PIPER'S CURLING ADVENTURES

Piper and the Almost Team

BOOK TWO



Mary Deuhs

An illustrated chapter book

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CHAPTER 1

A Very Important Name

Piper had a team name before she had a team.

This seemed like excellent planning.

She wrote FIRECRACKERS across the top of a piece of paper. Underneath, she drew three curling stones with flames coming out of them.

Dad looked over her shoulder.

“Those stones appear to be on fire.”

“They’re fast.”

“Pebble might have questions.”

Piper added a bucket beside the stones. Dad nodded as if that settled everything.

It had been several Saturdays since she first arrived at the rink and announced that she hated curling. The building was still cold. Her gloves still managed to hide from each other during the week. Number seven still sometimes stopped in the wrong place.

But now, when Saturday came, Piper was the one waiting by the door.

Last week, she had watched four older girls practice together. One stood by the house with her broom. Two swept. The fourth sent a stone sliding down the ice.

They called things to each other. They changed jobs without arguing about whose turn it was. When a stone stopped near the middle, all four looked pleased.

Piper wanted that.

She wanted it with Maisie and Wren.

Preferably with jackets that matched.

At the rink, she carried her paper carefully past the bench. Maisie was pulling her dark curls out from under her collar. Wren was putting both gloves into one helmet so they could not escape.

“I’ve had an idea,” Piper said.

“Is it breakfast?” asked Maisie. “I had some, but I’m willing to have another idea.”

Piper flattened the paper on the table.

“We should be a team.”

Maisie leaned over the drawing. “Are we on fire?”

“We’re Firecrackers.”

“I don’t want to explode,” Wren said.

“You don’t actually explode.”

“Good. I’ve only just tied my shoes.”

Piper drew a line under the name. “We could play games. Real ones. Together.”

Maisie stopped inspecting the bucket.

“With scores?”

“Yes.”

“And a team cheer?”

“Probably.”

Wren looked through the window. Two teams were shaking hands after a game. Someone was laughing at something Piper couldn’t hear.

“I’d like that,” Wren said.

Piper’s chest filled with a warm, bright feeling. She put three dots beneath the burning stones.

Piper. Maisie. Wren.

A proper team.

Granite came past carrying his clipboard. His white moustache twitched as he read the paper.

“A bold approach to ice care.”

“We want to be a team,” Piper told him.

“Splendid.”

She grinned at her friends. Granite had said splendid. That was almost as good as signing something.

“We’ve chosen a name,” she added.

“Piper has chosen a name,” Wren said.

Granite nodded. “And what else have you chosen?”

Piper looked down at the paper. There were three stones. Three dots. A bucket.

“Jackets,” she said, although she hadn’t quite chosen those yet.

“What would you like to learn together?”

“How to win,” Maisie said promptly.

“An interesting subject,” said Granite. “It contains rather a lot of losing.”

Maisie considered this. “Can we skip those pages?”

“Sadly, they tend to find you.”

He pulled up a chair. It gave a small squeak beneath his round stone body.

“Four players are on the ice for each team in the usual team game,” he said. “Would you like to practice being a group of four?”

Piper looked at her three dots.

She had known about four players. She had watched four players. Somehow, when she drew the Firecrackers, the fourth player had slipped out of her head.

“We could find someone,” she said.

“As it happens, Nora is joining our practice group today. She’s been learning with the other beginners. Would you be willing to welcome her?”

“Yes,” Wren said.

“Does she like team cheers?” Maisie asked.

“You could ask her.”

Piper moved her pencil to the paper. She squeezed a fourth dot between two of the others.

“There,” she said.

Granite studied the crowded row.

“Leave her a little elbow room.”

Piper rubbed out the dots and spread them farther apart.

That was easy.

She thought the rest would be easy too.

CHAPTER 2

The Fourth Chair

Nora arrived carrying a small bag and a helmet with a silver star on the back.

She had two neat braids, round glasses, and a dark fleece vest. She paused just inside the warm room, looking from the brushes to the window to the girls at the table.

Granite went to meet her.

“Nora, this is Piper. Maisie. Wren.”

“Hello,” Nora said.

Her voice was quiet, but she looked straight at them.

Piper pulled out the fourth chair.

“Do you want to be on our team? We’re called the Firecrackers. We haven’t got jackets yet.”

Nora put her bag beside the chair.

“I’d like to practice with you.”

“Good. We need one more. You can go first.”

“At what?”

“Sending stones. Then Maisie, then Wren, then me.”

Piper made four little marks with her pencil. She liked how neat they looked.

Nora leaned toward the paper. “I usually—”

“Or we could change,” Piper said. “Once we’ve tried it. Do you know about the house?”

“Yes.”

“It’s the rings. And you need a little turn on the handle. Not a big twist. I did that once.”

“I’ve been—”

“Number seven is good,” Piper continued. “It has a speck like an eyebrow. Not that stones have eyebrows.”

All four girls looked at Granite.

He lifted his very large white eyebrows.

“A difficult argument to make in this room.”

Maisie laughed. Nora smiled, and Piper felt pleased. Welcoming someone seemed to be going well.

During the warm-up, Nora knew the marching and shoulder circles. She balanced steadily when they bent their knees. She even remembered to check that there was room beside her before stretching out her arms.

Piper had been ready to explain those things too.

On the bench, Wren sat beside Nora.

“How many times have you come?” she asked.

“Five. We used the other short lane.”

“I thought you looked familiar.”

“My first stone went sideways.”

“Mine went to the zoo,” Maisie said. “It had a baby elephant inside.”

Nora blinked.

“Parcels,” Wren explained.

“Oh.” Nora’s smile came back. “Mine was probably an umbrella. Open.”

Maisie laughed so suddenly that she dropped a glove.

Piper smiled too. She hadn’t known Nora could say umbrella things.

Ben helped check helmets and shoes. Then Granite gathered them by the ice entrance. They remembered careful steps, clear paths, and waiting where a coach showed them. Nora listened without looking bored, even though she had heard the rules before.

Their first few deliveries were separate turns on the familiar short lane.

Nora settled slowly. Her braids hung forward as she checked her feet. Piper waited beside Wren.

“She should look at the broom,” Piper whispered.

“She is,” Wren whispered back.

Nora sent her stone. It curled away from the rings and stopped on empty ice.

“You turned too much,” Piper called.

Nora looked at her hand.

“I’m not sure,” she said.

Granite came over. “Let’s see what you notice on the next one.”

Piper watched him help Nora. She had been trying to help too. Perhaps he hadn’t heard.

On Piper’s turn, she remembered the soft finish she had practiced. Number seven slid neatly toward the house, then stopped short.

“Nearly,” Maisie said.

Piper didn’t feel like saying nearly back to the stone.

She had hoped to make a very good shot in front of Nora. Welcoming a person would be easier if the person could see that you knew things.

At the end of the round, Granite set out four brushes.

"Today," he said, "we begin putting some of our jobs together."

Piper picked up a brush. "I've already made an order."

"So I hear."

She waited for him to say splendid again.

Instead he asked, "Did everyone help make it?"

Piper glanced at her friends. Maisie was untangling a cuff. Wren was looking at her. Nora held her brush in both hands.

"I thought it would be quicker," Piper said.

"It certainly was," said Granite.

He didn't say anything else.

That was surprisingly uncomfortable.

CHAPTER 3

Four Jobs at Once

Granite drew four circles on his clipboard.

“An ordinary four-player team delivers eight stones in an end,” he said. “Two for each player. The lead goes first, then the second, the third, and the fourth.”

Maisie frowned. “The second gets a number for a name?”

“Three of them do.”

“I’d like something grander. Assistant Head of Brushing.”

“We’ll discuss your business cards later.”

Granite pointed toward the house.

“The skip helps decide the shots and gives the target. The skip doesn’t have to deliver last. Someone else takes over at the house when the skip delivers.”

Piper raised her brush a little. She liked the sound of deciding shots.

“Today we’ll try the different jobs,” Granite continued. “Nobody needs a permanent label.”

“Not even Assistant Head?”

“Not even that.”

First they practiced sweeping without a stone. Ben watched their feet while Granite checked their brushes. Then they practiced in pairs beside a gently moving stone, with a coach close by.

Piper had brushed alone before. Having another brush nearby made everything feel smaller.

She and Maisie stopped twice to sort out their spacing.

“My elbows are taking up too much room,” Maisie said.

“Bring them with you,” Ben told her. “Just give Piper room for hers.”

They tried again. This time their brushes moved without bumping.

When Ben called, “Up,” both lifted clear.

Piper liked the matching sound they made.

Swish, swish. Up.

It sounded like a team.

Next came Granite’s challenge. One girl would deliver a stone. One would stand with him at the house and give the target. Two would sweep with Ben beside them. Afterward, they would change jobs.

Their aim was simple: get one stone to stop in the broad front part of the house.

“Not the middle?” Piper asked.

“That’s our target for this challenge.”

He pointed to the wide patch they could all see.

Piper studied it. Plenty of room. They could do that.

Nora would deliver first. Wren stood beside Granite. Piper and Maisie held their brushes ready with Ben.

“Wren will give our sweep and up calls,” Granite said. “You two tell her what you notice about how far the stone is traveling.”

Piper nodded.

Nora took time settling at the hack.

“A little more push than your last one,” Piper called.

Nora looked up.

“And remember your hand.”

Nora looked down.

Wren held the broom at the aiming spot Granite had helped her choose.

“Look here,” she called.

Piper thought the broom seemed too far to the side.

“A bit that way,” she said, pointing.

“It will curl,” Wren replied.

“I know. But—”

Granite lifted a glove. They went quiet.

Nora began her delivery.

Piper walked beside the moving stone, watching it carefully. Maisie moved on the other side. Ben stayed close.

It looked slow.

“Sweep!” Piper called.

“Wait,” Wren called.

Maisie’s brush went down. Then up. Then halfway down, where it was no use to anyone.

Piper looked toward Wren. Wren looked toward Granite. The stone continued on its own small journey.

Ben brought the sweepers to a safe stop.

The stone stopped too, short of the house.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Then Maisie said, “I think my brush got confused.”

Piper stared at the gap.

“We should have swept.”

“I couldn’t hear how far you thought it would go,” Wren said. “You just told us what to do.”

“I was helping.”

“I know.”

Wren’s answer was so plain that Piper didn’t know what to do with it.

Nora joined them after Ben helped her cover her slider.

“I was going to ask something before I started,” she said.

“What?” Piper asked.

Nora looked toward the waiting place.

“I’ve forgotten now.”

Granite drew a small question mark beneath the four circles on his clipboard.

Piper wished he would stop writing things.

CHAPTER 4

The Almost Team



They changed jobs.

Piper stood with Granite at the house. Maisie prepared to deliver. Wren and Nora would sweep with Ben.

This, Piper decided, would be better.

She could see everything from here. The rings. The open ice. Maisie at the other end of their short lane, bending down with the support beside her.

Piper put her broom where Granite suggested.

“Send it here!” she called.

Maisie nodded.

“Not too hard!”

Maisie nodded again.

“But harder than Nora’s.”

Maisie sat back.

“Which part am I remembering?”

Piper opened her mouth.

Granite touched one white glove to his own lips.

Piper closed it.

Maisie tried. Her stone came off her hand quickly. Wren watched it move.

“It’s going far,” Wren called.

Piper saw the stone heading toward the side of the house. She wanted it to come across. She wanted it to slow down. She wanted everybody to do something before it was too late.

“Sweep!” she called.

Granite kept his voice calm. “Would more distance help this one?”

Piper looked again.

“Up!” she said.

The brushes stayed clear. The stone traveled through the side of the house and out the back.

Piper lowered her broom.

Granite crouched beside her. “Sweeping can help a stone travel farther and often straighter. We choose it for a reason. It can’t rescue every shot.”

“I know.”

Then, because she hadn’t really known in that moment, she added, “I forgot.”

“Happens to very experienced eyebrows.”

He raised his own. Piper almost smiled.

They tried again with different jobs. This time Piper delivered. Before she started, Nora asked whether she wanted a reminder about the aiming broom.

“No, thank you,” Piper said quickly.

She knew where the broom was.

Halfway through settling, she noticed something unpleasant.

Nora had asked.

Piper had mostly been telling.

Her stone slid short and wide. She watched it stop, then walked back with Ben.

On the dry deck afterward, she collected an extra brush because Maisie was fixing her glove. Both brush heads tangled against her knees.

“We should try me at the house again,” Piper said. “And Maisie needs a smaller push, and Nora needs—”

“A break,” Wren said.

Piper turned.

“I was going to say that,” Nora said.

Granite raised a glove. “An excellent shot. Let’s all take it.”

They carried their equipment safely to the rack and went into the warm room.

Piper put the brushes away carefully. One handle slid against another with a sharp click.

They had a name. They had four players. They even had a bucket on their picture.

They hadn’t made one stone work together.

At the table, Maisie drank water. Wren unzipped her jacket. Nora took off her glasses and wiped a little fog from one lens.

Piper sat down last.

“We’re almost a team,” she said.

Maisie looked at the Firecrackers paper. “We’ve done the easiest bit.”

“The name?”

“I was thinking the bucket.”

Piper let out a small laugh, but it didn’t stay long.

“Are you cross with me?” she asked Nora.

Nora put her glasses back on.

“A little.”

Piper’s stomach went tight.

“Oh.”

“I’d like to say things before you tell me what I’m going to say.”

“I don’t do that every time.”

“No,” Nora said. “Not every time.”

That felt worse than if she had argued.

Piper rubbed a thumb along the edge of her cup. She could see a tiny damp line it left on the table.

“Do you still want to practice with us?”

“Yes,” Nora said. “I’d like a turn at my own idea.”

Piper looked at the fourth chair. She had pulled it out so eagerly that morning.

Somehow she hadn’t left much space after that.

CHAPTER 5

The Question That Took Time

Granite arrived with four paper cups.

“Are those for drinking?” Maisie asked.

“Not at the moment.”

He put the empty cups upside down on the table. Ben placed a little rubber ball beside them.

“Your challenge,” Granite said, “is to roll this ball between two cups and stop it against a third.”

“What is the fourth cup for?” Wren asked.

“I was hoping someone would find a job for it.”

Piper reached for the cups.

Then she stopped.

Nora was looking at the ball.

“What do you think?” Piper asked her.

Nora moved one cup slightly.

Piper waited.

Nora moved it back.

Piper waited some more.

This was harder than it sounded. She had three ideas already, and one of them involved the spare cup.

“Maybe,” Nora said, “we could try how far the ball rolls first. Before we make the gap.”

“Oh.”

Piper hadn’t thought of that.

Maisie rolled the ball gently. It went across the table and into Wren’s waiting hand.

“Faster than a stone,” Maisie said.

“Less granite in it,” Granite observed.

They tried a smaller push. Then Nora set two cups apart near the middle of the table. Wren placed a third beyond them.

Piper held the fourth cup.

“It could catch the ball if it misses,” she said.

“Behind the third one?” Nora asked.

Piper put it there.

Maisie rolled. The ball brushed a cup and stopped.

“Excellent,” said Granite. “What happened?”

“We failed,” Piper said.

“We found out the gap was narrow,” Wren said.

“We can move it,” Nora added.

Maisie spread the cups farther apart. On the next try, the ball went between them and bumped the third.

All four girls made a little pleased noise.

Granite collected the ball.

“What did you do that was different from the ice?”

Piper looked at Nora’s hands, still resting beside the cups.

“I waited.”

“For the ball?”

“For Nora.”

Nora glanced up.

Granite nodded, then began stacking the cups.

Piper wasn’t finished thinking.

Ben sat beside her while the others fetched their gloves.

“I thought if I helped everyone, we’d be good,” she said.

“You want the team to work.”

“Very much.”

He turned one of the paper cups between his fingers.

“When you were learning your slide, did you want every reminder at once?”

Piper remembered her head full of voices. Hand. Foot. Broom. Push. Don’t fall over. Remember the hand again.

“No.”

“What helped?”

“One thing.”

Ben nodded.

Piper looked through the window. Her stone from the last round had been moved out of the way. The ice was clear again.

“What if I know something useful?”

“You can ask if the other person wants it.”

“And if they don’t?”

“You still get to be useful. You can listen.”

Piper considered that. Listening didn’t have an impressive name. It wasn’t on the list of curling positions.

But without it, Maisie’s brush had spent an entire shot deciding whether to go up or down.

When Nora came back, Piper moved her cup to make room.

"I'm sorry I kept interrupting," she said.

Nora sat down.

"I get excited," Piper added. Then she stopped. That was true, but it wasn't Nora's job to fix.

"I'll try asking first."

"Okay."

"What were you going to tell me this morning?"

Nora smiled a little.

"I usually like watching a shot before I take my turn. I was going to ask whether I could go later."

"Instead of first?"

Nora nodded.

Piper looked at the four marks on her paper.

She had made them so quickly.

She turned the page over.

"Let's do these again," she said.

This time, she passed Nora the pencil.

CHAPTER 6

Different Sorts of Loud



The next Saturday, Piper arrived with the same paper.

She had not brought a new chart. She had not designed jackets. She had almost written a list of things everyone should remember, but halfway through she noticed what sort of list it was.

Instead, she wrote one question at the top.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE DOING?

Maisie leaned over it.

“Eating toast.”

“At curling.”

“We could ask about toast at curling.”

Wren took the pencil. “I like watching where the stone goes.”

She wrote WATCHING THE STONE beneath the question.

“I like sweeping,” Maisie said. “When my brush knows the plan.”

Nora watched the pencil pass back to Piper.

“I like having a moment to look,” she said. “And knowing what we’re trying to do.”

Piper wrote that down too.

“What do you like?” Wren asked.

Piper thought about standing at the house and making calls. She still wanted to learn that. She also thought about the matching swish of two brushes.

“Trying the shot,” she said. “And knowing we’re all watching it.”

Nora reached for the pencil.

She drew a large circle. Then she drew a small stone near its front edge, away from the middle.

“For Granite’s challenge,” she said, “could we keep this same target for a whole round?”

“Even if we miss?” Piper asked.

“So we can remember what the last stone did.”

Piper looked at the drawing.

The idea didn’t flash or sparkle. It didn’t have a team cheer.

It seemed useful.

They took the paper to Granite, who listened while Nora explained it. When she paused to find a word, Piper kept her own mouth closed.

Granite nodded. “Let’s try it.”

On the ice, they warmed up and practiced their sweeping steps again. Then they returned to the same short lane, with the same broad target at the front of the house.

Maisie took the opening turn while Nora watched. Then Wren went to the house with Granite, and Nora prepared to deliver. Piper and Maisie would sweep with Ben close by.

Before Nora settled, Piper asked, “Would you like a reminder?”

Nora considered it.

“Just where to look.”

“Wren’s broom.”

“Thank you.”

Piper waited.

Nora’s stone started along the ice. It was moving slowly.

Piper bent to watch it. Maisie did too.

“Looks short,” Piper called.

Wren listened. Then, with Granite beside her, she called, “Sweep!”

Both brushes went down.

Swish, swish, swish.

Piper kept her steps careful. Ben watched the space between the girls and the stone. Wren’s voice came down the lane.

“Up!”

The brushes lifted together.

The stone crept toward the blue ring.

Then it stopped outside.

Piper felt disappointment flicker in her chest.

Maisie looked at her. “That was a much better nearly.”

It was.

They had known what they were doing. Nobody’s brush had hovered halfway between two instructions.

Nora came down to look after her slider was covered.

“I need a little more push next time,” she said.

“Yes,” Piper said. “That one went farther than your first.”

Nora nodded, still studying the gap. They were noticing it together.

They changed jobs. When Nora stood at the house, her first call didn’t reach Maisie.

“I couldn’t hear,” Maisie said.

Nora’s fingers tightened around her broom.

Piper almost shouted the call for her.

Instead, she waited.

Nora took a breath.

“Up!”

Maisie lifted her brush.

“There you are,” she called back.

Nora grinned. Her voice had room to travel after all.

Later, Wren sent a stone that reached the broad target. Piper swept beside Maisie while Nora gave the calls with Granite's help. They stayed clear as it stopped.

All four girls stared.

"In," Wren said.

"In together," Maisie said.

Piper looked from the stone to her friends. Wren had delivered it, but Piper could remember her own careful feet. She could hear Nora's clear call. She could see Maisie's brush lifting at the right moment.

There was more of the shot to remember now.

At the end of practice, Granite tapped his clipboard.

"Next Saturday, would you like a short practice game with the other beginners?"

Piper looked at Maisie. At Wren. At Nora.

She waited until all three nodded.

"Yes," she said.

It came out just as excited as before.

It simply arrived a little later.

CHAPTER 7

The First End

On game morning, Piper woke before Dad called her.

Her bag was ready. Both gloves were inside. Her clean shoes waited beside it like very sensible feet.

She ate her toast quickly, then remembered Maisie and laughed with her mouth full.

Dad looked up.

“Team business?”

Piper nodded.

He waited for her to swallow.

“Will you watch our game?”

“I’ll be helping. Of course I’ll watch.”

“All of it?”

“As much as two eyes can manage.”

At the rink, another group of four girls waited with a coach named Jo. One girl had bright purple laces. Another wore a helmet with tiny white dots. Their brushes were just like Piper’s.

This was reassuring.

Piper had half expected the other team to arrive knowing everything.

The girl with purple laces held out her gloved hand.

“I’m Evie.”

“Piper.”

“Good curling.”

“You too.”

They all greeted one another. Maisie wished good curling to the wrong person twice, then made sure everyone had some.

Granite brought both groups together.

"We're playing a small practice version today," he explained. "Two ends on our short lane. One stone per player in each end, instead of the usual two. We'll take turns, one team and then the other."

He pointed out their safe waiting places. Jo would stay by the hack to help each player deliver, stand safely, and cover her slider. Ben would stay close to the sweepers. Granite would help the girls at the house. They would pause whenever somebody needed help.

"We'll count the score after every stone in an end has been delivered," he said. "The team with the stone closest to the button scores. That's the little circle in the middle. It gets one point for each stone in or touching the house that's closer than the other team's nearest stone."

Maisie looked at the house.

"So being in the house doesn't always get a point?"

"That's right."

She sighed. "The house has paperwork."

Jo and Granite showed them with three stones before clearing the practice house. Piper watched carefully. Two yellow stones were closer than the nearest red: two points for yellow. Then Jo moved a red closer: only red could score.

That part made sense when she could see it.

Piper's group had red handles. Evie's group had yellow. A coin toss gave Piper's group the last stone of the first end.

Wren would help choose the shots from the house, with Granite beside her. Nora would take that place when Wren delivered. Piper and Maisie would sweep together for Wren and Nora. When Piper or Maisie delivered, Nora would sweep with the other one.

They had chosen their order together: Piper, Maisie, Wren, Nora.

Piper had offered to go first.

It had felt strange, giving away the exciting last turn. Then Nora had said, “You don’t mind?” and Piper had discovered that she didn’t. Not very much.

The first yellow stone stopped short of the house.

Piper’s turn came before she was ready to feel ready.

She settled at the hack. Jo checked her feet and waited nearby. Wren held the broom at their target.

Piper pushed.

The stone slid away from her hand.

It went farther than the yellow stone.

Then it kept going.

“Oh,” Piper said.

Past the front ring. Through the house. Out the other side.

Her first game stone had gone visiting.

Piper stood with Jo’s help. She could feel her face getting hot beneath her helmet.

Maisie met her at the waiting place.

“Anything you want?”

Piper looked at her.

“Not tips.”

“Okay.”

They stood together until Piper was ready to watch the next stone.

That helped more than a tip.

The end went quickly and slowly at the same time. Maisie sent hers short. Wren's stone stayed in the outer ring. Two yellow stones finished closer to the middle.

Nora still had the last red stone.

Piper wanted it to be a miracle stone.

She did not say so.

Nora sent it along a good line, but it stopped before the house. Ben brought the sweepers safely clear.

When all the stones were still, Wren and Evie looked at the score with the coaches.

"Two yellow," Wren said.

Piper looked at Wren's red stone in the outer ring.

It was in. It had worked.

It just wasn't close enough to count.

Yellow two. Red nothing.

There it was: the page of losing they hadn't been allowed to skip.

CHAPTER 8

The Shot Between Them

During the short break, Piper stared at the scoreboard.

The two beside yellow looked enormous.

The empty space beside red looked even larger.

Maisie drank some water. Wren flexed her fingers inside her gloves. Nora watched the coaches prepare the clear lane for their second end.

“We need a really good stone,” Piper said.

“We need four,” Wren said.

Piper sighed. “That would also be helpful.”

Granite came over.

“What would you like to do differently?”

“Win,” Maisie said.

“Before that.”

Piper pictured her first stone rushing through the house.

“A smaller push.”

Wren nodded. “Mine went where we wanted. It just wasn’t nearest.”

“I need more distance,” Nora said.

Granite looked from girl to girl.

“And what worked?”

Nobody answered immediately.

Then Maisie said, “We heard each other.”

Piper thought about Nora’s last shot. They had swept when Wren called. They had stopped together. Nora hadn’t had to sort through three different instructions before letting go.

“We did,” she said.

“Bring that with you,” Granite told them.

Because yellow had scored, red kept the last stone for the next end. Piper liked having one familiar thing in the plan.

She took her first turn after yellow.

Same starting place. Softer push.

This time her stone stayed in the house. Near the side, but in.

Piper held her excitement inside until Jo helped her stand and cover her slider. Then she grinned so widely that Maisie grinned back.

Maisie’s stone missed the rings. Wren’s went through. On the other team, Evie sent a yellow stone into the outer part of the house, closer to the button than Piper’s.

The other yellow stones were out of scoring position.

Now there was one red stone left.

Nora’s.

Piper studied the house from the waiting place. Evie’s stone sat on the right. Piper’s own was farther out. An open patch waited at the front, a little left of center.

“If we go right into the middle—” Piper began.

Nora looked at her.

Piper stopped.

“What do you think?” she asked.

Nora took a moment.

“That space we practiced,” she said. “At the front. Wren said it’s closer than the yellow from here.”

Wren nodded from beside Granite. “It is. We don’t have to get to the button.”

Piper looked again.

The open patch was the same sort of roomy target they had chosen on Nora's drawing. It wasn't the most dramatic place on the ice.

It was a place they knew how to try for.

"I forgot," Piper said.

"I kept the picture in my head," Nora replied.

Granite helped Wren choose an aiming spot. Nora walked carefully back to the hack. Piper and Maisie got ready to sweep with Ben.

Nora settled. Her braids brushed the front of her vest.

She looked at Wren's broom.

Nobody gave her another thing to remember.

She pushed.

The stone came toward Piper along the clear lane. Its handle turned gently. Piper walked beside it, matching her steps to its speed.

It looked slower than it needed to be.

"Short," she called. "I think it's short."

Wren watched from the house.

"Sweep!"

Piper's brush went down beside Maisie's.

Swish, swish, swish.

For a few seconds, the whole world seemed to be shoes and ice and the little space ahead of the stone. Piper kept her eyes where they needed to be. She heard Maisie's breathing beside her.

The stone kept traveling.

"Up!" Wren called.

Both brushes lifted. Ben guided the girls safely clear.

The stone curled toward the open patch.

Piper squeezed her brush handle.

The front ring passed beneath the gray granite. The stone slowed, traveling a little farther into the house.

Then it stopped.

Nobody shouted at first.

Wren looked from the red stone to the yellow one. Evie came beside her. The difference was clear enough to see without measuring.

"Red's closer," Evie said.

“One red,” Wren said.

Maisie made a small squeak.

Piper turned toward Nora. Nora was still at the other end with Jo beside her, staring at the house as if the stone had brought back surprising news.

“It worked!” Piper called.

Nora’s smile reached them before she did.

When they could all come down safely, the four girls stood beside the house. Piper looked at the stone. At Wren. At Maisie. At Nora.

They had made that shot.

Every one of them had been in it.



CHAPTER 9

Room for Another Saturday

The final score was yellow two, red one.

Piper checked it twice.

Two was still more than one the second time.

They had lost their first game.

The good shot hadn't changed that.

For a moment, both things sat inside Piper at once: the heavy little feeling about the score and the bright one about the stone.

She wasn't sure which she was meant to keep.

Evie came over with her hand out.

"Good curling," she said. "That last one was good."

"Thank you," Nora said.

"Your team's shots in the first end were good too," Wren told Evie.

Maisie shook hands with everyone, once each this time. Piper did too.

Her disappointment came along with her. It didn't get in the way of her hand.

Afterward, Ben and the coaches moved the stones safely back to their places. The girls carried their brushes to the rack and stepped off the ice one at a time.

In the warm room, Piper took off her helmet. Her ponytail had its usual bent place. Maisie's curls looked as if they had played an extra end on their own.

Nora sat in the fourth chair without waiting to be invited.

Piper noticed that.

She liked it.

Granite joined them at the table.

“How was your first game?”

“We lost,” Maisie said.

“And?”

“We got a point.”

“And?”

Maisie considered him. “Are you going to keep doing that?”

“Only until my eyebrows get tired.”

Wren unzipped her jacket. “I liked knowing what to call. Most of the time.”

“I liked going last,” Nora said. “Except for the part just before I went last.”

Piper laughed.

She knew that part.

Granite turned to her.

Piper looked through the window at the empty house. Somebody had brushed away a tiny bit of loose ice. The place where their red stone had stopped looked ordinary again.

“I liked the shot,” she said. “But I didn’t like losing.”

“You can feel both,” Granite told her.

“Do you?”

“Frequently. Sometimes I also feel hungry. There’s quite a crowd in here.”

He tapped the front of his jacket.

Maisie checked her bag. “I have crackers.”

“A thoughtful team.”

While they ate their snacks, Piper took out the paper with FIRECRACKERS at the top. One corner was bent. Nora's target drawing covered the other side.

"We never agreed about the name," Piper said.

Wren leaned back. "I remember."

"What do you want it to be?"

Maisie thought for a while. That was unusual enough that everyone waited.

"The Too-Cold Club," she said at last.

Piper looked at her.

"Still?"

"It already knows us."

Wren nodded. "And nobody has to explode."

Nora tilted her head. "Am I allowed? I wasn't here when you made it."

"Of course," Piper said.

Then she added, "Would you like to be?"

"Yes."

Piper crossed out FIRECRACKERS with one neat line. Beneath it she wrote TOO-COLD CLUB.

She passed the pencil around.

Maisie added four crumbs beneath the name, because she said every sensible club needed snacks. Wren drew four small stones. Nora drew a house with a wide open door.

Piper found room beside it for four dots.

There was space between every one.

Granite stood to leave. "Jo's beginners will be back next week. They wondered whether you'd like another game after practice."

Piper looked around the table.

Maisie nodded with her mouth full. Wren said yes. Nora tapped the drawing of the open door.

"Yes," Piper told him. "We would."

In the car, Dad waited while she settled the paper carefully on her lap.

"How did the team feel?" he asked.

Piper looked at the four little stones Wren had drawn.

"Busy."

"That sounds right."

"And sometimes difficult."

"That too."

She turned the page over to Nora's target. She could picture the last stone now: the slow beginning, the brushing, the clear call, the open patch of ice.

"Good," she said. "It felt good."

Dad started the engine.

Piper held the page where warm air couldn't blow it off her knees.

Next Saturday they might lose again. They would have to work on their pushes and their calls and all the things that still didn't happen when they wanted them to.

She had an idea about the first practice shot already.

She smiled at the paper.

First, she would ask.