PIPER'S CURLING ADVENTURES

Piper and the Halfway Huddle

BOOK TWENTY FOUR



Mary Deuhs

An illustrated chapter book

Contents

1 The Other Side of Wren 1

2 Too Many Improvements 4

3 A Page with No Stars 8

4 Four Names in Red 11

5 A Familiar Voice 14

6 The Longest Half 17

7 Two Things for Now 20

8 The Next Four Stones 24

9 The Whole Score 27

10 Back at Their Table 30

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CHAPTER 1

The Other Side of Wren

Wren was standing on the wrong side of the house.

Piper knew it was not really the wrong side. There were eight girls at the first development morning, and Tess had divided them into practice groups. Wren was supposed to be over there. She had her own broom, her own properly fastened helmet and a perfectly good reason for looking toward the other hack.

Still, Piper kept expecting her to turn around.

They were well into their fifth season now. That did not make this first morning with the selected group feel like an ordinary Saturday.

“Piper?” Fern said.

Piper turned instead.

Fern pointed to the stones Tess had placed for their exercise. “Which one were you talking about?”

“The red at the back. Sorry.”

Fern's broom bag was in the changing room. The lopsided star her brother had sewn onto it had been the first thing Piper noticed when she arrived. The second thing was Fern herself, which seemed the wrong order for greeting someone.

“You got a place!” Piper had said.

“So did my bag.”

Etta was there too. So was Cora, the Kestrels' vice from the eight-end game. The other girls were Mina, Iona and Suki. With Piper and Wren, that made all eight places full.

Tess and the other coach had checked their equipment and how everyone felt, then explained the block again. Four mornings, with ordinary life and home-team curling between them. They would work in different positions, learn from each other and finish with an eight-end training game.

Nobody was leaving her own team.

Piper knew that. Maisie had sent a message through Ben reminding her to inspect Fern's star properly. Nora had asked whether they would work on both sides of the sheet.

Wren had arrived in the same car as Piper. Now she was on the other side of the rings, talking to Cora.

For this exercise, the coaches had set two different houses on separate sheets. Each group would discuss one, try a shot and talk about what happened before the coaches reset the stones. These were practice situations, not ends with scores to add up.

Piper liked the first house. There was an open yellow in the front rings and a red farther back. A hit could remove the yellow and leave the shooter in front of the red.

Fern, who was delivering this time, asked about the finish.

“Stay,” Piper said. “Near where the yellow is.”

Etta and Mina were sweeping. Piper held the target while Tess watched. Fern's red struck the yellow nearly on the nose. The yellow left the house, and the red stayed.

Piper smiled.

Then Tess asked what the other side could play next.

Piper looked at the red she had just been pleased with. It was open.

“Hit it,” she said.

“They could,” Fern agreed.

“Would your shot still have helped?” Tess asked.

They looked again. It had removed the yellow and kept two reds in the house, even if the next player could change that.

“Yes,” Piper said. “But it isn't finished.”

“The end wouldn't be.”

Across the next sheet, Wren laughed at something Suki said. Piper almost called over to ask what it was.

Fern was waiting with a question about the next exercise.

Piper faced her own group.

At the break, Tess gave each girl a small notebook. Piper's had a green cover with a corner that would not stay flat.

“Something you saw,” Tess said. “Something to try. A question, if you have one. These are yours to use.”

Piper opened hers. She had brought a pencil, although she had expected to use her broom more often.

On the first line, she wrote: Wren is over there.

She considered it.

It was certainly something she had seen.

CHAPTER 2

Too Many Improvements



By the end of the morning, Piper had enough things to improve for three people.

There were the guards on her less comfortable turn. There was the draw that reached the right depth but stayed too wide. There were the weight calls she had remembered early and the one she had remembered when the stone was almost finished.

Tess had also asked her to leave room for an answer after asking a question.

Piper thought she usually did.

Then she remembered asking Fern about the finish, offering a different finish and explaining why before Fern had opened her mouth.

She added a small dot beside that one.

During the last exercise, each group had been given a difficult position with two opposing stones in the house. The players had to choose a useful result they could reasonably try. Tess would answer questions about the task, but she would not choose their shot.

Piper saw a thin double. Fern saw an open hit that would remove one yellow. Etta thought a draw on the other side might become their nearest stone. Mina began to say something about the guard.

Piper explained her double more loudly.

Everyone stopped.

“Would you like to hear mine?” Mina asked.

“Yes,” Piper said, feeling hot inside her helmet.

Mina had noticed that the red guard hid part of the front yellow. From where Piper had first stood, it had looked more open. They went to the safe side to check the route together.

The double was harder than Piper had thought.

They chose Fern's open hit. Etta delivered it for the exercise. Her shooter caught the yellow on the side, sent it out and rolled out too. The other yellow remained.

No one cheered. It was not the beautiful two-stone answer Piper had imagined.

It had done one useful thing.

After the coaches cleared and reset the position, another player tried the draw. It stopped short. They compared what the two attempts had actually done, without pretending either had won a game.

At the warm-room table, Piper began copying everything into her notebook.

“Do I have to fix all of it before next time?” she asked Tess.

“No.”

Piper looked up quickly.

“You and Jo can choose one or two useful things for your regular practice,” Tess said. “The others will still be here.”

That was not quite as comforting as having them vanish, but it sounded possible.

Piper chose her both-turn draw work. For her second thing, she wrote: Ask, then wait.

She covered it with her glove when Wren sat down.

“What have you got?” Wren asked.

“Quite a lot.”

“Me too.”

Wren's page included a sweeping reminder and a question about calling a hit when she could not see the whole target stone. She did not cover either one.

Piper moved her glove.

Wren read the second line. Her mouth moved slightly.

“You may laugh,” Piper said.

“I was remembering yesterday.”

Piper had asked what snack Wren wanted and offered her half a sandwich before she answered.

“That was an urgent question.”

“Apparently.”

In the car, Ben asked about the morning. Piper told him about Fern, the notebooks and the double that was not as open as it had looked.

“Were you and Wren together?”

“Some of the time.”

“Was that all right?”

Piper watched a tree pass the window.

“Yes. Different.”

Wren was beside her, examining a crumb that had become attached to her sleeve.

“You can ask me things afterward,” she said.

Piper knew that too. She was discovering how many things she could know and still have to get used to.

CHAPTER 3

A Page with No Stars

At home, Piper tried to make her notebook impressive.

She ruled a line beneath the heading. She drew two tiny houses. She wrote Better draws in careful letters, then disliked how little the words explained.

When she added a star beside a good attempt she remembered, the page looked better immediately.

She added another star.

Then she could not remember whether the second draw had finished in the front rings or behind the middle.

She rubbed that star out.

It left a grey cloud.

At regular practice, Jo asked to see the page. Piper showed her, including the cloud.

“What were you trying to find out?” Jo asked.

“Whether my draws were better.”

“Better than which draws? On which path?”

Piper sighed. “It was a very nice heading before those questions.”

Jo smiled. Together they made the question smaller. During Piper's individual block, she would compare a few draws on two open paths, using the same broad front-ring finish. She would write down what she and the sweepers noticed, including misses.

The other girls had their own work. Maisie wanted her partly hidden draw to become more reliable. Nora was still interested in the right-side route. Wren wanted to check the weight she used for an open hit-and-roll.

Piper did not ask them to squeeze all their plans beneath hers.

When it was her turn, the two paths did not behave exactly alike. One red went deeper than she wanted. Another stopped short. Jo helped her compare the deliveries before blaming the ice for everything.

Piper's next draw on the left-hand path reached the front rings. Nora reported its weight early, then called again as it slowed. Wren used the update to ask for sweeping.

That evening, Piper wrote what had happened rather than giving the stone a star.

It took more words.

Two weeks after the first development morning, the eight girls met again. The host club's ice gave Piper another reason to keep her notebook plain. A draw that had felt sensible went much too deep. Her next, made with a smaller push, stopped where the caller wanted.

The coaches did not let them copy the answer to every route on every sheet.

They compared what they could see today.

During a break, Mina sat beside Piper. Mina liked making little arrows in her notes. One arrow pointed back to a sentence she had crossed out.

“I changed my mind,” Mina said.

“I can see.”

“Twice.”

Piper showed her the grey cloud where the star had been.

They agreed that pencils were useful partly because they could be persuaded to leave.

Later, they practiced short team discussions between exercises. Each player offered one observation. The person calling chose a plan after listening. They tried it, then checked the result.

Piper remembered to wait for Fern.

It was difficult when she thought she already knew what Fern would say.

Once, Fern said something entirely different.

At the end of that second morning, Piper wrote: The left path was slower AFTER the break. Check it again next time.

Tess read it when Piper showed her.

“Good question for next time,” she said.

Piper looked at the page. It had no stars at all.

It was becoming much more useful.

CHAPTER 4

Four Names in Red

The third morning began with normal shots and ended with an unusual list.

By then, Piper could find the low hooks without help. She knew which part of Fern's star looked surprised and that Etta liked her bottle at the same end of the bench every time. She knew Mina sometimes needed a moment before she spoke.

She still did not know every answer.

The coaches kept changing their practice jobs. Piper delivered early stones, swept other people's late ones and took turns at the house. She had done all those things before. Doing them with girls who noticed different details made her work harder.

That morning, Cora asked why Piper wanted a particular guard.

“To cover the red,” Piper said.

“From which shot?”

Piper looked again.

They moved to where they could see the line from the delivery end. The guard she had imagined would cover one route but leave another open. It might still help. She needed to know which problem she was trying to make smaller.

After the break, Tess put up the list for the final morning's game.

Mina, Etta, Piper, Fern.

Iona, Suki, Cora, Wren.

Piper read the second list first.

“I'm over here,” Wren said, pointing.

“I can see.”

“You were looking very hard.”

The coaches had chosen two training sides from the group. Mina would lead for Piper's side, Etta would play second, Piper third and vice, and Fern fourth and skip. Iona would lead for the other side, Suki play second, Cora third and vice, and Wren fourth and skip.

Those positions would stay the same throughout the game. Other mornings had provided the rotations.

Piper was glad to know her job. Then she wished Wren did not know quite so much about it.

“You know what I miss,” she said quietly.

“So do you.”

That was true. Piper had watched Wren's wonderful doubles and the ones with an extra yellow left over. She knew Wren sometimes rubbed the end of her broom handle while thinking.

It would feel strange to want Wren's stone to stop in the wrong place.

“You can want your own shot to work,” Wren said.

“I do.”

“So do I.”

They smiled, although Piper was still thinking about it.

Tess explained the arrangements. Eight ends on the full sheet, two stones each per end, with a seated break after four. They had all been checked for the longer work. Anyone could ask for help, water or an extra rest. The coaches would supervise and help with rules, but would leave ordinary shot choices to the players unless asked.

For this particular training game, they planned to play all eight ends and all the stones, even if the score became one-sided. They could stop for safety or tiredness. There was no cup and no selection prize hiding in the result.

Piper wanted to win anyway.

Their group discussed what words they used for draw weight. Fern asked Piper to bring observations when they met at the house, then give her room to choose. Mina asked everyone to say when an estimate changed.

Piper wrote that down.

Before leaving, she and Wren compared family calendars for the final morning. Ben would drive them again.

“Same car,” Piper said.

“Different stones.”

The coaches would settle colors on game day. Piper had not thought of that.

She looked at the two lists once more.

This time she read her own four names first.

CHAPTER 5

A Familiar Voice

Piper's side won the toss and chose last stone in the first end. Wren's side chose yellow, leaving red for Piper and her teammates.

Piper liked that small familiar thing.

Everything else was familiar in an inconvenient way.

There was Wren at the far house. There was Cora, who had agreed the score with Piper after the Kestrels game. There was the quiet rub of Wren's glove along her broom handle before she set the target.

Piper could not use any of those things to decide her own shot.

Fern could use her attention.

During the warm-up, the open left-hand draw path toward the window end had seemed a little slower than the right. That was the direction they played in the first end. Piper and Etta both noticed it. They mentioned it to Fern, then the game started and several other things happened at once.

Iona's first yellow became a useful guard. Mina's first red slipped into the front rings instead of stopping outside. Suki drew a yellow behind the guard.

“Up!” Wren called as it approached the house, and Suki's yellow stopped exactly where Piper did not want it.

Etta's reply stayed exposed, and Suki's second yellow removed it. Piper swept Mina's and Etta's stones. Wren's familiar voice was giving entirely unhelpful instructions to the other team.

Piper nearly smiled at how pleased Wren looked.

Then she remembered the score they were trying to make.

By Piper's second stone, two yellows were nearer the middle than their remaining red. Fern chose a draw around the left side. They agreed the finish and target. Piper delivered what felt like her usual draw weight.

The stone slowed early.

Etta called it light. Mina agreed. Fern asked for sweeping, but the red stopped outside the house.

The left path, Piper remembered.

She had already known something about it.

For Fern's last two deliveries, Piper took the house while Mina and Etta swept. The first red removed one yellow, but Wren replaced it with another good draw. Fern's last red came around the guard and stopped short of both counting yellows.

Piper and Cora agreed two yellow.

The first score went up on Wren's side.

“Lots of game left,” Piper said to Fern.

“Yes,” Fern said. “What did you see on that last draw?”

Piper had meant her sentence to be helpful. It had not answered Fern's question.

“Still slower on the left,” she said. “Both our draws needed more.”

Fern nodded.

In the second end, they found a way to score one. Etta's red had stayed near the middle while hits and replies removed other stones. Fern's last draw was intended to add a second, but it finished wider than the nearest yellow. Only Etta's red counted.

Two to one for yellow.

Mina gave Etta a glove tap. Piper joined them.

At the next hack, Wren passed on the safe side.

“Good red,” she told Etta.

It was a kind thing to say. Piper wished it had not sounded quite so much like her own skip.

Fern was already looking at the new, empty house.

Piper went to join her for the quick plan before Mina's first stone.

She had a skip on this side too.

CHAPTER 6

The Longest Half

The third end seemed to gather yellow stones.

Not all at once. Iona placed an early one. Suki made a useful reply. Each shot changed what they could try next. Mina's second draw had stopped short on the left-hand route toward the window end. They were playing in that direction again.

Piper understood that perfectly when she was watching someone else's practice.

In a game, she wanted the changes to stop long enough for her side to catch up.

With her first red, she made an open hit. The yellow went out, and her shooter stayed. Cora answered by removing Piper's shooter with her first yellow. By Piper's second delivery, yellow again had two stones she wanted to remove.

One was partly hidden. The other was more open.

Piper saw a chance for a double if she caught the front yellow very thinly.

Fern came down to look with her. They discussed the narrow contact and the simpler hit on the open stone.

“We need to get both,” Piper said.

Fern considered it. “Let's try the double.”

It was Fern's call, agreed with Piper. Mina and Etta knew what they were trying to do.

Piper released cleanly enough, but the red caught the front yellow too thickly. That yellow left the house. The second one did not move, and Piper's shooter rolled out.

One yellow removed. The harder part unfinished.

She wanted another turn immediately. She had used both her stones.

Fern still had two, and Wren had the last yellow of the end. They traded useful shots. Before Wren's final draw, one yellow was nearer the middle than the closest red. Wren added another inside that red.

Two yellow again.

Four to one.

Piper looked at the board for longer than it deserved.

At the start of the fourth, Mina asked whether they were using the same weight words as before.

“Of course,” Piper said.

Mina bent to check her gripper. “I couldn't hear both of you on my last draw.”

Piper remembered calling softly because Etta had already spoken. She had worked on that during the assessments. Apparently working on a thing did not stop her forgetting it when the score annoyed her.

“I'll make it clearer,” she said.

The fourth end stayed crowded. Mina made a good guard, but an early red draw went deep. Etta brought one into the front rings. Cora's later hit removed it, leaving a yellow near the middle with a red farther away.

Piper's first draw stopped short. Her second came far enough but stayed wide. They were heading toward the doors this end, so these were different paths to check. She was collecting quite a lot of things to discuss.

Fern had to draw for one with her last red. Piper held the target, checked the finish with her and listened to the sweepers.

The red came close. It stopped farther from the middle than the yellow.

One stolen yellow point.

Five to one at the break.

They covered their sliders and left the ice carefully. Piper could hear Wren's group behind them, discussing something that had gone well.

At the table, Fern put down her bottle.

“We're making it hard for ourselves,” she said.

Piper had several explanations ready. Bad luck was one. Yellow stones was another.

Mina took off her helmet and sat down. Etta unwrapped her snack.

They were waiting for a useful conversation.

Piper opened the green notebook.

CHAPTER 7

Two Things for Now



Nobody spoke at first.

That was different from four people all speaking at once, but not much more useful.

Piper looked at the score she had written. Red one, yellow five. The numbers were small on the page and large everywhere else.

“There's still time,” she said.

Fern nodded without looking convinced.

Piper nearly said they could get a four. She remembered Mina asking whether she would like to hear an idea.

“What have you noticed?” she asked instead.

Then she waited.

“The left-side draws toward the windows,” Etta said. “In the first and third ends, we kept sending them like the quicker path. We're sweeping hard because they need more distance, but they still stop short.”

Mina pointed at Piper's note from warm-up. “We saw it before the game.”

Piper touched the pencil to the paper.

“I know. I wrote it down instead of using it.”

“We all heard it,” Fern said. “I kept setting the same sort of finish and expecting the stone to get there.”

They were heading toward the windows again in the fifth. The information was about that route, not every left-hand draw in the building.

They did not need to blame the ice for every miss. Piper's wide draw had been wide. Her thick hit had been thick. The repeated short finishes along one route were still something they could act on.

“So, enough more weight for that path,” Etta said. “Not a giant push.”

“And we check it as we go,” Mina added.

Piper wrote: Toward windows, left draw: adjust from today's short ones. Report early and update.

Fern read it and nodded.

“My other thing is the doubles,” she said.

Piper's pencil stopped.

“We've only tried one in this game.”

“I know. I'm thinking about what we choose next. I agreed to that one because I wanted the two yellows gone all at once.”

“So did I.”

“If the contact is there, we can still try it,” Fern said. “But I want us to look properly at the open shot too.”

Etta leaned forward. “Especially if taking one out leaves them only one counting.”

Piper looked at Fern. Their skip was not asking her to stop seeing doubles. She was asking for another choice beside the exciting one.

“What would they have left?” Piper said.

“Yes. That's what I want to know.”

Piper wrote a second line: Compare the open shot. Say what stays.

Tess came to their table, carrying her own drink. She had let the girls begin their discussion before joining them.

“What have you agreed?”

Fern explained the two changes. Piper left room for Etta and Mina to add their parts.

Tess asked one question about how they would check the slower route. They described the earlier finishes and said they would watch the next draw rather than decide the whole second half from one guess.

“That gives you something to try,” Tess said.

“Will it be enough?” Piper asked.

“To win?”

Piper nodded.

“We'll find out what both sides do.”

Piper would have liked a more useful promise. She knew it would not have been a real one.

The rest of the break was for eating, drinking and resting. They closed the notebook. Etta told them that her sandwich had more crust on one side than the other, which Mina said was an ambitious complaint about a rectangle.

Piper laughed.

When Fern stood up, she checked that everyone was ready before they collected their gear.

“Two things,” she said.

Piper could remember two things.

She did not have to carry a whole improved season back onto the ice.

CHAPTER 8

The Next Four Stones

The fifth end began with yellow delivering first again. Red had kept last stone after yellow's stolen point.

Piper watched Iona's opening guard. Then she went to her sweeping place for Mina.

They were playing toward the window end. Their own first red was a corner guard. It stopped outside the house, leaving a route around it toward the left-hand rings. Mina's second was meant to use that route.

Before Mina returned to the hack, Fern checked the finish with her. They recalled the short draws from the first half and agreed that this route needed a little more weight today.

Piper did not say, “Make a good one.”

She listened to Mina tell them what she intended.

The red came toward them. Etta called its weight. Piper gave her own estimate loudly enough for Fern to hear.

At first it looked deep enough. Then it began to slow.

“Less than I thought,” Piper called.

Fern asked them to sweep. They worked together, keeping clear of the stone. The red passed the corner guard and reached the left side of the four-foot.

Mina came down the safe side smiling.

It was one useful draw. There were plenty of stones left to change it.

Yellow tried. Suki's first draw stopped wider, and her next useful shot made the house harder. Etta removed an open yellow with her second red, after the first five

deliveries of the end were complete. Cora answered with a hit that took out Etta's shooter but left Mina's partly covered red alone.

Piper's first red became a guard. Her second came around a different route and finished in the front rings, farther from the middle than Mina's.

Fern and Wren still had their two stones each.

For Fern's first, Piper took the house. Wren had just placed a yellow nearer the middle than Piper's front-ring red, but farther away than Mina's. Fern drew to the other side of Mina's stone, and her red stopped inside that yellow.

Two reds counting.

Wren came to look. Piper knew the small movement of her broom handle. It told her Wren was thinking. It did not tell her what Wren would choose.

Wren tried to remove Fern's red. The yellow caught it too thinly, rolled away and left the red in the house, still nearer than the closest yellow.

Fern's final draw did not add a third. It stayed wide.

Piper and Cora agreed two red.

Five to three.

This time, Piper let herself smile at the board.

“That first draw,” she told Mina.

“I heard you change your mind,” Mina said.

“I did.”

“It helped.”

The sixth end did not offer the same picture. Wren's side had last stone now. Iona and Suki made the early shots awkward, and by Piper's last delivery there were two counting yellows, with one more open than the other.

Piper saw the tempting double. Then she looked from the delivery line.

“The open hit takes one,” she told Fern. “The other yellow stays. The thin double might take both, but there's very little of the front stone showing.”

Fern studied both routes.

“The open one,” she decided.

Piper made the hit and stayed. One yellow remained nearer the middle than her red.

Cora had one yellow left before the skips. She tried to draw nearer than Piper's red, but her yellow stopped too wide.

There were still Fern's and Wren's shots to come. They could not promise a one-point end from Piper's stone alone. Fern's first red missed its intended finish. Wren tried to add another yellow but finished outside Piper's red. Fern's last draw did not beat the nearest yellow either.

Wren's final draw also stopped farther from the middle than Piper's red.

One yellow point.

Six to three.

Piper wished they had stolen one. She was glad she could explain what their actual shots had done.

Both feelings fitted in the same end.

CHAPTER 9

The Whole Score

In the seventh, red needed more than one.

Fern said it plainly before Mina went to deliver. They wanted to build a chance for two, while paying attention to the replies Wren's side could make.

Nobody promised them a helpful arrangement of yellow stones.

Mina placed a corner guard. Her next red reached the house on the open side, where it was easier for yellow to see. Suki made a good hit. Etta replied with a draw that stopped near the middle.

Piper called the weight clearly when she swept. She still got one estimate wrong. This time she changed it aloud instead of waiting to see whether it might become right again.

Later, Piper's first red hit an open yellow and rolled out. Her second draw came into the front rings. It gave Fern another stone to work with, but it was farther from the middle than Etta's red and the nearest yellow.

By the time Fern's last red came to rest, they had one counting stone. Her draw had not beaten the yellow lying second.

Six to four.

Piper looked at the last empty space on the scoreboard.

Two behind. Wren had last stone.

She remembered being two behind late in the Kestrels game. That time they had arranged a blank to keep hammer for the eighth. This was a different position.

Wren's side already held it, and there was no ninth end waiting for a clever explanation.

They needed to steal two to tie.

Fern talked with all three teammates before they began. They would try to put reds where yellow could not easily remove them. They would still use the information from the ice, checking the routes toward the doors in this end. Wanting two did not make every draw behave alike.

Yellow's reply mattered at every stage. Mina opened with a guard. Iona replied with her first yellow in the house. As the end developed, Suki and Cora made it difficult to keep a red tucked behind that guard.

Piper worked hard on both her deliveries. The first missed its intended contact. The second drew into the front rings but remained open. Cora's next hit removed it, leaving her yellow in the house.

Piper covered her slider and went to the house for Fern.

She wanted to offer something magnificent.

Instead, she told Fern which yellow was nearest, where the red behind it lay and what she could see of the possible routes. Fern chose the shot she thought gave them the best remaining chance.

Her first red did not finish where she wanted. Wren improved yellow's position with her first stone. Fern's last draw came close to the middle, but stopped just outside the nearest yellow.

The tie was gone.

They still had the last training delivery to play, as they had agreed before the game. Wren used it to try an open

draw. It finished farther from the middle than Fern's red, so it added no second point.

Piper and Cora checked the house together.

One yellow. Seven to four.

They shook hands and thanked the coaches. Piper told Mina she had liked her fifth-end draw. Etta thanked Fern for making room for the discussion at the break.

Piper did too.

Fern put her broom in the rack. “I nearly said we should just try harder.”

“We were already trying quite hard,” Piper said.

“Yes.”

Across the room, Wren was talking to Iona, Suki and Cora. Piper waited until their group had finished before going over.

“Your second-half draws were better,” Wren said.

“Some of them.”

“Some of them were very inconvenient.”

Piper smiled a little.

She still would rather have won. She did not have to pretend otherwise to be pleased about a few inconvenient reds.

CHAPTER 10

Back at Their Table



Tess did not ask who had won the second half.

Piper had quietly worked it out. Red three, yellow two. She was prepared to mention it if nobody else did.

Then Fern said, “We lost seven to four. We used our information better after the break.”

Both parts were true. Piper closed her mouth around the smaller score she had been saving.

The coaches talked with each group, then with the girls individually and their grown-ups. There were useful things to keep and things to work on. Finishing four mornings did not hand anyone a new competitive position.

Tess told Piper that her account of the open hit had helped Fern make a decision. She also reminded her of the wide draws and the first-half weight reports that had arrived too quietly.

Piper wrote those down without drawing clouds around them.

“Could we play stronger junior events?” she asked.

“You can talk with your home coach about a suitable next event and what the team needs,” Tess said. “These mornings give you more to work with. They aren't an entry form.”

Piper nodded. She still wanted the big under-eighteen competition she had talked about with Jo. Today had shown her several ordinary things that would need to travel there with her.

In the car, Wren asked whether she could have the window open a little.

Piper said yes before remembering that they were no longer on opposite sides of anything.

“Good game,” Wren said after a while.

“Parts.”

“Good parts.”

Piper leaned back. That she could agree with.

At the next regular practice, Maisie and Nora were waiting at their usual table. Maisie had finally seen a picture of Fern's star, shared with Fern's permission. She thought the surprised point was the best one.

Nora wanted to hear about the slower draw path.

Piper told her. Then she asked what they had been working on.

Maisie had made two useful draws around her corner guard on different days. She had also missed several.

Nora had a new question about how early she could tell that a draw was running deep.

Wren put down her bag. “We've got a question for all of us too.”

Jo had brought information about an eight-end junior weekend next season, for teams ready to face stronger opposition. The dates were provisional. It would need preparation and a proper decision by the four girls and their families. No one had entered them.

Maisie unfolded the paper.

“I want to look,” she said. “Looking isn't promising every weekend.”

“No,” Piper said.

Nora began with the dates. Wren looked at the game length. Piper looked at the level of play, then made herself read the rest.

The separate return visit with the Owls was still waiting for a date everyone could manage. Jo was keeping those conversations separate. Four development mornings had not quietly become that visit.

They put the new information away for a proper family discussion. They had their usual practice to do now.

Maisie led. Nora played second. Piper was third and vice, and Wren skipped.

Before they went out, Piper showed them the two lines from her halfway notebook.

“Could we have a short talk like that when we need one?”

“With time to eat?” Maisie asked.

“Yes.”

“And not fourteen improvements?” Nora asked.

“Two was plenty.”

Wren read the page, then handed it back.

“Let's ask Jo where it fits.”

Piper tucked the notebook into her bag. The bent green corner still would not lie flat. She pressed it once and let it spring up again.

Through the glass, their sheet was ready.

There were four familiar names on this side of her next game. Beyond it, there were people and places she was beginning to know, and harder choices she still wanted to try.

Maisie lifted her broom carefully from the rack.

“Coming?”

Piper went with them.