PIPER'S CURLING ADVENTURES

# Piper and the Season Ahead

BOOK TWENTY FIVE



Mary Deuhs

An illustrated chapter book

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CHAPTER 1

# The Paper in the Middle



The paper was in the middle of the table, where all four girls could reach it.

Piper had put it there. She had also turned it so she could read the heading the right way up.

Nora turned it sideways.

“Now nobody gets the good side,” she said.

Maisie leaned over Wren's arm. “I can read sideways.”

Piper could too. That was not the difficult part.

The junior weekend Jo had mentioned after the development mornings had proper dates now. The host club had confirmed its ice. There would be two eight-end

games on Saturday and another on Sunday, against stronger junior teams. Breaks, meals and rest were part of the schedule. Each team would play the other three once. There would be no extra final.

Their families had copies of the full information, including the entry cost and travel arrangements. Jo wanted the four girls to talk before any grown-up sent their names.

Piper had read the games part several times.

She had imagined the team name on the list.

“The Too-Cold Club,” she said aloud.

“We are already called that,” Maisie said.

“I mean on this.”

Wren pulled the paper closer. “We haven't decided.”

“I know.”

Piper knew it so well that she was beginning to dislike knowing it.

They were near the end of their fifth season. The four development mornings were finished. Piper and Wren had brought home plenty to work on, and their usual team still had its own work. Maisie led, Nora played second, Piper was third and vice, and Wren skipped.

Piper wanted those four names to go somewhere harder together.

Jo arrived with a second sheet.

“The Owls visit is settled too,” she said. “Our families and theirs have agreed on the Saturday after next.”

Maisie sat up. “Back to their building?”

“Yes. Morning practice time, lunch, then a six-end friendly. The two clubs have agreed the arrangements.”

Piper remembered Lila asking whether they were coming again. They had wanted another game ever

since. The date had taken much longer to arrange than the wanting.

Wren smiled. “Good.”

“Could that tell us?” Piper asked, touching the weekend paper.

“Tell us what?” Jo said.

“If we're ready.”

“It will give you another game to learn from. I already think the proposed weekend is a reasonable next challenge for this team, with preparation. We also need to know whether you all want the work and can manage the arrangements.”

Piper looked at the schedule again. Two games on Saturday. A night away. Another game on Sunday. They had stayed away for curling before, but this was more full-length curling in the same weekend than their team had yet played.

“Can we think while we play the Owls?” she asked.

“You can think now as well,” Nora said.

That was fair, although Piper would have preferred a question she could answer with a good hit.

Jo checked the reply date. They had time for the visit and a family discussion afterward. There was no need to finish the choice beside their unopened snack bags.

Through the glass, their regular sheet waited. Wren folded the weekend information along its old crease and set it aside.

Maisie picked up the Owls sheet.

“I remember where their low hooks are,” she said.

Piper smiled. There were things they would not have to find for the first time.

There were other things a familiar hook could not help with.

CHAPTER 2

# Through the Same Door

On the return journey, Maisie brought the square cushion again.

“This one knows the road,” she said, settling it beside her.

Ben said he hoped it would help if he missed the turning. Nora asked whether the cushion had been given a proper map. Wren held the snack bag where nobody could sit on it.

Piper looked out of the window. Last time she had been watching for the unfamiliar building. This time she recognized the last bend before it appeared.

She liked knowing where they were going.

Inside, Lila and Ruth were by the changing area. Lila's long braid lay over her jacket. Ruth was holding a bottle with both hands while she talked.

“You came,” Lila said.

“We said we wanted to,” Wren answered.

“The calendars took their time,” Nora added.

Piper put her bag on the same stretch of bench she remembered. It did not belong to her, of course. Another team's bags had been there earlier. Still, she felt less like a visitor who might put everything in the wrong place.

The Owls' coach greeted Jo. The girls changed, checked their equipment and fastened their helmets. The adults asked how everyone felt before they went onto the ice.

The morning was for each team's own warm-up and familiar practice work on neighboring sheets. Nobody

was being assessed for a place. Piper had no clipboard to look at except the one holding the day's schedule.

Jo reminded them to watch today's stones.

Piper remembered a draw route from the first visit. She almost told Nora what it would do. Then Maisie's warm-up stone went farther than Piper expected.

“Quicker than the one I'm remembering,” she said.

“Today,” Nora replied.

They watched another. This one had a different delivery and finished short. Jo asked what they had actually seen, and Piper kept the answer about those two attempts.

At lunch, the teams sat at adjoining tables. Ruth asked Nora how the full-length games had been going. Nora told her about a draw she had been practicing and the Kestrels game. Piper told Lila about the development mornings when Lila asked.

Maisie wanted to know whether the Owls still voted on things.

“Sometimes,” Lila said. “Why?”

“I wondered whether you had voted about lunch.”

“No. I chose this sandwich myself.”

“A brave decision.”

Piper laughed, and Lila looked inside her bread as if it might contain a reason to reconsider.

After lunch they would play six ends, with a seated break after three. Ties would stand. The coaches would supervise and help with rules. Brief advice between ends was available if the players asked, just as the clubs had agreed. Jo had checked that everyone was ready for the day's length, and anyone could ask for an extra rest or help.

Piper liked the familiar arrangement. She could think about the game without also learning a new timetable.

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

Red again for Piper's team.

Before they went out, Wren asked everyone to come close enough to hear.

“Let's give each other the information we have,” she said. “And check the finish before we throw.”

Maisie nodded. Nora tightened the lid on her bottle.

Piper glanced at the empty scoreboard. She had imagined bringing home a good result and laying it beside the weekend paper.

For now, she had to leave both papers in the warm room.

The first stone belonged to the Owls.

CHAPTER 3

# The Stones They Kept



Maisie's first red became a guard where Wren had asked for it.

Piper and Nora stayed beside it until it stopped, then moved to their waiting place. There were fourteen more deliveries in the end. Piper did not congratulate them on an entire good morning yet.

The Owls drew into the house. Maisie's second red came around her guard and reached the front rings. A little of it still showed from the delivery end.

Maisie looked pleased anyway. So was Piper.

Both sides changed the house as the end went on. Nora's first draw was too deep. Her second gave them a

red nearer the middle. The Owls removed that one later, and Piper's first hit took out an open yellow but rolled away too.

For her second stone, Wren asked for a draw beside Maisie's red.

Piper checked the finish. The stone started on the line she wanted. Nora and Maisie reported the weight, Wren asked for sweeping near the end, and it arrived inside the nearest yellow.

Piper came down the safe side after covering her slider.

“Two at the moment,” she told Wren.

“At the moment,” Wren agreed.

Lila's first yellow removed Piper's red. Wren drew another into the house with her first stone. Lila tried to reach a space nearer the middle but finished too wide. Wren's last red did not add a third.

Maisie's red and Wren's first one counted.

Piper and Ruth agreed two red. Maisie had helped make the end from its very beginning.

The Owls scored one in the second. They had last stone, and Lila used it to draw nearer than the closest red. Piper had made an open hit earlier, then missed her next intended contact. Two to one seemed a fair description of what both teams had done.

In the third, red had last stone again.

Nora gave Wren a useful report about a draw path before delivering her own second red. Piper heard Wren ask a question back. Nora answered it, rather than merely repeating the first thing louder.

Their red reached the front of the four-foot. Later the Owls took it out. The information about the path remained useful even after Nora's stone had gone.

Piper's first draw came too deep. Her second hit removed an open yellow and stayed in the house, farther from the middle than a red Maisie had delivered. Lila's first yellow caught Piper's shooter and sent it away.

Wren still had two deliveries. Her first red drew nearer the middle than the closest yellow. Lila tried to remove that new red with her last yellow. The contact was thin, and the red moved but remained closer than yellow's nearest stone.

Piper looked carefully with Wren before setting the target for the final delivery. They already had two counting reds, Maisie's and Wren's. Wren chose a draw to an open part of the house, hoping to add another.

It finished outside the nearest yellow.

Two red again. Four to one at the break.

Piper was pleased enough to feel a little taller when they left the ice. She stopped herself from explaining the entire half to Jo before the others had sat down.

Maisie opened her snack.

“My guard got used,” she said.

“Yes,” Piper answered.

“And my red stayed.”

“Two of your reds stayed,” Nora said.

Maisie considered that over a mouthful.

“I like staying.”

Piper did too. The beginning of an end could still be there when everyone had finished having their turn.

CHAPTER 4

# A Good Game to Bring Home

The break was long enough to sit down properly.

Piper drank water. Maisie told Nora that the corner of her sandwich had fallen off in a surprisingly tidy shape. Wren asked Jo one question about an earlier shot, then put curling aside while she ate.

Piper had wanted to discuss every red still on the board.

She let them stay there without extra help.

In the fourth end, the Owls had last stone. They made the house difficult, with a yellow near the middle and other stones limiting the easy routes.

Nora swept beside Piper, speaking early and changing her estimate when the red slowed. Maisie's draw reached the rings. It did not become the nearest stone, but Wren used its position while planning the later shots.

By the time the skips played, red and yellow each had a useful stone in the house. Wren's first red removed the nearest yellow and stayed. Lila answered with a draw that stopped wider than she wanted. Wren's second red reached a different part of the rings, farther from the middle than her first.

Lila had a chance to score with her last draw. It was close, but it stopped outside Wren's first red.

One red point. Five to one.

At the next end, Piper began imagining the handshake before Maisie had delivered anything.

A good yellow draw brought her back.

The Owls still had last stone after red's steal. Their early work gave Lila choices. Piper removed one open yellow with her first red, but Ruth replaced it with another counting stone. Piper's second draw stopped short. Wren took out one yellow later, and Lila put a new one near the middle.

By Lila's final delivery, one yellow counted. She drew a second inside the nearest red.

Two yellow. Five to three.

“Good draw,” Wren said as Lila passed.

Piper said it too. It had been a good draw even though she would have preferred it farther away.

The sixth end gave red last stone. Wren wanted them to keep making useful shots, and the others knew their jobs.

Nora's early red drew into the house. It was removed as the end developed. Piper's first hit rolled out with its target. Her second draw reached the front of the four-foot and stayed there through Lila's first reply, which missed it.

Wren drew a second red nearer the middle with her first stone. A yellow remained farther out. Lila still had a possible double: removing both reds and keeping her shooter could leave two yellows counting. She tried it with her last stone, but missed the contact. Both reds stayed.

Piper and Ruth checked together. Two red.

With the result settled, Wren did not need her last delivery. The game ended seven to three for the Too-Cold Club.

Piper smiled all the way through the handshakes. There had been good beginnings, useful replies and

several things their opponents had made difficult. They had won together.

In the changing room, Maisie leaned against her bag.

“My legs know we played.”

“So do mine,” Wren said.

Piper's did too. They had worked hard even with a comfortable final score.

Lila came to say goodbye before they left. She wanted to hear how the next season went, and Wren said they would like to hear about the Owls too. This time nobody tried to arrange another visit while people were carrying bags through the door.

In the car, Piper waited until Ben had pulled away.

“We should do the weekend,” she said. “We can play well together.”

“We can,” Wren agreed.

Piper waited for the rest of the answer.

There wasn't one.

Beside her, Maisie adjusted the well-traveled cushion. Nora looked out at the road.

The win was coming home with them.

The decision was still waiting.

CHAPTER 5

# Three Yeses and a Question

At home, Piper wrote seven to three in her notebook.

She added Maisie's first-end guard and the reds that had stayed. Then she put the notebook beside the weekend information, as she had imagined doing before the visit.

The two papers did not make a decision by themselves.

Ben came to the table with his calendar.

“Our family can manage these dates,” he said. “We've checked the travel and the cost. Do you still want to go?”

“Yes.”

“You've read the early start?”

“Yes.”

“And the second Saturday game?”

Piper nodded. She had read it. She had not imagined being tired during it as clearly as she could now.

Ben asked her to talk him through what she thought the weekend would be like. She began with the teams. He waited through that part, then asked about the hours between games.

“Food. Rest. Maybe looking at the other sheet.”

“Maybe. What if your team needs a quiet break?”

Piper pictured everyone sitting while an interesting game happened beyond the glass. That sounded irritating and possibly sensible.

“Then a quiet break.”

At the next regular practice, the four girls sat with the paper again.

Piper said she wanted to go. Wren said she did too. Her family could arrange the weekend, although it meant moving a visit to a different date. Wren wanted the other girls to know that someone else was making room for their curling as well.

Nora put down her pencil.

“I want these games,” she said. “I want to find out how we do against teams that make fewer mistakes.”

Piper smiled. Three yeses.

“I also want to know about practice,” Nora added.

Piper looked at Maisie.

“I want to ask the same thing,” Maisie said.

Jo had suggested they might need some extra preparation at the start of the next season. Nothing had been booked for the team yet. Piper had privately imagined taking every available session.

“How much extra?” Nora asked.

“As much as we need?” Piper offered.

Maisie tipped her head. “That could be a very large amount.”

Wren unfolded the lower half of the schedule. “We need to ask Jo.”

Piper could hear her own eagerness making the answer sound bigger than the actual event. She wanted stronger competition. She also wanted these friends beside her. She had been treating the two wants as if one automatically supplied the other.

Maisie traced the edge of the paper.

“I liked the Owls game. I liked trying to leave something useful for all of you. I want to do that against the stronger teams too.”

Piper began to smile again.

“But I don't want to say yes to a weekend and find out I've said yes to every spare morning,” Maisie finished.

Nobody answered immediately.

Nora pushed the pencil toward the middle.

“That's my question as well.”

They had chosen different things before. Piper had learned to go to her own activity without making everyone come. This time she was asking the others to share the same entry. Their answers would affect one another.

She picked up the pencil.

“What do we need to know before we can answer properly?”

Wren pulled the spare sheet toward them.

They began with practice.

CHAPTER 6

# An Ordinary Wednesday

The first plan Jo brought back included three extra sessions before the junior weekend.

Two were at ordinary team-practice times, using a longer booking. The third was a Wednesday evening, between the opening weeks of the new season.

Piper liked seeing actual spaces on a calendar. They looked more manageable than as much as we need.

Then Maisie shook her head.

“I can't do that Wednesday.”

Piper looked at the date. “Could you move the thing?”

“No.”

Maisie said it quietly, without explaining the thing. Piper's mouth stayed open for the next question. She closed it.

Jo moved the paper so everyone could see.

“This is why we're checking before we book. It was an available piece of ice, not an instruction.”

Nora could make the first longer Saturday, but her family could not stay for the full second one if it began at the usual time. Wren's family needed to know the final schedule before moving their visit. Three little spaces had become a great many people.

Piper felt annoyed at Wednesday. It looked harmless enough on the calendar.

“Could three of us practice?” she asked.

“Sometimes,” Jo said. “But the extra work I proposed here is about managing the longer team day. It needs all four of you. We can look for a different arrangement.”

They talked through what they were preparing for. Their ordinary practice already included guards, draws, hits and decisions. Jo did not intend to squeeze a whole new set of skills into three special dates.

They needed to build their readiness for more play in one day, keep their communication useful when they were tired and learn how to use the time between games. Jo would increase the work gradually, with rest and safety checks, rather than send them straight into two full games.

“Could we begin earlier on the second Saturday?” Nora asked.

Jo checked her own availability. That might work if the club had the ice and all the families could come.

“What would happen to Wednesday?” Maisie asked.

“We could use shorter pieces of regular team practice for the other work. I would need to change the plan.”

Piper looked at the three dates again. The Wednesday had seemed important mainly because it was written down.

“Would two longer Saturdays be enough?” she asked.

“For the plan I'm describing, with your regular practices, they could be,” Jo said. “We'll keep checking how everyone is managing. Entering an event doesn't take away anyone's right to say they're hurt or exhausted.”

That answer left room for work. It left room for people as well.

Afterward, Piper and Maisie were the last two at the bench. Piper was trying to push a glove into an already full pocket.

“I didn't mean you had to explain Wednesday,” she said.

“I know.”

“I was going to ask again.”

“I know that too.”

Piper let the glove stay outside the pocket.

“I wanted an easy answer.”

Maisie fastened her bag. “Me too. Mine was no to Wednesday.”

Piper laughed, partly because it was true and partly because Maisie was smiling.

They went to help carry the practice cones. Jo would ask the club about the earlier ice, and their families would check the revised dates. Nobody had to promise an imaginary free evening while they waited.

CHAPTER 7

# The Work They Chose

The revised plan had two longer Saturdays and no Wednesday.

The earlier start was possible. Nora's family could manage the whole session. Wren's family confirmed their changed visit. Maisie's grown-up checked both dates with Jo, and Ben put them beside the weekend in the calendar.

There was still a cost to the choice.

The earlier Saturday would mean getting out of bed while Piper would much rather stay in it. The longer team blocks would leave less of those practices for everyone to repeat a favorite shot. Jo would use some ordinary sessions for preparation too.

Piper looked at Wren.

“What about our doubles?”

“We can still practice them,” Wren said. “They can't have the whole morning.”

Piper knew that. She had been hoping the morning might become larger.

Jo asked the girls to help choose what they most needed from the team work. They already had experience of eight ends. The new demand was returning to play after a proper break, then arriving ready again the next day.

Maisie wanted to talk about what everyone needed between games before they were all tired and cross.

“I don't want to spend lunch being told about every stone I missed,” she said.

Nora nodded immediately.

Wren wanted a short chance to discuss a few useful observations, with eating and quiet time protected as well. They had used good short talks before. They could agree when to have one, then let the conversation finish.

Piper wrote that down. She added a reminder to ask before beginning a whole game explanation in the car.

“Is that for us?” Nora asked.

“It may be for me.”

Nora smiled and left it there.

Jo explained how the two longer practices would fit around steady work during the opening weeks. She would assess how they managed the load as it increased. They would bring food and water, take planned rests and tell her about pain or unusual tiredness. The event coaches and families would know the arrangements too.

No one promised that preparation would make every end easy.

Before they left the table, Wren asked each girl what she wanted from the weekend itself.

Piper wanted to see how her choices stood up when opponents left fewer open shots. Nora wanted to judge weight across a longer day and keep speaking clearly. Maisie wanted to make beginnings that gave her teammates a chance, even when someone on the other side made an excellent reply.

Wren listened to all of them.

“I want us to keep making our own decisions,” she said. “I want advice when we need it, but I want to find out what we can work out together.”

Piper liked that answer. She could imagine offering a useful picture to Wren at the house without having to solve the entire weekend herself.

Jo asked if anyone needed more time before answering.

Maisie looked at the revised dates once more.

“I want to go,” she said. “With this plan.”

Nora said yes. Wren said yes. Piper said yes without adding three other events she might like afterward.

Their grown-ups still needed to give the final permission for the entry. The girls carried the same agreed plan to them.

Piper left the table feeling excited and slightly nervous.

The two feelings had been there before. Now they had something definite to do.

CHAPTER 8

# Their Name on the List

Jo sent the entry after all four families confirmed.

The reply came back the next day. There was a place for the Too-Cold Club, and their entry was accepted.

Piper read the team name slowly. She had wanted to see it there for weeks. It looked very ordinary in the same small letters as everything else.

She read it again anyway.

At the club, Jo gave the families the confirmation and the preparation dates. The girls put their copy in the team folder. Wren checked the weekend once more. Maisie inspected the schedule for the long lunch gap.

“It has survived,” she announced.

Piper laughed. Then she noticed the other three team names. They were new opponents, with results and experience she did not know yet.

For a moment she wanted Jo to tell her exactly how good they would be.

Jo could tell her the event was suitable and demanding. She could not supply the games before anyone played them.

“Can we win?” Piper asked.

“You'll have chances to play well,” Jo said. “So will they.”

Wren was still looking at the list.

“I'd like to win,” she said.

“Me too,” Maisie answered.

Nora nodded. Nobody had to pretend they were entering only to admire the building.

Piper folded the confirmation. She could want the result without turning it into something the adults had promised.

At the next table, a girl from another junior group asked what they had entered. Maisie showed her the schedule.

“I'm doing the Saturday club games again,” the girl said. “My sister starts this autumn. She wants me to show her where everything is.”

“Show her the hooks first,” Maisie advised. “The low ones.”

Piper remembered how much she had liked finding a place for her bag. The girl looked pleased about having someone to bring. Her autumn had something worth looking forward to as well.

After she went to find her family, Nora asked Jo whether their ordinary club sessions would still include the other groups.

“Yes,” Jo said. “There will be plenty of different curling here. Taking one weekend away doesn't replace the club programme.”

“Good,” Maisie said. “I like knowing people in the next lane.”

Piper did too. She liked the voices through the changing-room wall, and the small players carefully carrying equipment, and the familiar adults who knew where the spare grippers lived. The club had room for much more than the next event on her own calendar.

There were two regular practices left before their club's ice closed. The junior weekend would come after the next season began. They did not need to spend every remaining minute rehearsing autumn.

At the first of those practices, Jo set aside time for each girl's chosen work. Piper asked to revisit an open hit-and-roll. Wren chose a double she had been trying. Nora wanted a draw on the other turn. Maisie returned to her corner guard.

They helped one another in the usual ways. Piper made one roll that went where she intended and another that traveled much too far. Jo asked her to compare the contact, and Piper could give a better answer than she once would have.

Afterward, Wren wanted one more attempt at her double.

Jo looked at the time. There was room for one, with the lane safely set and cleared afterward.

The first target left. The second stayed where it was.

Wren stood up, covered her slider and came down to look.

“That one is very committed,” Maisie said.

Wren smiled. “Apparently.”

They would leave the shot there for another day. The next season's team practices would not be large enough for every extra stone anyone wanted, either.

Piper helped return the equipment when Jo said it was time. She still wanted another roll. Wanting it did not make the ice booking longer.

At home, Ben put the accepted weekend on the calendar in ink.

Piper watched. Then she went to find something to eat.

She had a whole summer before those games. She intended to enjoy some of it without wearing gloves.

The next morning, she found a pebble in her shoe. An ordinary little one, with no useful opinion about curling. She tipped it out beside the step and went to look for her brother.

He had proposed building something in the garden. For once, nobody had asked Piper to read a schedule first.

CHAPTER 9

# The Last Saturday on Ice



On the closing Saturday, Maisie brought an extra bag.

“For everything I've left here,” she explained.

“That may not be large enough,” Nora said.

“It folds out.”

The changing area was busy with the ordinary sounds of a last session. Zips caught. Bottles rolled under benches. Someone asked whether a sock belonged to anybody and received no useful answer.

Piper found the green notebook in her bag. Its bent corner had survived the development mornings, the

Owls return and several attempts to make it flat. She left it bent.

Jo had planned an ordinary team practice with time to enjoy the shots they wanted to try. They had already decided what came next.

Piper went onto the ice with her helmet fastened and her broom in hand. The familiar sheet looked the same as last Saturday. Knowing it was the last one made her look a little longer.

They warmed up. Maisie delivered first in their team work. Nora and Piper swept. Wren asked for a guard, checked the finish and gave Maisie time to settle.

The stone came down neatly and stopped in the house.

Maisie looked at it from the far end.

“Too sociable,” she said when she arrived. “It wanted to join the rings.”

Piper grinned. They discussed the delivery, then went on with practice. A final Saturday did not require every shot to behave beautifully.

Later, Piper took the house for Wren. They looked at a set position Jo had arranged for a decision exercise. There was no end score; the stones would be reset between attempts.

Wren asked what Piper could see.

Piper described the open hit and where the shooter might finish. She also pointed out the draw route, including the stone that made it awkward. Wren chose the hit.

The target went out. The shooter rolled farther than intended and stayed in the back rings.

Wren came down to look. Piper waited for her before describing the next possible reply.

She had learned to wait before. She would probably have to remember it again.

Near the end, Jo gave them a few minutes to say what they wanted to carry into the next season. Nora spoke about early reports. Maisie wanted to keep asking for the finish she understood. Wren wanted all four of them involved before a difficult choice became hers to call.

Piper looked through the glass toward the table where the papers had been.

“I want to know what we're agreeing to,” she said. “Before I agree for everybody.”

Jo nodded, and Maisie touched Piper's sleeve with her glove.

Then it was time to come off.

Piper covered her slider and walked carefully to the doorway. She turned once to look at the house. Another team would use the sheet before the ice work began. Their club would have other sounds for a while.

In the changing room, Maisie found a glove behind the bench. It was hers. Nora found Maisie's spare hair tie, and Wren found the cap from her bottle.

The extra bag was useful after all.

Piper lifted her broom bag from the rack. This was the end of their fifth season together.

She felt sorry to be leaving the ice and pleased about the weeks ahead.

Both feelings came out through the door with her.

CHAPTER 10

# What Stayed Packed

For the first Saturday without curling, Piper woke early by mistake.

She lay still, waiting for the familiar hurry to begin. Then she remembered that her bag was downstairs, dry and properly packed, with nowhere it needed to go that morning.

She went back to sleep.

Later, Ben asked whether she missed the ice.

“Yes,” she said. “Not quite as much as I would have missed sleeping.”

The summer found other uses for Saturdays. There were family plans, ordinary errands and afternoons when Piper saw her friends without anyone checking a slider. They did not turn every game in the garden into curling. Maisie objected strongly when a rolling ball was accused of taking the wrong turn.

“It is round,” she said. “It has many choices.”

Piper's little brother agreed with this so firmly that the ball had to be retrieved from under a chair.

The curling bag stayed put. Piper opened it once to check that she had not left any food inside. Ben thought this was an excellent discovery to make before the next season.

The four girls still talked about the junior weekend sometimes. They also talked about other things. Nora had a puzzle that none of them could finish on the first afternoon. Wren wanted to begin again after they had

put every piece away, and Maisie said that was a suspiciously curling sort of suggestion.

As the new season approached, Jo sent the confirmed practice arrangements to the families. The two longer Saturdays were still there. So was the earlier start everyone had agreed. The event had not grown three extra weekends while nobody was watching.

Piper checked the dates with Ben. Wren's family had kept its changed visit. Nora and Maisie were ready for the plan they had chosen. Any further event would need a further conversation.

The evening before their first regular practice back, Piper took out the green notebook.

She found seven to three. Beside it were the stones she wanted to remember, including the ones Maisie had left for the others. Farther on was the sheet with their questions about practice. There were rubbed-out times and an arrow to the earlier Saturday.

She had once thought the good score would be the important paper.

She kept both.

On the next morning, the four girls met at the familiar changing bench. Their sixth season was beginning. Jo checked equipment, fit and how everyone felt before they would return to the ice; a summer away did not cancel the usual safety checks.

Maisie's extra bag had stayed home.

“I am starting with only things I intend to bring,” she told them.

Nora glanced underneath the bench. “Promising.”

Wren set her broom safely beside the others. Piper could hear the rink beyond the door. Soon Maisie would lead, Nora would play second, Piper would take her third and vice jobs, and Wren would skip.

They were the four girls who had chosen this next step together. The stronger weekend was on the calendar. The work before it was about to begin.

Piper still hoped that someday the calendar would hold an under-eighteen championship. There were other teams and harder seasons between here and that hope. Today she had a practice she had agreed to attend, with people she wanted beside her.

Jo called them over for the warm-up.

Piper closed the notebook and put it away.

This time all four of them went to the door together.

# 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/