PIPER'S CURLING ADVENTURES

Piper and the Changing Team

BOOK TWENTY SEVEN



Mary Deuhs

An illustrated chapter book

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CHAPTER 1

After Practice

Maisie's glove was sitting on top of her bag with all five fingers pointing up.

“It wants another turn,” Nora said.

“It has had several,” Maisie answered. “It can wait.”

Piper put her own gloves away. Through the glass, Jo was checking the sheet for the next group. The four girls had been working on draws behind a corner guard. Maisie had made one that disappeared neatly from the delivery end. Piper had gone down to look, then gone back to look again.

“You're allowed to remember it,” Maisie had told her.

That had been a good part of the morning.

Their sixth season was well past its beginning now. The stronger three-game weekend was months behind them. There had been ordinary practices since, games at home and Saturdays when Piper's most interesting achievement was finding both socks before breakfast.

Two home friendlies and a closing practice remained before their club's summer break. The Ravens would visit first, then the Lanterns. Maisie would lead, Nora would play second, Piper would be third and vice, and Wren would skip. Piper knew the shape of those mornings almost without thinking.

Wren sat down beside her.

“I have something to tell you,” she said.

Maisie turned her bag so its glove could face them. Nora stopped winding the strap around her bottle.

“Next season, I'm going to play with a different team.”

Piper's hand stayed inside her bag.

She had been looking for its zip. Suddenly she could feel every small thing in the pocket instead: a tissue, a hair tie, something that might once have been a crumb.

“At the club near the old railway bridge,” Wren said. “With Rowan's team. They've asked me to be their third and vice.”

Piper knew which club she meant. She did not know Rowan.

“You won't be skipping?” Nora asked.

“No. Rowan will.” Wren rubbed the end of her sleeve. “I've liked the third turns I've tried. I want to do that job for a whole season. More sweeping, more weight calls, and helping another skip work things out. Rowan has been skipping longer than I have.”

Piper pictured Wren standing beside sweepers Piper had never met.

“We've talked with their coach,” Wren continued. “My family can manage the regular practice and games. I've said yes for next season.”

There was a quiet moment. Someone beyond the doorway dropped a plastic cup, which bounced much louder than it deserved.

“Are you excited?” Maisie asked.

“Yes.” Wren looked around at them. “And I'm going to miss this.”

Piper wanted to ask whether missing it meant Wren might change her mind. She knew, before she asked, that it was the wrong question.

Instead she said, “A whole season at third?”

“A whole season.”

This was not four development mornings. It was not one afternoon when some of them made kites. Next autumn there would be ordinary weeks when Wren's bag went through another door.

Jo came in and pulled up a chair. Wren had told her about the decision with her grown-up. Now the other three could talk with their families about what they wanted next season. Jo would help them work out the home team.

“You don't have to settle your own plans this morning,” she said.

Piper was glad. She could not yet imagine the empty place clearly enough to fill it with a sensible answer.

Wren reached for her helmet.

“I still want our two games.”

“So do I,” Nora said.

Maisie took the glove from her bag. “And that draw was extremely good. I intend to do it again.”

Piper looked at her friends. Wren was waiting, not for permission, but for Piper to come with them to the door.

Piper found the zip.

“All right,” she said. “Let's tell her glove.”

CHAPTER 2

The Name in the Notebook

At home, Piper opened her green notebook at a clean page.

She wrote Next Season.

Underneath she wrote Maisie, Nora, Piper.

The pencil waited above the next line.

Ben came into the kitchen carrying a bag of vegetables. One potato escaped and rolled beneath a chair. Piper caught it with her foot before her brother could announce an emergency.

“Useful fielding,” Ben said.

“It was going straight.”

He put the potato on the counter. “How was practice?”

Piper told him about Maisie's draw. Then she told him Wren's news.

Ben listened while he took things out of the bag. He had heard from Jo that families would be talking about the home team. He had not heard Wren's own explanation yet.

“She wants to play third,” Piper said. “I play third.”

“Yes.”

“She could practice it with us.”

“She has practiced it with you, hasn't she?”

Piper looked at the three names. Wren had taken other positions in practice and in their earlier friendly exchange. The development mornings had let her try them too. She was asking for something longer now.

“She wants it to be her usual job.”

Ben nodded.

Piper closed the notebook, then opened it again.

“What happens to us?”

“We'll talk about what you want. Jo will help with the team. We don't have to make that answer out of Wren's decision today.”

Her brother arrived with a second potato.

“This one's got a face.”

It had three little marks in a row. Piper thought it looked more like a very surprised bus.

“Are we eating it?” he asked.

“That was the plan,” Ben said.

Her brother considered this, then carried it over to show Piper properly before its future became soup.

For a few minutes, Piper helped him arrange the vegetables into an audience. Ben moved the onions back when they were needed. The audience gradually became smaller and more nutritious.

Piper laughed. Then she felt the empty fourth line waiting beneath her elbow.

“I thought we'd keep going together,” she said.

Ben stopped peeling.

“I can see why you hoped that.”

“Even the big competitions. Someday.”

“You haven't chosen all those teams yet.”

“I know.”

She had known it as a fact. She had not pictured it happening to a person whose broom she could recognize from the far end of the rink.

Ben asked whether she still wanted to curl next season.

“Yes.” That answer arrived quickly. “I want more games. I want to keep learning the vice part. I just don't know what it will look like.”

They talked about the home programme. There would be familiar practice time and junior games. Other opportunities could be considered later, on their own merits. Nobody had offered Piper a larger adventure to make this one stop hurting.

She put the pencil down.

“Wren looked happy when she talked about Rowan.”

“Did she?”

“Yes. I wanted to ask something about it. Then I kept thinking about us.”

“You can still ask her.”

Piper turned the notebook back to an earlier drawing. It showed the result of one of Wren's doubles. One yellow was crossed out. The other had a very large circle around it because it had refused to leave.

Piper smiled at the circle.

Next Saturday, she could ask what Wren liked about the new job. She did not need to have her own fourth name ready first.

Her brother held up the potato bus.

“Last chance.”

Piper gave it a respectful nod.

Then she helped set the table.

CHAPTER 3

Beside the Stone



Wren's first sweeping report was late.

The red was already slowing when she called it short. By then Maisie, holding the target for this practice draw, had seen the same thing.

“Thank you for the news,” Maisie said after it stopped. “It has also reached this end.”

Wren grinned, a little ruefully.

Jo had made room in the individual blocks for the work each girl wanted. Nora was delivering while Wren and Piper swept. Maisie took the house for the drill, with Jo watching. Their usual positions would return for team practice afterward.

They had checked their helmets and equipment, warmed up and talked through the safe waiting places before starting. The drill stones were cleared between attempts. Nobody was keeping an end score.

Wren wanted practice judging weight beside the stone, rather than only from the house. Piper had known that much before today. Now she wanted to hear the rest.

“What did you like when you tried Rowan's practice?” she asked during the reset.

Wren leaned on her broom lightly.

“Her second asked what I saw, even when she'd already called. We didn't always agree. We had to keep watching.”

Piper nodded. She knew how useful that could be.

“And afterward Rowan asked me which choice I'd have made. We compared the next reply. I liked having my own answer without having to make the final call every time.”

“Do you want to stop calling?”

“No. I like calling. I want to understand more of the end from down here.”

Piper looked along the sheet toward Maisie. It was the place Piper spent much of every game. She had sometimes treated it as the distance between her and the interesting decisions.

Wren was choosing to spend a season there.

Nora was ready again. Wren checked which side she would sweep from. Piper waited beside her, watching the release.

“Front rings,” Piper called early.

“I think deeper,” Wren said.

They kept moving with the red. It traveled more easily than the last one.

“Back half now,” Piper called.

Maisie kept the brushes up. The stone finished deep in the house.

Wren glanced at Piper.

“I thought you'd mind if I said something different.”

“I changed mine.”

“I heard.”

Jo asked when each girl had noticed the difference. Wren could point to the stretch where the stone had kept its pace. Piper had seen it a little later. Their reports had reached Maisie in time to be useful, although Nora had still delivered more weight than intended.

They tried again after a rest and reset. This time Wren spoke early. The girls agreed it looked close to the chosen finish. Maisie called for a short sweep near the end, then brought them up together.

The red stopped in the front rings.

Nora's smile was immediate. “That one.”

Piper met Wren's glove. She had not had to remind herself to do it.

Later they restored their normal team jobs. Wren asked Maisie for a corner guard, and Piper swept beside Nora. There was a six-end game against the Ravens next Saturday. It needed their attention now.

When they were changing, Wren asked about Piper's plans.

“I still want to play here,” Piper said. “We haven't worked out the team yet.”

Wren sat quietly beside her.

Piper pulled a stubborn sleeve through her jacket.

“I'll miss having you at the other end.”

“I'll miss you coming down to explain something.”

“Even the long explanations?”

Wren held her hands a short distance apart.

“Some of those could be this size.”

Piper laughed. Then she asked what Rowan was like when a shot went wrong, and this time she listened to the whole answer.

CHAPTER 4

Still Their Game

The Ravens arrived with a bottle that whistled when its lid was opened.

Their skip, Zoe, looked at it in surprise.

“It didn't do that in the car.”

“Perhaps it likes our club,” Maisie said.

They had met the Ravens in the earlier league, when the ice they used had been much shorter. Today's friendly would be six ends on the full sheet, with a seated break after three. Both coaches had checked the players' readiness. Ties would stand, and brief between-end advice was available if a team asked. These were the clubs' arrangements for this game.

Wren was still their fourth and skip. Piper was still third and vice. Nora and Maisie had their usual jobs. The following season could not change the lineup halfway through this one.

The Too-Cold Club won the toss and chose last stone in the first end. The Ravens chose yellow.

At the opening house, Piper found herself standing too close to Wren, ready to offer information nobody needed yet.

“Can I see past your elbow?” Wren asked.

Piper moved.

She had wanted to be especially useful. Her elbow had wanted something else.

Red scored one in the first. The Ravens made two with last stone in the second. In the third, red took one, bringing them level at two each for the break.

There had been useful shots all along the order. Maisie left a guard that made yellow use a different route. Nora reached the rings with a draw on the turn she had been practicing. Piper removed one open yellow and missed another.

Wren did not look like somebody partly gone. She watched, listened and chose. When her own draw ran too deep, she looked back at the finish and asked Nora what the sweepers had seen.

At the break, Maisie discovered she had brought two spoons and nothing that needed a spoon.

“Prepared for somebody else's lunch,” she said.

Zoe's bottle whistled at the next table. Nora lifted one of the spoons as if she might conduct it.

Piper laughed before remembering that she had meant to keep a very careful record of this particular morning.

She put the notebook away. There were people in front of her.

The Ravens scored one in the fourth. Red answered with one in the fifth. Three each, with yellow holding last stone in the sixth.

The final end became crowded. An early red went too deep. Yellow used the space it left. Piper's first hit removed its target but rolled away; her second draw stayed too wide.

After Wren's last red, Zoe's team had two counting yellows. Wren's attempts had not left a nearer red, so Zoe did not need her final delivery. The vices checked the stones, agreed two yellow and recorded a five-to-three Ravens win.

Piper disliked losing. Wren did too. They shook hands properly, then came off with their own team.

Jo asked what they wanted to take into the Lanterns game. Nora mentioned the draw path. Maisie wanted to compare two early finishes. Piper had a question about her roll.

Nobody needed a speech about their last games together while they were still trying to understand this one.

Later, Wren held out a little sketch of the sixth-end house.

“Was your red farther right?”

“Yes. About here.” Piper pointed, and Wren changed the mark.

They studied the result. Piper could see why Wren had chosen the shot she did.

“I wanted that one,” Wren said.

“So did I.”

Piper stayed beside her until Wren folded the paper. Losing still felt like losing. It also felt like their game, right to the end.

CHAPTER 5

A Different Broom

Lottie's broom had a strip of checked tape near the top.

Piper noticed it before she noticed Lottie's shoes. She was used to identifying people by the things she could see across a rink.

Lottie was a junior from another practice group at their home club. She had skipped games with that group. Its players were making different plans for the following season, and she was looking for a regular four who wanted club practices and junior games.

Jo had spoken separately with everyone and their families. Maisie, Nora and Piper all wanted to continue at home. Lottie was interested in joining them as fourth and skip. Today they would try a short practice block together, then each decide whether the arrangement felt right.

It was not a contest for Wren's place. Wren had made her own decision. Now four other people needed to see how they worked together.

Wren was on the neighboring sheet for her individual block with an adult helper. She waved her broom when Piper looked over.

Lottie asked Maisie which finish she wanted for the first drill.

“A corner guard. One that stays outside the house.”

“An important detail,” Nora said.

Lottie set the target. Piper and Nora took their sweeping places. Jo checked the lane, and Maisie delivered.

The guard reached the chosen area. Piper smiled. She was ready for Wren's small nod from the house.

Lottie lifted a thumb instead.

It should not have been surprising. Piper noticed it anyway.

For the next draw, Lottie asked for “a little farther.”

Maisie waited at the hack.

“Farther than which one?” she called.

Lottie looked at the guard. “Sorry. Into the front rings, around that side.” She showed the finish clearly before Maisie settled again.

The red came around the guard but stopped exposed. They looked at it after everyone had moved safely. Lottie suggested changing the target. Nora said the weight had been a little stronger than the previous draw on that path.

“Can we try the same line with less first?” Nora asked.

Lottie listened, then nodded.

Piper had been holding her own explanation ready. Nora had already given the useful one.

They reset and tried. This draw reached the front rings, with more of it hidden from the delivery end.

Maisie came down to admire it.

“I would like to order that one regularly.”

“I can't promise delivery,” Lottie said.

Piper laughed at the word before Lottie did. That helped.

When Piper took the house for Lottie's own attempts, they had to check their signals. Lottie held her broom at a different angle while asking for the turn. Piper misunderstood once and they stopped to sort it out before the delivery.

No one was better because their old signal was familiar. Their new signal needed to be understood by both of them.

After the block, Jo spoke with each girl. Piper said she wanted to continue third and vice. Lottie wanted to skip and work with the early players on clearer finishes. Nora wanted the whole team to hear changing weight reports. Maisie wanted her guards to be part of the plan.

Over the next week, all four and their families agreed to the regular team for the following season. Jo would keep coaching them. They would keep the Too-Cold Club name, with Lottie pleased to join it.

Piper told Wren at their next meeting.

“Good,” Wren said, and meant it.

Piper was glad there would be four names. It did not make Wren's name unimportant. She still knew exactly where it had been.

CHAPTER 6

The Last Red

For the Lanterns game, Wren brought the wrong snack box.

It contained neatly folded paper napkins.

“I packed it beside the other one,” she explained.

Maisie looked inside. “Very tidy lunch.”

Wren's grown-up had the food in another bag, so nobody needed to eat a napkin. Piper was relieved about that. She was relieved, too, that the morning could begin with something ordinary and ridiculous.

Inez greeted them beside the rink. The Lanterns had played them before, and there were familiar smiles along the bench. Both teams wanted to win.

This was the second and last of the two remaining home friendlies. The same six-end arrangements applied: full sheet, checked readiness, halfway rest, ties allowed and brief requested advice between ends. Jo checked equipment and how the girls felt before warm-up. The four kept their usual delivery order, two stones each.

The Too-Cold Club won the toss and chose first-end last stone. The Lanterns chose yellow.

Piper took a moment to look toward Wren. Then she looked at Maisie, who was waiting for the first call. That was where the game began.

Red scored two in the first. Yellow answered with one in the second.

In the third, Maisie's second red came around a corner guard and reached the front rings. Nora's later

draw gave them another useful stone, although the Lanterns removed it. Piper made an open hit with her first delivery; her shooter rolled out. Her second draw stopped too far from the middle to count.

Maisie's red was still there when the skips began.

Inez's first yellow came into the house but stayed farther from the middle than Maisie's red. Wren drew another red nearer than yellow. Inez tried to remove that new red with her last stone, but missed. Wren's final draw went too deep to add anything.

Two red: Maisie's and Wren's. Four to one at the break.

Maisie inspected the score.

“My beginning has reached lunch.”

“Your actual lunch is here too,” Nora said, moving the snack bag toward her.

Piper had a question about her roll. They talked briefly, then rested. Wren offered everyone a napkin with exaggerated care.

The Lanterns scored one in the fourth. Red took one in the fifth. Five to two for the Too-Cold Club before the sixth, with yellow holding last stone.

Piper wanted to finish well. She also wanted the final end to last a little longer than it ought to.

The Lanterns had different plans for it.

They built a useful house. By the skips' turns, one yellow lay near the middle, with another yellow farther out. All their other delivered yellows were out of play. The nearest red was outside both yellows.

Wren tried to remove the nearer yellow with her first stone. She missed, and her red went through. Inez's first yellow also went through without changing the house.

Wren had one red left.

They looked at the open draw together. A red between the two yellows would leave only one yellow counting for the moment.

Wren chose it. Piper checked the finish, then held the target while Maisie and Nora prepared to sweep.

The red came down the sheet. The reports were clear. Piper called them down briefly, then up.

It stopped between the yellows.

Piper smiled at Wren before remembering Inez still had her last stone.

Inez made a good hit on the new red. The red left, and the yellow shooter stayed in the house, farther out than the two yellows already there. The other red remained outside those two but nearer than the shooter.

Two yellow points. The vices agreed the count. Five to four for the Too-Cold Club.

Wren's final red was gone. The work of that red had still made the Lanterns use their last delivery to remove it.

Piper went to shake hands. She was pleased they had won, and she told Inez it was a good last hit.

Afterward, the four girls stood together with their brooms.

“That was our last game this season,” Nora said.

Wren nodded.

Piper bumped her glove gently against Wren's.

Then Maisie joined, and Nora, until there were four gloves and a rather unnecessary number of broom handles in one small space.

They laughed and untangled themselves carefully.

CHAPTER 7

Nothing Left Under the Bench



The closing practice was for shots they wanted to try.

Jo had planned sensible blocks with rests. Nobody was going to make up a season's missed stones in one morning. Piper still asked for another go at her hit-and-roll, and Wren asked for the draw she had delivered against the Lanterns.

“That one was good,” Piper said.

“I'd like to do it twice.”

Nora wanted a draw on the other turn. Maisie wanted to use her corner guard again, which was beginning to sound like a perfectly reasonable hobby.

The girls changed and put their helmets on. Through the glass, another group was finishing its work. A girl raised both arms when her stone reached the rings, then quickly remembered where she needed to put her broom.

Piper recognized the feeling in the raised arms. She still got it.

On their own sheet, the familiar jobs fell into place. Wren called. Maisie delivered. Piper and Nora watched the red together.

The guard was slightly deeper than Maisie wanted, but it stayed outside the house.

“I'll accept it,” she said when she arrived.

“For now,” Nora added.

They practiced the draw. One curled too soon. Another came through the gap and stopped in the front rings. They looked back from the delivery end to see how much showed.

Piper did not need to make the whole morning precious. She needed to tell Maisie what she could actually see.

Later, her own hit removed the yellow and stayed almost on its spot. On the next reset, she got a broad roll into the open patch Jo had marked as the goal. It was not narrow or spectacular. It was the result Piper had asked the stone for.

She turned toward the others, smiling.

Wren raised her glove from the waiting place.

Piper would remember that part without writing it down.

When their ice time ended, there were still shots all four wanted. Jo called them off anyway. They covered their sliders, came through the doorway and carried their equipment to the changing area.

Maisie put a glove on top of her bag.

“Don't start,” Nora told it.

Wren sat beside Piper. For a little while, they pulled at laces and folded things. Piper could hear another team laughing in the warm room.

“I don't want to say goodbye as if you live on the moon,” she said.

“The railway bridge,” Wren reminded her.

“I know.”

“Less rocket fuel.”

Piper laughed, then found that she wanted to cry a little. She pressed her lips together. Wren touched her sleeve and stayed beside her without asking her to explain it.

After a moment, Piper could speak normally.

“I'll miss our Saturdays.”

“Me too.”

Maisie leaned across Nora. “We can have other Saturdays. With shoes that don't need covers.”

Their families had already arranged an afternoon together early in the summer. Piper was glad it was a real plan. She was also glad nobody suggested it was exactly the same as meeting here every week.

Before they left, Nora checked beneath the bench. There was a bottle cap that belonged to somebody else and one of Maisie's hair ties.

Maisie accepted it solemnly.

“My collection thanks you.”

They carried their bags out together. Behind them, the junior session continued with other voices.

Their sixth season had finished. Next season the team would change.

Wren held the outer door while Piper came through, then asked whether anyone had remembered the snack box.

CHAPTER 8

The Missing Nod

The first summer afternoon together was loud.

Piper had half expected everyone to sit around talking about the team. Instead, her brother knocked over a stack of game pieces, Maisie invented an implausible explanation and Nora spent ten minutes proving that two pieces really were missing.

They found one beneath Wren's chair. The other was in Maisie's hand.

“Evidence,” Maisie said.

Wren laughed until she had to put her drink down.

The summer went on. There were family days and messages carried through grown-ups, an afternoon that had to move because someone was away, and another that happened without anyone saying the word curling for nearly an hour.

Piper still missed the ice. Near the end of the summer, she checked her bag with Ben. Her gear needed the usual fit and condition checks before she went back. A summer could change feet as well as plans.

When the seventh season began, Wren was not at the home changing bench.

Piper knew she would not be. She looked toward the doorway anyway.

Lottie arrived carrying the checked-tape broom and a bag with an awkwardly long strap. She caught the strap before it could trail beneath Nora's shoes.

“It keeps trying to get there first,” she said.

Maisie moved her own bag over. There was space for Lottie's, though it did not sit in the same place Wren's had.

Jo gathered them for the equipment checks and warm-up. Maisie would still lead, Nora would play second, Piper would be third and vice. Lottie would be fourth and skip. This was their regular team now, with Jo coaching. Wren's own weekly practice had started at the other club that morning.

The first red ran deep.

So did the second, although for a different reason. Jo asked each player what she had noticed. Lottie listened to Nora, then changed the next target after checking it with Maisie.

Piper waited for Wren's little nod from the house.

Lottie's thumb went up.

Piper felt the missing nod sharply, in the middle of a perfectly ordinary drill.

Then Nora said, “Ready?” and the next delivery began.

They had work to do. Piper gave an early report and stayed with it when the stone slowed. Lottie called for sweeping. The red finished nearer the intended place, and Maisie came down pleased.

Piper was pleased too. She did not have to stop missing Wren in order to enjoy that stone.

When Lottie delivered, Piper covered the house. They checked the turn and the finish aloud. Lottie wanted a broad hit-and-stay. Her red removed the yellow and rolled out instead.

She made a face at the empty spot.

“I know that expression,” Piper said when Lottie reached her.

“I've practiced it.”

“Me too.”

They looked at the contact with Jo, then reset. Their next attempt missed altogether. Familiar work could be difficult in a new combination.

At the end, Jo asked what they would return to next Saturday. Nora wanted another look at the changing weight. Maisie wanted her guard followed by the draw, with the whole team watching the finish. Lottie asked Piper to keep checking their signals until neither had to guess.

Piper agreed.

On the way out, she stopped looking at the door for Wren.

She had something to tell her now: Maisie's guard, Lottie's wandering strap, the shot both of them had missed. Wren would have things Piper had not seen as well.

CHAPTER 9

At the Other End

By the third week, Wren knew where the spare grippers lived at her new club.

Piper learned this because Wren pointed them out before pointing out the place to sit.

“In case you wondered,” she said.

Piper had come with Ben, Maisie and Nora to watch part of an afternoon practice. Their own team had practiced at home earlier in the weekend. The coaches and families had arranged the visit, and the girls would stay in the warm room behind the glass.

Wren's team had regular ice here now. This was not a guest turn before she returned to their usual four.

She introduced Rowan, who had a long plait and a laugh that arrived suddenly. Their lead and second came over too, with their own bags and their own things to finish before warm-up. Nobody stood still as if they were waiting to be inspected by Piper.

Wren went to join them.

Piper watched her take the sweeping position beside the second. She knew the tilt of Wren's helmet. The two brushes beside it were unfamiliar together.

Rowan called a draw for the lead. Wren spoke early as the stone traveled. Piper could not hear every word through the glass, but she saw Wren looking along its path and changing pace with her partner.

The red stopped short of the chosen finish.

Wren made a small disappointed face. Her teammate said something that made her smile. They looked toward Rowan and listened.

“She's doing the thing she told us about,” Nora said.

Piper nodded.

During Wren's own deliveries, Rowan held the target. Later, when Rowan went to deliver, Wren took the house. She and Rowan looked at a set position, talked briefly, then separated to do their jobs.

Piper recognized the shape of the work. She could also see small differences: where Wren waited, how the second lifted her brush to show she had heard, how Rowan asked another question before settling.

Wren's first target for Rowan produced a draw that finished too wide. They discussed it with their coach after the stone stopped. The next practice attempt was closer, without being perfect.

Maisie leaned toward the glass.

“I would have liked that one.”

Piper would have too.

There were no scores on the board. These were reset drills inside their ordinary practice, not a game to win for the visiting friends. Wren had come to work, and much of the work looked very familiar.

At the break, she joined them with her water bottle.

“Did you see the early one?”

“The short draw?” Nora asked.

“Yes. I thought it had more. I said so too late.”

“I've done that,” Piper said.

“I know. I was usually at the other end.”

They grinned at each other.

Wren asked about Lottie. Piper told her about the signals, and Maisie reported that her draw behind the guard had begun making occasional appearances.

“I'd like to see it again,” Wren said.

“You may need a long visit.”

Wren's coach called the players back. She put down her bottle and picked up her broom.

Piper had been about to ask one more question. She let it wait.

“Good practice,” she said.

Wren tapped her glove against Piper's and went through the rink door.

Piper watched her join the other three. For once, the picture in her head did not stop at the space Wren had left behind.

There was a whole sheet in front of her friend.

CHAPTER 10

Four Friends at the Table



The puzzle piece looked like a duck wearing an enormous shoe.

Maisie held it above the picnic table.

“I don't see it on the box.”

“That's because it's part of a tree,” Nora said.

“A tree with footwear.”

They were at Piper's house on a mild afternoon, with Ben nearby and the puzzle safely inside a shallow tray. The four friends had their own curling stories now. They also had a very difficult patch of leaves to finish before the light changed.

Wren had arrived after her family's errands. Piper had heard her laugh through the open door and gone to meet her before remembering to put down the piece in her hand.

It was still in that hand.

“Evidence,” Maisie told her.

Piper put it where everybody could see it.

The morning's home practice had been good. Lottie had asked Maisie to explain the guard she wanted, then built the next exercise around it. Nora had noticed a draw slowing and spoken early enough for Piper to pass the information on. Piper and Lottie had misunderstood one signal, checked it and carried on.

They were beginning to recognize each other at the far end of the ice. That took more than learning a strip of checked tape.

Piper told Wren about a red that had rolled into almost the right place.

“How almost?” Wren asked.

Piper held her hands apart.

Wren looked at the gap. “A generous almost.”

“An encouraging one.”

Then Wren described sweeping a draw beside her new partner. She had changed her estimate, said it clearly and heard Rowan change the call. The stone had still stopped just outside the finish they wanted.

“I liked knowing what I could tell her,” Wren said.

Piper understood. She had heard that pleasure in Wren's voice before the summer. Now it belonged to something Wren was actually doing every week.

Nora found three pieces that fitted. Maisie objected that two of them had looked perfectly suitable elsewhere. The puzzle ignored her.

For a while, nobody talked about curling.

Ben brought drinks. Piper's brother came to inspect the enormous shoe and announced that it was obviously a crocodile. Wren rotated it, considered the new animal and handed it back to Maisie.

They could disagree about that for a long time without needing a coach.

Later, Piper and Wren carried the empty cups inside. Their brooms were in different buildings. Their gloves were somewhere else. Piper could hear Nora laughing outside at something Maisie had said.

“I'm glad you showed us your practice,” Piper said.

“I'm glad you came.”

“I still look for you sometimes.”

Wren rested a cup on the counter.

“Me too. Mostly when I've got something to tell you.”

“You can tell me.”

“I am telling you.”

Piper smiled. That was true. It required finding a time now, instead of assuming the next changing bench would provide one. Their families were helping them make those times, and the girls were using them.

Piper still wanted bigger curling someday. The under-eighteen dream had not disappeared. It also had not told her everything about the people who would share the journey, or the jobs she would need to learn along it.

Next Saturday, she would go to the home club. Maisie and Nora would be there. So would Lottie and Jo. Piper had a practice and a team she wanted to come back to.

Wren would go to hers.

From outside came a triumphant shout.

“The shoe is a branch!”

“We'd better see,” Wren said.

Piper held the door, and her friend went through first.

There was still room for both of them at the table.

Want to Try Curling?

Maybe you'd like to slide a stone, sweep beside a teammate or discover what happens inside a curling club. You can start with a try.

Ask a grown-up to help you find a junior or learn-to-curl session. The club can explain which sessions suit you, what they cost, what to wear and which equipment they provide. Ask about helmets and other safety arrangements before you go.

Let the coach show you how to move safely on the ice and use the equipment. You can ask questions. You can be new. Your first stone doesn't have to reach the rings.

Some curlers enjoy a game with friends. Some want bigger competitions. You can discover what you like one visit at a time.

Piper began by deciding to come back. Your beginning can be your own.

A grown-up can start with HouseCall’s club finder and ask a club about its current sessions:

https://thehousecall.org/find-a-club/