe. One spot looked more like a hole.

“You liked it when you were little.”

“I did.”

“And now.”

“Yes.”

She pushed harder with her pencil. “You probably got your stone in the house the first time.”

Dad leaned against the table.

“I don’t remember my first stone.”

“You don’t?”

“I remember wanting the red handles because red was my favorite color. And I remember leaving one shoe at the rink.”

“Only one?”

“I was wearing my boots. I got halfway home before I noticed.”

Piper considered this. The little silver cup did not show the shoe part.

Dad glanced at her drawing. “That’s an impressive neck.”

“It’s for Maisie.”

“Ah.”

“It isn’t a promise.”

“Okay.”

Piper drew a box around the giraffe. Part of its head stuck out.

Dad went back to searching for his fleece.

She found it on the back of his chair. For a person who could remember where everyone should put their feet, he lost a surprising amount of clothing.

On Friday, Piper laid her clean shoes by the door.

Then she added her gloves, her fleece, and her helmet.

Dad came past carrying a basket of laundry.

“Same time tomorrow?” she asked.

“If you’d like.”

“I have to give Maisie something.”

He looked at the envelope in her hand.

“And there’s a heater that hasn’t arrived,” Piper added.

Dad’s smile got bigger. She pointed at him.

“Don’t do the smile.”

He pressed his lips together. The smile escaped around the edges.

The next morning, Piper wore warmer socks with plenty of room for her toes. She put her fleece on before they left the house. She also ate all her toast, because she remembered being hungry after Penguin Post.

None of these things meant that she liked curling.

They meant she had collected information.

At the rink, the cold reached up her sleeves to say hello.

“Go away,” she told it.

Maisie was already on the bench, struggling with a shoelace.

“You came!”

Piper handed over the envelope. Maisie stopped pulling at the lace.

“My giraffe!”

“It’s a very squashed parcel,” Piper said.

Maisie studied it. “That’s because he packed himself. They should never let giraffes do that.”

Wren moved her bag off the bench. “I saved you a place.”

She said it quietly, as if saving places happened all the time.

Piper sat down in the space.

On the wall, a clock clicked. Somewhere in the building, a kettle began to hiss. Through the glass, Granite was checking the practice lane with Ben.

Piper knew which hook held the spare brushes now. She knew the warm room had a small rip in one chair. She knew Wren peeled bananas from the end Piper thought was the wrong end.

The place didn't feel quite as enormous.

Granite came in and spotted her.

"Any messages for the cold?" he asked.

"Several."

"I'll need a larger bag."

Maisie carefully propped the giraffe envelope against the window, safely off the ice.

Then the three girls stood up together.

The Too-Cold Club had another delivery to make.

CHAPTER 5

The Porridge Problem

Piper's first stone went too far.

Her second stone went hardly anywhere.

Her third stone went too far again.

"Porridge," she said.

Granite looked up from his clipboard. "I'm sorry?"

"Too much. Too little. Too much. I'm doing the bears."

Maisie nodded. "You need the baby bear."

Piper watched number seven stop beyond the rings. "I think I sent him to another country."

The coaches had kept the same short practice lane. Piper had expected to remember exactly how hard to push. Apparently her arm had spent the week forgetting.

Ben showed her how to start from the same position each time. Granite asked her to finish gently instead of giving the handle a last shove.

She tried to remember both things.

Then she remembered her foot.

Then she remembered the little turn of the handle.

Then she remembered that she was meant to be looking at the broom.

By the time the stone left her hand, her head felt full of people all talking at once.

Number seven curled away to the side.

Piper stared at it.

"I think it wants to play something else."

"Perhaps it's interested in gardening," said Granite.

Piper did not laugh.

Granite lowered himself beside her. His jacket made a little creak.

“Too many things?”

She nodded.

“Then let’s keep one. Finish with a quiet hand.”

“Hands don’t make noise.”

“This one is doing a lot of shouting.”

He made a sudden shove with his glove. Then he showed her a soft finish, letting the handle go without an extra jab.

Piper tried the motion without a stone.

Ben was helping Wren at the hack. Wren settled, looked up, and sent her stone away. It traveled toward the rings, slowed, and stopped with its front edge inside the blue.

Wren’s eyes went wide.

“Oh,” she said.

Maisie put both hands against her helmet. “The book has arrived!”

Granite smiled at Wren. Ben lifted one hand for a high five when she came back to the waiting place.

Piper clapped too. She meant the clap.

She also wanted Wren’s hand.

Not forever. Just for one turn.

When it was Piper’s turn, she set up exactly as Ben showed her. She remembered to look at the brush. She remembered her quiet hand.

The stone went straight toward the target.

It slowed.

Piper leaned forward.

It stopped short.

She straightened and pressed her gloved hands together.

"Well," she said. "That was quiet."

"It was," said Granite.

"And it didn't get there."

"No."

That surprised her. She had expected him to say it was wonderful anyway.

He studied the stone with her. "The line was better. Next turn, we can try a little more push from the start."

Piper looked at him sideways. "A little means how much?"

"A question I still ask."

"But you're the coach."

"Yes. Very inconvenient."

While Maisie took her turn, Piper stood beside Wren.

"Your hand knows," she said.

Wren flexed her fingers. "Knows what?"

"How much."

"Sometimes."

"Mine doesn't."

Wren glanced at her own stone, now parked out of the way. "Last week I got one in. Then I couldn't do it again."

"Even though your hand already knew?"

Wren nodded. "It was very irritating."

Piper liked that word. It sounded the way a scratchy sock felt.

Maisie's giraffe sailed through the rings and kept going. Ben was waiting at the end of the clear lane.

"Mine has overslept on the train," Maisie announced.

On her next try, Maisie sent it short. She flung up her hands.

"Now it's missed the train!"

Piper laughed.

Maisie turned toward her. "What?"

"Nothing. My heater and your giraffe should travel together."

"They'd be very warm."

"They'd be very lost."

Ben called them in for a break. As Piper walked carefully off the ice, she looked back at the house.

It was big. It was right there. It had no door to shut and no stairs to climb.

She could not understand why it was so difficult to send one small stone into it.

Beside the entrance, Pebble was looking down at a patch of ice. He crouched, tilted a little light, and looked again.

Piper stopped.

Maybe he was trying to work out what was wrong with the house too.

CHAPTER 6

A Very Small Mountain



“Is something broken?” Piper asked.

Pebble looked up.

He was a thin man in a dark work jacket, with gray hair that lay flat except for one piece at the back. He moved his light aside so it wouldn’t shine in Piper’s eyes.

“No,” he said.

Piper waited.

Pebble seemed perfectly happy to wait too.

“What are you looking at?” she asked at last.

“The pebble.”

Piper looked at him.

He looked at the ice.

"Oh," she said. "Different pebble."

He smiled a little and shifted closer to the walkway.

"Stay there. Look low."

Piper crouched on the rubber surface, beside Ben. Pebble held the light at an angle across a small patch of ice.

Something glittered.

Piper leaned her head to one side. The smooth white surface wasn't smooth after all. Tiny frozen bumps crowded together, shining in the light.

"They're like little mountains."

"Very little," said Pebble.

Maisie and Wren came to look from the walkway too. Maisie had to crouch lower because she kept looking at her own reflection.

"You make those with the sprinkler," Piper said.

Pebble nodded. "Drops freeze. Stones glide over the bumps."

He let her look for as long as she wanted.

Nobody said, Have you seen it yet? Nobody pointed at the clock.

Piper moved her head a little, and a new row of tiny mountains appeared.

"From the window it looks flat."

"Mm." Pebble adjusted the light again. "Different down here."

Wren leaned beside Piper. Their helmet edges nearly touched.

"It looks like sugar," Wren whispered.

"Very disappointing sugar," Piper said.

After a moment, Pebble switched off the light. “Warm hands?” he asked.

Piper tucked hers under her arms.

“Not yet.”

He opened the door to the warm room for them.

Inside, Maisie took the giraffe envelope down from the window and drew a scarf around its neck. She ran out of room halfway through the scarf.

Piper asked for the pencil.

In the corner of the envelope, she drew a tiny house with a chimney. Wren added a stack of books inside it.

“That’s where they’re all going,” Maisie said.

“Eventually,” said Piper.

When they returned to the ice, Granite had brushes ready.

“Before we send any more parcels,” he said, “we need an orchestra.”

Piper glanced around. “Here?”

“Excellent acoustics. Ben’s singing is banned, however.”

“It was one song,” Dad said.

“And we all remember it.”

With grippers covering both shoes, the girls stood well apart in a clear space. Ben helped them hold their brushes and bend comfortably. They practiced short brushing strokes across the ice while their feet stayed still.

Swish. Swish. Swish.

Granite raised both hands.

They stopped.

He waved one glove very slowly. They brushed slowly.

He waved it a little faster. Their brushes made a shushing sound.

Then he put one glove against his ear and frowned.

“I’m hearing an unauthorized squeak.”

Maisie giggled. “It’s me.”

“Try tuning your nose.”

She pinched it. Piper laughed so hard her brush stopped moving.

After that, Ben helped each girl practice the walking steps without a stone. When they were ready, they tried beside a stone that he sent gently along the clear lane. One girl at a time brushed in front of it, staying to the side, with Ben close by. The other two waited with Granite.

Piper’s first try felt like walking, brushing, and remembering which way her elbows bent all at once.

She managed several strokes before Ben called, “Up.”

She lifted the brush and let the stone pass.

It stopped just beyond the place she had brushed.

“Did I make it go?” she asked.

“You helped it keep going,” Ben said. “We’ll work on it.”

“Can we sweep it now to get it started again?”

“No. Once it stops, that’s where it stays.”

Piper studied it. “I know people like that in the morning.”

Ben gave her a look.

She gave it back.

Next, the girls took turns giving the calls while Granite and Ben made a brushing orchestra of their own. Wren’s

first “Up” came out so softly that Piper could hardly hear it.

Granite cupped a glove beside his ear.

“The back row needs to hear you,” he said. “Especially the handsome fellow conducting.”

Wren tried again. “Up!”

Three brushes came off the ice at once: Granite’s, Ben’s, and Pebble’s, over on the closed lane where he was working.

Pebble looked at his raised brush. Then he looked at Wren.

“That one reached me,” he said.

Wren smiled so hard she had to look down.

At the end of practice, Piper took off her gloves. Her hands were warm. There was a damp curl of hair against her forehead.

She checked her toes.

Still there.

Still rather cold.

But they had stopped writing complaints.

CHAPTER 7

Special Delivery

By the third Saturday, the giraffe envelope had a house, three books, a heater, and a very long scarf drawn on it.

Piper had added a sign over the door.

TOO-COLD CLUB.

The letters leaned slightly uphill. She had planned to fix them, but Maisie said it looked as if they were climbing onto the roof to see whether the giraffe was coming.

So Piper left them.

Granite let them put the envelope on the clubhouse window again. They could see it from the ice if they looked back.

Today, he announced, was Special Delivery Day.

“Are there stamps?” Maisie asked.

“Imaginary stamps.”

“Again?”

“I’m afraid the budget is extremely imaginary.”

Ben had prepared their familiar short lane. The little stones waited neatly out of the way. The brushes leaned in their rack.

Piper looked at number seven.

Today, she thought.

Then she worried that thinking today might make her hand shout.

She thought nothing much instead.

That was difficult.

They warmed up, checked their gear, and walked onto the ice. Penguin Post had a new letter for a walrus who was having trouble with his moustache. Granite took a personal interest in that one.

Afterward, the girls practiced their small slides. Piper's balance was steadier than it had been on her first day. She still needed the support in her left hand, and Ben still stayed close.

But her sliding foot no longer seemed determined to travel without her.

"Shall we try it with the stone?" he asked.

Piper looked at the house. "Will it go farther?"

"It might. First we'll work on putting the slide and the release together."

Another thing to remember.

She breathed out slowly.

Ben waited.

"Okay," she said.

With the support steady beside her, she pushed gently from the hack. She slid a little. She gave the handle its small turn and let go.

Number seven traveled a short way and stopped.

Piper had been so busy letting go that she had hardly pushed at all.

But she had slid. With a stone.

She glanced at Ben.

He was watching her, not the rings.

"You stayed balanced," he said.

"I know."

She said it again, more quietly. "I know."

When Wren's turn came, she took ages to settle. Maisie began describing the contents of her next parcel, which now included a giraffe-sized pair of pajamas.

Wren looked up.

"Could I have quiet for this bit?"

"Oh," Maisie said. "Yes."

She zipped her lips with two fingers. Then she zipped them again when she thought of something else.

Wren sent her stone. It slowed before the blue ring.

"Short," she said.

Piper liked how she said it. Just short. No terrible. No always. No I am the worst person ever to have hands.

Maisie's turn went long. She watched it go with her mouth open.

"Those pajamas were very energetic," she said.

Granite brought them together at their waiting place.

"Where does your parcel need to stop today?"

"In the middle," said Maisie.

"Anywhere in the house," Wren said.

Piper studied the rings. The center looked very small from where she stood.

"The blue bit at the front," she said. "My heater doesn't need a fancy room."

Granite nodded. "Good address."

They took turns. Sometimes they practiced sweeping with Ben. Sometimes they watched from the side while Granite helped the girl delivering. They changed jobs, drank water, and stopped for warm hands before anybody became miserable.

Piper sent one stone long. One wandered off to the side. One stopped so close to the blue ring that she felt a squeak building inside her.

Then the stone went still.

The squeak sank back down.

“Nearly,” said Maisie.

Piper looked at the space between the stone and the house.

Nearly was a very annoying place.

Still, it was a different place from where she had started.

When Granite called for a break, Piper walked past number seven and checked the little gray speck that looked like an eyebrow.

“Stay there,” she told it.

For once, the stone did exactly what she wanted.

CHAPTER 8

One More Delivery

During the break, Maisie found a pencil stub in the bottom of her bag.

She used it to add a parcel beside the envelope's front door.

"My pajamas got there," she explained.

"Your stone went through the house," Wren said.

"The giraffe was visiting the neighbors. It's very complicated."

Piper ate an apple slice and watched a drop of water slide down her cup.

She had almost done it. She could still see the gap before the blue ring.

If she could remember that last push and make it a tiny bit bigger, perhaps the heater would arrive.

Unless she remembered her hand and forgot her foot.

Or remembered her foot and forgot the brush.

Ben sat on the bench beside her.

"What's happening in there?" he asked, tapping his own forehead.

"Too many people talking."

"Which one do you need?"

Piper thought about it.

"The one who remembers the last push."

Ben nodded. He didn't add another person to the conversation.

At the doorway, Pebble was putting away his light. Piper carried her cup to the tray and stopped beside him.

"My stone got nearly there," she said.

He looked toward the window.

"The one just short of the blue?"

"You saw it?"

He nodded.

Piper looked too. From here, the stone seemed much closer to the house than it had from the hack.

Pebble put his light in its case and closed the lid.

"Didn't used to get that far," he said.

Then he went to hang up his work gloves.

Piper stayed at the window for another moment.

When they returned to the ice, Granite said there was time for one more round of deliveries. Every girl would have two turns.

Maisie went first. Her stone reached the house, but slid on through the far side.

"Visit to the neighbors," Wren said.

"Exactly," Maisie replied.

Wren sent hers short. She made a face at it, then came back to stand beside Piper.

"Hands," she said, shaking hers.

Piper nodded. "Very irritating."

On Piper's first turn, Ben helped her settle into the position she knew. She looked at Granite's broom. The blue ring waited beyond it.

Same sort of push. Just a little more.

She slid forward and let go.

For a moment, she thought she had done it.

Number seven traveled along a good line. Then it began to curl. It slid toward the edge of the house, slowed, and stopped outside the blue.

Piper pressed her lips together.

The distance was better. The direction wasn't.

She wanted to ask for her other turn immediately. She wanted to push the stone again before the feeling in her leg went away.

But Maisie and Wren still had turns.

Piper walked back to the waiting place.

Maisie had gone quiet. She looked from Piper to the stone.

"Do you want the giraffe to carry it?" she asked.

Piper shook her head.

"Fair enough," Maisie said.

On her last try, Maisie settled carefully and kept her hand quiet. Her stone stopped inside the house, well away from the middle.

"The pajamas!" she cried.

Granite raised both gloves. "Delivered."

Wren's last stone slipped past the front of the blue ring and stopped a little farther in. She watched until it was completely still. Then she let out a breath that seemed to have been waiting for most of the morning.

Piper clapped for both of them.

She meant it.

She also wished she could borrow the morning for another ten minutes.

Ben brought number seven into position for her last turn. Granite set his broom at a slightly different aiming spot to allow for the way her previous stone had curled.

“Same delivery,” he said. “New address.”

Piper looked at the brush head.

Then she looked at the space beside the house where her last stone had stopped.

She had sent it far enough. That part had worked.

Ben waited beside her.

Maisie and Wren stood safely off to one side. Maisie’s lips moved silently.

“Are you saying giraffe things?” Piper asked.

“No,” Maisie said. “I’m being quiet very hard.”

Piper smiled.

She settled. Her glove rested around the handle. Her left hand held the support. Her foot was where it belonged.

She looked at Granite’s broom once more.

Then she pushed.

She slid a short, steady slide. She gave the handle its gentle turn. Her fingers opened without the last little shove.

Number seven left her hand.

Piper stopped and watched.

The stone moved past the place where her very first delivery had run out of ideas. Past the next place. Past the place that had seemed a terribly long way on her first Saturday.

Nobody swept this one. Granite wanted her to see what her own delivery would do.

It began to curl.

Piper forgot the wrinkle in her sock.

It slowed.

Maisie made a small sound behind her closed lips.

The front edge of the stone reached the blue ring.

Piper's fingers squeezed the handle of the support.

Number seven crept a little farther.

Then it stopped.

Inside.

Only just inside. Near the front edge, a long way from the center. It would have looked ordinary to someone hurrying past the window.

Nobody in the Too-Cold Club was hurrying.

Wren threw both hands up. Maisie said, "The heater!" so loudly that Pebble looked over from the doorway.

Piper looked at Ben.

"It's in."

"It is."

"Without you pushing."

"Without me pushing."

She looked at Granite.

His white moustache had lifted with his smile.

"Warm parcel for the blue room," he said.

Piper wanted to bounce. Her knees even started thinking about it.

So she squeezed her hands into fists instead and did one enormous grin.

When Ben had helped her up and covered her slider, they walked down the clear lane together to look. The stone sat partly over the blue, exactly where it had stopped.

Piper crouched beside it without touching.

The speck on number seven still looked like an eyebrow.

“Well,” she whispered. “You took your time.”



CHAPTER 9

Next Saturday

Piper wanted another turn.

This surprised her so much that she almost didn't say it.

"Could I do one more?"

Granite glanced at the clock.

"That's our ice time for today."

"Oh."

She looked at the house.

Number seven was still there. For a moment, she wished they could leave it exactly where it was until she came back. Then she could check that she hadn't imagined anything.

But Ben and Granite had other stones to put away. Pebble was waiting to ready the ice for the next group.

Piper stepped aside and watched Ben move number seven safely to its place.

The blue ring was empty again.

It didn't seem quite so far away now.

In the warm room, the girls sat in a row on the bench. Piper's ponytail had a bent place where her helmet had pressed it. Maisie's curls sprang in every direction. Wren's hair lay smooth except for one astonishing piece that stuck straight out.

Maisie pointed at it.

"That's your calling hair. It heard you say 'Up.'"

Wren tried to smooth it down. It stood up again.

"Very irritating," all three girls said.

They laughed until Ben looked over to see what he had missed.

“Hair,” Piper told him.

He touched his own. “What about it?”

“Nothing.”

Maisie collected the giraffe envelope from the window. The corners were soft now. A drop of water had made one spot spread into two.

She handed it to Piper.

“You should keep it this week.”

“Why?”

“The heater arrived. You know where the warm room is.”

Wren borrowed the pencil and drew a small stone inside the house. She added a seven to the handle.

Granite came in carrying his clipboard. There was a little dusting of ice on one of his navy, red, and white sneakers.

“Any final business for the club?” he asked.

“Real stamps,” Maisie said.

“Noted.”

“More time,” said Wren.

“Also noted.”

Piper thought about the cold. It was still out there. The rink had not turned into a beach. Her nose had been chilly at the very moment her stone reached the blue.

“Could we do parcels again?” she asked.

“Next Saturday?”

She nodded.

“We could,” said Granite. “Perhaps with some new addresses.”

Maisie began explaining an important delivery of socks to an octopus. Wren immediately wanted to know whether the octopus needed eight socks or only seven because one arm would be holding the parcel.

Piper had opinions about that.

She shared them while she changed her shoes.

In the car, Dad waited until she had fastened her seat belt before starting the engine.

“Too cold?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He turned on the heater. Warm air reached her knees.

Piper held the envelope carefully on her lap.

“Same time next Saturday?”

Dad glanced at her. “Same time.”

“And my gloves go in the bag together. Both of them. And we have to be early.”

“How early?”

“Before Maisie delivers an octopus.”

Dad nodded. He seemed to understand that this was important.

Piper looked back through the car window. Beyond the rink doors, she could just see the bright clubhouse windows and a bit of the ice.

Next Saturday, her first stone might stop short. It might go too far. She would probably have to find the right push all over again.

She turned the envelope over and found a blank space beneath the giraffe's tail.

With the pencil stub Maisie had lent her, Piper wrote the address for her next parcel.

TO THE BLUE ROOM.

She underlined it once.

Then she put the pencil away, tucked the envelope into her bag beside both gloves, and held her hands in the warm air all the way home.