PIPER'S CURLING ADVENTURES

Piper and the Time to Choose

BOOK TWENTY SIX



Mary Deuhs

An illustrated chapter book

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CHAPTER 1

One More Possibility



Piper had a very good reason for moving the little red stone.

Wren had an equally good reason for moving it back.

The stone was made of plastic, and the house was drawn on paper, so neither reason required a broom. Even so, Maisie had been waiting with hers for some time.

“Have we finished the game on the table?” she asked. “There is some ice through that door.”

They were at the beginning of their sixth season. The first ordinary practice had brought the familiar jobs back: Maisie leading, Nora playing second, Piper third

and vice, Wren skipping. Now, a few practices later, Jo had given them a position to discuss before their team work.

Piper could see a draw. Wren could see a hit. Piper could see what might happen after the hit, and Wren could see what might happen after that.

The little red had traveled farther than some of their real stones.

“We're nearly ready,” Piper said.

Nora sat down again.

Piper looked up. “We really are.”

“What are we trying to leave?” Nora asked.

Wren pointed to an open patch. “A red here, with their yellow gone.”

“Then I like the hit,” Nora said. “We can try it.”

Piper put the little red down. She had liked the hit too, until she thought of something else.

At the sheet, Jo checked their equipment and helmets. They warmed up before trying the set position. The stones would be reset after each attempt; this was practice, with no end score.

Maisie removed the yellow. Her red rolled away as well.

They looked at the result, then helped Jo set the stones back safely.

That one attempt had taken much less time than deciding to make it.

Afterward, Jo asked about the table.

“We found lots of things,” Piper said.

“You did. Which things helped you choose?”

Piper thought about that. Some had helped. Others had merely been possible.

Wren rubbed a mark on the paper. “I wanted to be sure.”

“So did I,” Piper said quickly.

Jo nodded. “At the weekend, you will need to make decisions while a game keeps moving. You can prepare some of your thinking before it becomes your turn.”

Piper knew about short talks. She had practiced them with Tess. When she had called practice ends from third, she had learned how easily too many words could get in the way.

This felt different. Wren was listening. Piper was listening. They were agreeing very politely to keep talking.

The stronger junior weekend was getting closer. There would be four teams and three eight-end games for each: two on Saturday, one on Sunday, with no final. They had played a two-day round robin before, on much shorter ice with shorter games. This time the amount of full-length curling would be new work for their team.

They had chosen the preparation together. Two longer Saturdays, ordinary practices between them, and no extra Wednesday quietly added to the plan.

“I don't want to choose badly just to be quick,” Wren said.

“Neither do I,” Jo replied. “Let's find out where your time is going.”

Piper looked at the little red stone still sitting on the paper.

She could think of one more possibility.

For once, she left it where it was.

CHAPTER 2

Before Their Turn

On the first longer Saturday, Piper's lunch bag was almost as large as her curling bag.

Ben looked at the two together.

“Are you planning to feed the other teams?”

“There aren't other teams today.”

“Then this is an ambitious lunch.”

Piper removed the extra apple her brother had added. He said it had looked lonely in the bowl. She left it with him so he could keep it company.

Jo had arranged a longer morning in short blocks, with proper breaks. She checked how everyone felt as the work increased. There were ordinary deliveries and sweeping, then a return to the ice after they had sat down, eaten and rested. Nobody had to hide pain or unusual tiredness to complete the plan.

The girls had agreed when to talk about curling during the break. Piper used her part of the short discussion, then closed her notebook while Maisie described a dream involving a very small horse.

“It could climb stairs,” Maisie said.

“Could it come down?” Nora asked.

“That was the problem.”

Piper was still imagining the horse when they went back out.

For the next exercise, Jo set two reds and a yellow in the house. Wren called, Piper covered the house when Wren delivered, and Maisie and Nora swept. Jo and another adult managed the opposing practice stones and

the resets. They were trying short sequences, not keeping a game score.

Before the adult sent the next yellow, Wren looked at Piper.

“If yellow stays open, the hit is there.”

“If it goes behind ours, we'd need another way,” Piper said.

They stood out of the delivery player's view and watched quietly. The yellow stopped open, near the front of the house.

“The hit,” Wren said.

Piper checked the path and held the target. Wren's red struck the yellow and stayed almost where it had been.

They had made a choice before Piper had time to invent six more.

Nora came down with Maisie after the stone stopped. They had understood the call from the start and could concentrate on its weight.

“I like knowing which shot we're playing,” Maisie said. “From where I am, two people pointing at different things can look like a very quiet argument.”

“We weren't arguing,” Piper said.

“I couldn't tell that either.”

Piper looked back along the sheet. It was a long way for a question to travel.

Jo reset the position. This time the adult's yellow reached a different place, partly covered by a red.

“Same hit?” Piper asked.

Wren shook her head. “It isn't the same house.”

They checked from the delivery end's line of sight. An open draw on the other side offered a useful finish.

Wren chose that instead. Her red was too deep, but the route had been there.

Jo asked what had changed between attempts.

“The yellow,” Maisie said.

“And our plan,” Wren added.

Piper looked at the partly hidden stone. Thinking early had felt wonderfully efficient. She had nearly let the early thought become an instruction that could not change.

They tried more sequences. Sometimes Wren's first idea survived. Sometimes Piper noticed a new obstruction. Once Nora's weight report from the previous attempt changed the draw Wren wanted.

None of it required discussing every possible end of the world.

Near the end of the morning, Piper found herself watching an opposing practice stone and thinking about two useful replies. She waited until it stopped. Then she looked again.

Wren chose one.

There was still time for Piper to prepare her own delivery properly.

At home, Ben asked how the longer morning had gone.

“My legs are tired,” Piper said. “And I didn't explain every shot at lunch.”

“An excellent use of a horse.”

Piper told him about the stairs.

The horse had not come down yet. Some decisions could wait for next Saturday.

CHAPTER 3

Early Does Not Mean Hurry

The second longer Saturday began earlier, exactly as the families had agreed.

Piper did not admire that part of the agreement when Ben woke her.

At the club, Nora was already there, holding a bottle against her jacket. The earlier start meant she could stay for the whole session before her family's afternoon plans.

Maisie yawned so widely that Piper yawned back.

“Don't pass it round,” Wren said. Then she did it too.

They warmed up carefully. Jo checked that everyone was ready, and the morning built on the first longer session. The work and the rests both belonged in it.

Piper wanted to show that their choosing had improved. In a set-position exercise, she saw an open yellow and offered the hit immediately.

Wren agreed.

Nora had begun to speak, but Piper was already moving to her delivery end. Jo stopped the exercise before she settled into the hack.

“Nora had information,” Jo said.

Piper turned.

Nora had noticed something about the previous red on that path. It had run straighter than the others. She was not certain why, but she wanted Wren to know before choosing the target.

They checked the position and discussed what they had actually seen. Wren still wanted the hit. She adjusted her target after listening.

Piper's stone caught the yellow thinly. Both went out.

The extra information had not promised a perfect shot. Piper had needed to hear it anyway.

At the next break she put her notebook beside Wren's.

“I thought we were meant to stop talking so much.”

“We are,” Wren said. “But Nora hadn't started.”

Piper looked at the bent corner of her page.

That was an inconveniently clear difference.

They asked Jo how to tell when another question was useful.

“Is something unclear? Has someone seen something new?” she asked. “Or are you going round the same choices again because you wish one came with a guarantee?”

Piper and Wren looked at each other.

Maisie raised her sandwich. “The second one does happen.”

They made a plan for their ordinary practices before the event. Watch while the other side played. Consider a likely reply without distracting the player. Check the actual result. Share the information that mattered, choose, then give the delivering player time to get ready.

No one was going to shout a countdown at Maisie.

“I'd dislike that,” Maisie said.

Piper would have disliked it too.

The rest of the session was uneven. One discussion was quick and useful. Another grew long because the girls really could not see whether a path was open. They went to look. Jo said that was a sensible reason to take care.

By the time they packed, both longer Saturdays were complete. Jo was satisfied with how they had managed the gradual extra work, and the families checked the event arrangements again. There would be supervision, breaks and help if anyone needed it.

Their next practices were ordinary ones. Piper's draws still wandered. Maisie asked for time on her corner guards. Wren missed a hit she had chosen without any delay at all.

The weekend was close enough now for Piper to put the schedule in her bag.

She checked it once.

Then she checked that she had packed both gloves.

That second check turned out to be necessary.

CHAPTER 4

The List Becomes People

The Swifts were eating toast when Piper first saw them.

She had imagined stronger opponents looking fierce, or studying complicated diagrams. One Swift was trying to catch a crumb before it reached the floor.

It reached the floor.

“Oh,” she said.

Piper felt immediately better about the entire building.

The four Too-Cold girls had traveled with their families. Jo met them in the warm room and showed them where to leave their bags. They had stayed away for curling before; Piper knew a night away included ordinary things like finding her toothbrush and remembering which room was Ben's.

On the ice, there were still new things to learn.

Nora stood beside Piper at the window while their parents spoke to the host. On the far sheet, two players were practicing open hits. One yellow left the house with a sharp clack. The next red missed its target completely.

“I liked the first one,” Piper said.

“I noticed the second one,” Nora answered.

Piper looked at her. Nora was smiling, but she was twisting the loose end of her bag strap.

“Are you nervous?” Piper asked.

“A bit.”

“Me too.”

They watched another delivery without deciding what it proved about anybody.

Behind them, Maisie had found four chairs together. Wren put the team folder on the table, and Piper went to join her. There was room for their nerves beside the lunch bags.

The host explained this weekend's arrangements before play. Eight-end round-robin games, with a seated break after four. Ties would stand. Each team would play all three scheduled opponents, whatever the earlier results. There was no final to qualify for. The coaches would help with rules and safety, and each team could request one brief coaching pause during a game, as the clubs had agreed.

There was no separate thinking-time clock for each team. They were expected to be ready for their turns and keep the games moving. Anyone who needed help or rest should ask.

Piper liked having the arrangements said aloud. She had been carrying them around as a folded piece of paper.

Now the Swifts' skip, Liv, was shaking Wren's hand.

“Good curling.”

“Good curling,” Wren answered.

The Too-Cold Club won the toss and chose last stone in the first end. The Swifts chose yellow. Piper's team would use red. Maisie, Nora, Piper, Wren: their ordinary delivery order, two stones each.

They checked their helmets, equipment and footing, then used the permitted warm-up to watch today's ice. Piper resisted explaining a path after seeing only one stone use it.

When the game began, Maisie made an early guard. Her second red reached the front rings. Nora and Piper

helped the end develop, with good shots and misses on both sides.

By the skips' turns, Maisie's red was still useful. Liv's first yellow came into the house but stayed farther out. Wren drew another red inside it. Liv's last yellow failed to remove that new red, and Wren's final attempt added nothing.

Piper and the Swifts' vice agreed on two reds: Maisie's and Wren's.

Two to nothing was a pleasant beginning.

The Swifts answered with one in the second. Red scored one in the third. In the fourth, yellow had last stone again.

Piper and Wren had been considering a hit if the next yellow stopped open. It did. Piper checked the finish Wren wanted and delivered without reopening every other choice.

She removed the target. Her shooter rolled farther than intended and stayed at the back.

The Swifts still had replies. Liv eventually drew their nearest stone, and their last attempt did not add another.

Three to two for the Too-Cold Club at the break.

Piper was pleased with the score. She was pleased about choosing, too.

Then Wren asked whether Piper had heard Nora's report before her second shot in the third.

“Most of it,” Piper said.

Wren raised her eyebrows.

Piper sat down properly. The morning still had things in it to discuss.

CHAPTER 5

A Win with Work Inside

Nora had said the stone was slowing earlier than she expected.

Piper remembered the beginning of the report. She had been thinking about the next yellow before Nora finished.

“I was trying to be ahead,” Piper said.

“You were ahead of my sentence,” Nora replied.

Maisie laughed into her cup. Piper laughed too, after a moment.

They used their agreed short talk. Wren wanted Piper to keep watching the whole delivery, including the sweepers' updates. They could think about replies without leaving the current stone behind.

Then the notebooks closed. Maisie had found the small horse an answer: a very long ramp. Nora wanted to know where it would fit.

Piper ate her sandwich while they designed an increasingly unreasonable house.

In the fifth end, red had last stone. Nora's second red reached the rings and stayed through the next few exchanges. Piper's first hit removed an open yellow and rolled out. Her second draw finished short of the house.

She did not enjoy that part.

Wren still had her deliveries. Liv's first yellow failed to beat Nora's red. Wren drew another inside the nearest yellow. Liv's final hit caught that new red thinly, moving it but leaving it closer than yellow. Wren's last draw finished too wide to add a third.

Two red. Five to two.

Nora smiled when Piper confirmed the count. The report Piper had nearly missed belonged to someone who could also leave a very good stone.

Yellow scored one in the sixth, and red took one in the seventh. The score was six to three as they began the eighth.

Piper did not count it as a win yet.

The Swifts tried to build a chance for three. Maisie and Nora worked on the early calls; later, Piper made one useful hit and missed another. Wren kept asking what would remain after a shot, without asking the same question three different ways.

Late in the end, two yellows counted. The rest of the yellow stones already delivered had been removed. With her last red, Wren took out one of the counting yellows. Her shooter stayed farther from the middle than the yellow that remained.

Liv had one yellow left to deliver. Even if it scored, two yellow points would not close the three-point gap. There was no need to play it.

The teams agreed one yellow for the end. The final score was six to four for the Too-Cold Club.

Piper felt her smile arrive before she could arrange it. They shook hands and thanked the Swifts. Liv asked whether they were playing the Junipers next.

“Yes,” Wren said.

“They make good guards.”

Piper almost asked for a complete description. Jo was waiting by the door, and her team had bags to collect before lunch.

“We'll watch,” she said.

At their table, Wren wrote the result on the team sheet. Maisie leaned over her shoulder.

“Please make the six clear. Your sixes sometimes look uncertain.”

“This one is certain,” Wren said.

Piper liked seeing it written down. They had come for stronger games and won one through work spread across the team.

There were things to repair. There was a lunch break to use. There were two more games, neither of which had happened yet.

She put her broom safely away and went to find her food.

CHAPTER 6

The Junipers Keep Answering

The Junipers' guards were good.

Their draws were good too. Piper thought Liv could reasonably have mentioned that.

The Too-Cold Club had won the afternoon toss and chosen first-end last stone. The Junipers chose yellow, leaving red for Piper's team again. Their skip was Anouk, who checked the house carefully and then went to deliver as if she had somewhere definite to be.

The first end took Piper's cheerful morning feeling apart.

Yellow stones kept arriving in useful places. Piper and Wren discussed a difficult way around a guard, then an open hit, then the first idea again. Maisie and Nora waited at the other end.

By the time Piper settled for her second delivery, she was thinking about the shot they had rejected as well as the one she was supposed to play.

Her red stopped short.

The Junipers stole two. Red had last stone again in the second and managed one. Yellow scored two in the third.

One to four.

Piper disliked how quickly the numbers had become large.

In the fourth, she described two possible replies while the Junipers prepared their next yellow. She kept her

voice low and stood clear of the delivering player's view. Wren watched with her.

The yellow stopped in a place neither had expected.

Piper's mouth was already beginning the word hit.

She stopped. The route they had considered was covered now.

Wren chose an open draw instead. Piper's stone reached the house but stayed too wide. Later Wren made a nearer red, and Anouk's replies kept the result to one red point.

Two to four at the halfway break.

Choosing at a sensible pace had not made the Junipers disappear.

“They're very good,” Piper said when everyone had sat down.

“They are,” Jo agreed.

Wren asked for one piece of advice about dealing with the guards. Jo helped them look at the choices they had actually been offered, rather than planning an imaginary house with no yellow stones in it.

The girls chose a clear early plan for the next end. Then they ate, drank and rested. Piper's legs had done a morning's work before this game began; she told Jo how they felt. Jo checked in with all four before they returned.

Yellow had last stone in the fifth and scored one. In the sixth, red scored one. Three to five.

The seventh began with the Junipers holding last stone. Maisie's first red went deeper than Wren wanted. Her second was a useful guard. Nora gave an early weight report, then revised it as the stone slowed.

Piper heard both parts.

She made an open hit with her first red. Her second draw was nearly where Wren wanted, but yellow still had stones to play. Anouk's team answered well and finished with two yellow points.

Three to seven.

They began the eighth. Piper wanted to do her remaining work properly, and so did the others. Eventually red could no longer catch yellow. Both teams still had stones left, so the unfinished end was marked with Xs and no points were added.

The Junipers had won seven to three.

Piper shook Anouk's hand. She meant the good game she said, although she wished a little less of it had been good for yellow.

After changing, the four girls sat together. No one began a full explanation of every miss.

Maisie took off one shoe and inspected her sock.

“It has turned round.”

“During which end?” Nora asked.

“I don't keep that sort of record.”

Piper laughed. Her team had lost. Her friend had a troublesome sock. Both things could be true in the same chair.

CHAPTER 7

Two Lines at Supper



At supper, Piper asked before opening the notebook.

“Could we talk for a few minutes?”

Wren looked at the others. They had eaten most of their food and rested after the afternoon game. Nora nodded. Maisie was folding a paper napkin into a shape that might become a boat.

“Until this is seaworthy,” she said.

Piper turned to the page where she had written the two results.

Six to four. Three to seven.

She had circled a missed draw, then disliked the circle. It looked as though that one stone explained the afternoon.

“I thought being ready would feel different,” she said.

“You were ready to play,” Nora answered. “They played well too.”

“I mean choosing. Sometimes we did it properly, and the shot still didn't work.”

Wren nodded. “That happened this morning as well.”

Piper knew it had. Winning had made those parts easier to leave alone.

Jo was at the next table, speaking with the parents. The girls could ask her for help, but Wren wanted to understand what the four of them had noticed first.

Piper tapped the circled draw.

“I was still thinking about the other shot when I delivered.”

“The one we'd decided against?” Wren asked.

“Yes.”

Wren looked at her own hands for a moment.

“I kept asking again because I thought if we agreed twice, I'd feel certain.”

“Did you?” Nora said.

“No.”

Piper had thought Wren wanted her to keep finding another answer. Sometimes Wren did. Sometimes she wanted to know whether Piper had understood the answer already chosen.

“Could you say which you mean?” Piper asked.

Wren considered it. “I could ask for another idea. Or I could tell you I'm choosing the hit.”

“Even if I liked the draw?”

“If I've heard why you like it.”

Piper nodded slowly. She remembered having the calling job herself. Somebody had to choose a stone the team could actually send. She had wanted help then, but she had not wanted to stay in the house forever.

Maisie's boat collapsed on one side.

“Mine has made a decision,” she said. “It will be a hat.”

Piper smiled, then drew two short lines beneath the results.

They had learned to give each person room in a talk. They had learned to watch for replies. They still needed a clear moment when the talk finished and the player could prepare to deliver.

“What if I ask whether you've seen something new?” Wren said. “If you have, tell me. If you haven't, we don't need to choose the same shot again.”

“And I can still say I don't understand the finish?” Piper asked.

“Please do.”

Nora wanted their early observations to reach Wren before the last two stones, especially when a path was behaving differently. Maisie wanted the target and finish said clearly when her turn came, instead of receiving the ending of a conversation from the far house.

Piper wrote those things down without making them into a very long speech.

Then she let Wren read the page.

“After you've chosen,” Piper said, “I'll help you play that shot.”

“Unless something new really changes it.”

“Yes. Unless that.”

Jo came over when they asked. She listened to their plan and asked each girl what it would sound like on the ice. Maisie gave an example so clear that Piper could imagine holding the broom for it.

They were not promising to become a perfectly efficient team by breakfast.

They had something small and useful to try.

The napkin hat was finished. Maisie put it beside her plate, where it slowly became a boat again.

Piper closed the notebook. The next part of the evening belonged to their families and the ordinary work of getting ready for bed.

In Ben's room, she found her toothbrush exactly where she had packed it.

She was pleased with that decision too.

CHAPTER 8

Something New



On Sunday, Piper knew where the toast was.

She knew where the changing bench was, and which pocket held the schedule. She still did not know what the Curlews would do.

Their skip, Orla, greeted Wren while Piper met their vice, Della, who played third. The Curlews had their own morning voices and their own work to try. One player had tied a bright ribbon around her bag handle so it would be easier to find among the others.

Maisie admired the idea.

“My bag mostly identifies itself by being open,” she said.

Jo checked the four girls after breakfast and again before their warm-up. The Saturday games had been tiring, but they had rested, slept and were ready for the agreed Sunday game. If that changed, they would say so.

The Too-Cold Club won the toss and chose last stone. The Curlews chose yellow. Red for the third game too.

Same order. Same four girls. A new house after every delivery.

In the first end, Piper watched the whole of Nora's second stone. She listened to the weight report and the update. When she reached Wren, she passed on the useful part.

They discussed a likely reply while yellow played. The result left the draw they had considered available. Wren chose it. Piper checked the finish, then went to prepare her delivery.

She did not carry the rejected hit into the hack with her.

Her draw was a little deep. Red still managed one from the end, after both skips had their say.

The Curlews took two in the second.

Piper felt the familiar wish to repair the whole score at once. She looked at Maisie, who was preparing for the third end's first red after the Curlews opened.

Maisie needed a useful call now, not a speech about Sunday.

Her guard stopped where Wren wanted. Her second red came around it and reached the front of the house. Nora helped keep the end open for their later shots. Piper's first hit removed an exposed yellow and rolled away; her second draw reached the rings but stayed farther out than Maisie's red.

Orla's first yellow did not remove Maisie's stone. Wren drew another red nearer than yellow's closest. Orla tried a hit with her last stone, but the contact sent her shooter away and left the new red in the house. Wren's final attempt did not add another.

Two red. Three to two for the Too-Cold Club.

In the fourth, yellow had last stone. During the later deliveries, Piper and Wren considered a draw if the next yellow left the route clear.

Della's second yellow changed that. It stopped in the route, open to a hit.

“Something new,” Piper said quietly, once it had stopped.

Wren came to look. A red already lay farther back. Removing the new yellow and keeping the shooter could leave red counting, although Orla would still have a reply.

Wren chose the hit for her first stone. Piper held the target. The yellow went out, and Wren's red stayed.

Orla's draw finished too wide. Wren's last red did not add a point. Orla tried again with her final yellow, but it stopped outside the nearest red.

One stolen red. Four to two at the break.

Piper had changed the plan for a reason she could point to.

Wren had listened, chosen and played.

Piper liked the score. She liked knowing what the two of them had done with the time before it.

CHAPTER 9

A Stone They Could Play

At the break, Maisie asked a question about her guard in the third.

Piper began answering, then noticed Wren leaning forward.

Wren had seen it from the house. Piper let her speak first.

They finished their short talk while everyone still had time to eat and sit quietly. On the neighboring table, the ribbon from the Curlew's bag had become tangled round a chair leg. Its owner untied it patiently.

Piper wondered what their team had chosen to work on. She would find out some of it on the ice.

Yellow scored one in the fifth. Four to three.

In the sixth, red had last stone. The Curlews made good early shots, and one yellow remained near the middle as Piper's turns approached. There was another yellow farther out and a red in the back rings.

Piper could see a difficult double. She could also see an open hit on the nearer yellow.

She described both, including where the remaining yellow would be if they removed only one.

Wren chose the open hit.

Piper began, “But if we—”

Wren waited.

Piper looked at the stones. Nothing had moved. Nobody had supplied a different observation. She had already explained the other shot, and Wren had heard her.

“I haven't seen anything new,” she said.

“All right,” Wren answered. “Let's make this one.”

Piper checked the finish, covered her slider and walked down the safe side to her delivery end. She took her usual moment to settle. Choosing without another conference had left room for that moment.

The red hit the nearer yellow and stayed. The target went out.

Della's second yellow then drew nearer the middle than Piper's red. Piper's second draw was short. Wren's first red then reached nearer the middle than yellow. Orla tried to remove it with her last delivery, but caught it thinly. It moved sideways and stayed in the house, still ahead of the nearest yellow.

Wren had last stone. There was room for another red inside yellow's nearest.

Piper checked the route with her. Nora and Maisie were ready to give their weight reports. Wren drew into the open space, and both reds counted.

Six to three.

It had taken more than Piper's hit. It had taken replies, another miss, Wren's two deliveries and the sweepers watching both. Piper could enjoy her part without borrowing the others.

The seventh end gave yellow last stone. Red made one point when the Curlews could not beat their nearest stone. Seven to three.

The girls checked the score together before beginning the eighth. Wren asked them to keep doing the work in front of them. Maisie gave them a useful early red. Nora called the weight, and Piper stayed beside her until the stone stopped.

The Curlews tried to build enough yellow stones for a chance to tie. Red's later replies reduced that chance. Eventually it was beyond reach while both teams still had stones to deliver.

Piper and Della checked together. The unfinished eighth was marked with Xs, with no points added.

Seven to three for the Too-Cold Club.

Piper stood still for a moment, taking in the whole sheet. Maisie was turning toward Nora. Wren was smiling. Orla was coming forward for the handshake.

“Good curling,” Piper said.

“Good curling,” Della answered.

They had played all three games. Two wins and one loss. The weekend had a whole set of results now.

Piper went to find the other three girls before doing anything else.

CHAPTER 10

The Road Home

The schedule looked different when there was nothing left to wait for.

The same three games were printed on it. Piper had checked their times so often that she knew where the fold crossed Saturday afternoon. Now Wren had written the results beside them, with especially clear sixes.

There was no fourth game hidden underneath.

Maisie checked anyway.

“No final,” Nora reminded her.

“I was looking for lunch.”

The teams ate before leaving. Piper thanked Della for the game. Maisie asked the girl with the ribbon whether it really helped her find the bag, despite the chair.

“Usually,” the girl said.

Maisie thought that was a fair recommendation.

The Junipers had won all three of their games. Piper congratulated Anouk when their paths crossed. She was pleased with her own team's two wins, and she did not need the Junipers to be less pleased with theirs.

Soon there were bags in doorways and parents checking for missing bottles. Jo gathered the four girls for a last check before they left.

“What do you want to keep working on?” she asked.

Piper had several answers. She selected one before speaking.

“Knowing when the choice is made. So I can help with the shot we've actually called.”

Wren wanted to keep listening for new information without asking for the same reassurance again. Nora wanted her early reports to travel all the way to the house. Maisie wanted more of her first stones to stay useful.

Jo listened to each of them. At home, ordinary practice would give them room to continue. They did not need to arrange another trip in the doorway.

Piper tucked the schedule into the green notebook. It would join the Owls' score and the preparation questions. The two longer Saturdays were done. So were the three games they had agreed to enter.

In the car, Ben asked whether they wanted to talk about the weekend.

“A little,” Wren said.

Piper told him about the sixth end on Sunday, including the double she had decided to stop explaining. Nora supplied the part about Wren's last draw. Maisie mentioned the red that had stayed in the third.

Then the conversation ran out for a while.

Nobody repaired the silence.

Piper watched the road signs go past. She still wanted harder curling someday. She still liked imagining an under-eighteen championship. This weekend had not put that faraway game into her bag. It had given her three real games and some clearer work to do.

After a while, Maisie asked whether the small horse could live downstairs instead.

Nora turned slowly toward her.

“We built an entire ramp.”

“The horse didn't ask us to.”

Wren laughed so hard that Piper began laughing before she had decided whether it was really that funny.

At the next home practice, other juniors were already at the bench. A new girl was looking for a place to put her bag. Maisie pointed out the low hooks, then made room for her to reach them.

Piper liked the familiar noise. Some of these players wanted away games. Some were happy about the club games ahead. They all had reasons to come through the door.

Jo called the Too-Cold Club over. Wren had a question about the first exercise. Piper listened, looked at the stones and offered what she had seen.

There were two sensible choices.

They chose one.

Then they went to play.

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/