PIPER'S CURLING ADVENTURES

Piper and the Wider Circle

BOOK TWENTY THREE



Mary Deuhs

An illustrated chapter book

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CHAPTER 1

A Place to Apply



Piper had not expected a question about Thursday.

She had expected Jo to ask about the double takeout. They had looked at it twice since the Kestrels game, with two stopped yellows and plenty of time to move around them. Wren had made one beautifully. On another try, the second yellow had stayed.

Piper could still picture the one that had stayed in their eight-end game. They had lost six to five. She would have preferred to remember a different score.

Now Jo was holding a letter.

“Thursday evening,” she said. “There’s a short meeting for families who want to hear about the development mornings.”

“What do they develop?” Maisie asked.

“Junior curlers.”

“Good. I’ve already developed a hole in my glove.”

She showed them. Nora inspected the small loose seam at the thumb.

“That may develop further.”

Jo waited until Maisie had stopped trying to poke her thumb through it. Then she laid the letter on the warm-room table.

Three nearby clubs were arranging a new training group. Experienced girls from the clubs could apply for eight places. The group would meet for four longer mornings, spread over the rest of the season. There would be coaches, planned breaks and work in different playing positions.

Two assessment mornings came first. They were four weeks apart, giving everyone time to work on the feedback from the first.

Piper leaned closer.

She liked the word experienced. She liked eight places rather less. It meant there might be a place with her name on it, and there might not.

“Is this the visit we talked about after the Owls game?” Wren asked.

“A separate opportunity,” Jo said. “The clubs are still sorting the date for that visit. These mornings would be a regular group working together for a short block.”

Piper remembered Lila wanting another game. She wanted that too. She had thought getting stronger would

mean finding more opponents. This letter seemed to have found more people she might practice beside.

"Is it a new team?" Wren asked.

"A training group," Jo said. "You keep your own teams. Some of the girls will already have played stronger events. You'll all work together."

The Too-Cold Club had reached the fifth season with the same four girls. Maisie led, Nora played second, Piper was third and vice, and Wren skipped. Piper liked how familiar their jobs felt. Lately she had also started noticing how much the stronger visiting teams could do.

"Could we apply?" she asked.

"Yes. You've all been managing full-length play safely. We'd talk about what each of you wants and check the dates with your families."

"Do we have to come together?" Nora asked.

"No."

Piper looked at her. Nora was reading the letter carefully, her glasses low on her nose.

"I mean," Nora said, "is it four names, or one name at a time?"

"One at a time."

That made the eight places feel different again.

Jo gave each girl a copy. Applying was a choice, and an application did not promise a place. The coaches would explain what they were looking for before anyone decided.

Piper folded her letter once. Maisie folded hers several times and immediately had to open it again to find Thursday.

Ben was helping put chairs away. Piper carried her copy over to him.

“I want to hear about this.”

He read it, then checked the evening on his phone.

“We can go.”

Piper felt the quick pleasure of something beginning.

Then Ben read the line about the two assessment mornings.

“Still want to hear about it?”

“Yes.” She paused. “I might want them to hear about my hits.”

“They probably will.”

She imagined a yellow leaving the house and her own red staying exactly where it should. That seemed like a useful introduction.

Behind her, Maisie was asking Wren whether a letter could have too many folds.

Wren said it could if Thursday disappeared.

Piper unfolded her own copy. She read the dates properly this time.

CHAPTER 2

The Whole List

The meeting room had chairs for children at the front and chairs for adults behind them.

Piper sat beside Wren. Maisie arrived with her letter flattened under a book. Nora came too, although she had already told Piper she was only listening tonight.

At the front stood Tess.

Piper recognized the short dark curls and the pale jacket. Tess had coached them in Sunday clinics when they were younger. She had waited while Piper worked out how to explain the red she wanted to keep after a hit.

Piper was glad to see her. Then Tess put a clipboard on the table, and Piper was slightly less glad.

“Do you think she remembers my roll?” she whispered.

“Probably,” Wren said. “You explained it several times.”

Tess welcomed the families with another coach. They had room and coaching cover for eight girls in this particular block. More than twelve had asked to hear more.

The assessment mornings would include delivery, sweeping and decisions in small supervised groups. Each girl would get the same types of tasks, time to warm up and a proper break. On the second morning they would revisit the work, then try set positions together.

Nobody would be chosen from one spectacular stone. Both coaches would compare their observations from

both mornings. They would look at safe habits, control with both turns, useful information to teammates and how a player used feedback.

Piper listened for the bit about hits.

It came. Draws and guards came too.

“Will there be a winner?” a girl in the next row asked.

“No,” Tess said. “This isn't a competition between score sheets. We need a group ready for the work we've planned. You’ll each hear what we’ve seen and what to work on, whether you’re offered a place or not.”

There were dates to check, and travel to arrange, and a question from an adult about missed mornings. The coaches answered those before handing out the application pages.

“Can we ask questions during the tasks?” Piper asked.

“Please do,” Tess said. “If you aren't sure what the task means, we'll explain it. Asking for a drink or telling us something hurts won't count against you either.”

Piper had not meant that sort of question, but she was glad someone had said it aloud. She would have preferred to arrive knowing everything and needing nothing. That sounded less possible when she thought about an entire morning.

Piper wrote her name carefully.

Under her usual position, she wrote Third and vice.

Under what she wanted to learn, she started with Harder shots.

She looked at it.

Wren was still writing. Maisie had rested her pencil across the paper. Nora was turning her page over to read the back.

Piper added Better choices in stronger games.

That was closer.

On the way out, Nora said she was not applying this time.

Piper stopped beside the door.

“Because of the dates?”

“Partly. I like our regular curling. I want to keep some weekends for other things too.”

“But you could do it.”

“I know I could apply.”

Nora's voice was calm. Piper remembered the kite afternoon years ago, when she and Maisie had chosen something different from Nora and Wren. She had been very certain then that she ought to be allowed to want two things.

“All right,” she said.

“I still want to hear what you do,” Nora added.

Maisie wanted to try the first assessment morning. Wren wanted to apply for the block. Piper did too.

Their families checked the dates. Ben read Piper's page with her before confirming her application. The regular team games stayed on their calendar.

At home, Piper put the whole task list beside her bed.

She underlined hits.

Then she saw guards above it and felt faintly annoyed at a perfectly ordinary word.

CHAPTER 3

Before the Exciting Part

On the first assessment morning, Piper knew five girls and did not know six.

That used up all the other eleven.

There were two groups arriving at different times, so the coaches could watch everyone properly. Piper, Wren and Maisie were in the early group with five girls from the other clubs. The later girls were due after their group had finished.

The host club had familiar things in unfamiliar places. Its broom rack was beside the window. Its changing bench went around a corner. Piper put her bag beneath a hook and then discovered that the hook was far too high to be useful to her.

Maisie looked up.

“That one's for someone arriving on a ladder.”

They found lower hooks.

Tess checked their gear and asked how everyone felt before the warm-up. Piper fastened her helmet, checked her grippers and followed the group to the full-length sheets.

Her first station was delivery. Wren went to the decision station. Maisie began with sweeping. Each station had a qualified coach or trained club helper in charge. The assessing coaches would move between groups while the helpers stayed. The girls would change stations after a rest and a check-in.

A girl called Fern waited beside Piper.

“I usually play second,” Fern said.

“Third and vice.”

Piper heard how quickly she had answered. Fern only nodded.

Tess showed them the delivery tasks. Guards in a broad space beyond the far hog line but short of the house. Draws into a broad part of the front rings. Open hits, with the shooter to stay. Both turns, a few attempts at each, with the lane cleared and reset between them.

No one would sweep during this part. Tess wanted to watch the delivery and finish without that help. The other coach observed from the side, and the waiting players kept clear.

Piper looked toward the stones set aside for the hits.

“We start with the guards,” Tess said.

Of course they did.

Piper's first guard traveled pleasantly along the line. For a moment she thought it might stop in the chosen space.

It went into the house.

Her next stopped in the guard area, farther to one side than the space Tess had shown. On the other turn, one went short of the far hog line and was removed after it stopped. The next reached the intended area.

One finish she liked out of four.

Fern watched without making a face about it. Piper wished she would say something comforting. Piper also wished very strongly that she would not.

The draws were mixed. Piper got one into the front rings, sent another deep, and left two outside the chosen area. She knew she could make these shots. Knowing did not put them where they belonged today.

Then came the hits.

Her first removed the yellow and stayed. So did the second. On the other turn, she missed one and made the last.

Three good hits. Piper felt herself getting taller inside her jacket.

Tess wrote something down.

Piper wanted to see which bit.

When the station was over, Tess asked what she had noticed.

“My hits were better.”

“Yes. What about the guards?”

Piper looked at the place where her first red had entered the rings.

“I was waiting to get to the other part.”

Tess nodded once, as if that was something worth writing down too.

CHAPTER 4

What the Coach Saw

At the sweeping station, Piper worked beside Fern.

She had played with another team before. She remembered standing with Kit when she had filled in for the Silver Mittens, remembering which color belonged to her that day. New company did not make her forget how to curl.

It did make her want to look as if she knew everything before anyone asked.

A player sent a draw toward the front rings. Piper thought it was running deep. Fern said, “Back half.”

Piper agreed, but she said it so quietly that the girl holding the broom did not hear.

The stone went past the intended finish.

When the lane was still, Tess asked what they had seen.

“Too much,” Piper said.

“When did you think that?”

“Quite early.”

“Then the player at the house could have used it quite early.”

Piper looked toward Fern, who was resting her brush on the ice.

“I thought you had already said it.”

“I did,” Fern said. “I didn't know if you agreed.”

On the next draw, Piper spoke clearly. Fern gave her own view, and the caller heard both. They swept when asked, stopped together and watched the stone finish in the front rings.

It was somebody else's good shot. Piper had helped with it.

After the seated break, her decision work went better. She liked looking at the set stones, naming the result she wanted and checking what could happen next. Tess asked about a hit that might leave a shooter in the way. Piper spotted the problem after looking from the other end.

At the final conversation, Ben sat with her at the side of the warm room. Tess had a separate sheet for each player.

“Your open hits were controlled,” she told Piper. “You described your choices clearly. Your shorter finishes were less steady, particularly with the other turn. And your sweeping partner needed to hear you sooner.”

Piper wanted the first two sentences to be the entire conversation.

They were not.

Tess showed her the actual attempts. Piper could see the guard that had gone into the house and the one that had stopped too short. Nobody had marked them wrong merely because a coach disliked them.

“Can I still get a place?”

“Yes. We haven't chosen the group. These are the things to work on before the second morning. We’ll watch all of it again.”

“Do I need four perfect guards?”

“No. We need to see steadier control and useful habits across the work. There isn't one stone that buys a place.”

Piper looked down at her hands.

She wanted a number. Four perfect guards would have been an awful number, but at least she could count it.

“I do more calling now,” Piper said. “I've skipped before too.”

“I know. That's useful experience. You can bring it with you while you work in the other positions.”

Tess turned the sheet so Piper could see the whole thing at once.

Piper had put third and vice on her application as if the words might explain her all by themselves. Maisie could have written lead, but that would not have told anyone how carefully she noticed a draw beginning to run too deep.

Tess made a small plan with her. Short blocks of both-turn guards and draws during regular practice. Early weight reports when she swept. Jo would help fit the work around the whole team's needs.

Outside, Maisie was waiting beside Wren.

“How did yours go?” she asked.

Piper almost said Fine.

Then she unfolded the feedback sheet.

“I have to get better at the beginning.”

Maisie looked interested.

“That is where I spend a lot of my time.”

CHAPTER 5

Maisie Knows This Bit



The next Saturday, Jo gave everyone a small individual practice block.

It fitted inside their usual session. Wren still had her doubles to work on. Nora wanted the right-side draw she had chosen after the Kestrels game. Maisie wanted to come around her corner guard without leaving the draw exposed.

Piper wanted her four guards back.

She told Jo that, and Jo said they would use a sensible number of fresh attempts instead.

“You can't throw last Sunday's stones again.”

“I could complain about them again.”

“You could.”

Piper decided to put her helmet on.

Maisie came to the house with her before their block started. Both girls stood clear while Jo finished arranging the lane.

“This is the space,” Piper said, pointing to the guard area.

“I know.”

“I know you know.”

“Good. We've both arrived.”

Piper laughed. Then she looked at the broad patch again.

“When I'm third, there's usually something here already.”

Maisie rested her broom head lightly where Jo had shown the target.

“When I'm lead, there usually isn't.”

It was an obvious thing. Piper had watched Maisie begin hundreds of ends. She had helped sweep those beginnings and sometimes wished they had stopped somewhere else.

She had spent less time thinking about how the empty sheet looked from Maisie's hack.

“What do you look at?” she asked.

Maisie pointed out the broom and the finish they had agreed. She did not offer a secret wrist trick or a magic count. Mostly she described taking enough time to know which short shot she was trying to make.

“I still get it wrong,” she added.

“I've seen.”

“Thank you for your support.”

Piper nudged her sleeve gently with a glove. Then Jo called them to their places.

They began without sweeping, as Jo had arranged for this delivery check. Piper's first guard reached the chosen area. Her next went into the front rings. On the other turn, one finished too wide and one stopped in the intended space.

Two useful finishes. Two that needed more work.

Jo asked what had felt different between the long one and the first. Piper described the stronger push she thought she had made. Jo had seen it too. They kept the next adjustment small.

“Was my second one faster?” Piper asked Maisie.

“I thought so.”

“Even at the start?”

“I was watching from down here. Jo could see your start better.”

Piper looked toward Jo. She liked having a friend answer honestly about which part she knew. It was the sort of answer she needed to give Fern too.

Then Piper changed places so Maisie could have her own block.

It took effort not to ask for four more immediately.

Maisie's guard stopped where she wanted. After the lane was safely cleared for her next task, she tried the draw around a freshly placed corner guard. It came into the house but stayed exposed.

Maisie sighed.

Piper knew that sound very well now.

“Same thing again next time?” she asked when the stone had stopped.

“Same thing, slightly better.”

Later they returned to team work in their ordinary positions. Piper swept with Nora. Wren called the next shot, and Maisie went to deliver it.

Before she settled at the hack, Maisie looked back.

“The beginning,” she said solemnly.

Piper lifted her brush.

“I am paying attention.”

CHAPTER 6

Four Weeks Are Quite Long

Piper thought about the second assessment morning at school, in the car and once while looking for a spoon.

She found the spoon before she found out whether she would get a place.

At home, Ben helped her put the training dates on the family calendar in pencil. They marked the regular team games in ink because those arrangements were already settled.

“What if I don't get in?” she asked.

“Then we rub out the pencil.”

“That sounds easy.”

“The rubbing part would be.”

Piper leaned against the table. She appreciated that he had left the other part alone.

One evening she drew a house in her notebook and began marking the broad guard area. Her pencil point broke before she finished the circle.

She went downstairs for the sharpener. Her family was getting dinner ready, and Ben asked her to put out the plates.

“After this?” she asked, holding up the pencil.

“The plates won't be improved by a sharper pencil.”

Piper set it down and got the plates. Later she finished her drawing, then read until she lost the page and had to find it again.

There was a lot of ordinary life between two curling mornings.

At the club, practice continued. Some guards stopped in the broad space she had chosen. Others went too far. Jo changed the practice order so Piper could not always get ready for her favorite shot first. Sometimes she started with a draw on the turn she used less often. Sometimes she swept before delivering anything.

The jobs were familiar. Doing them while hoping someone would choose her made them feel newly important.

Nora helped with the sweeping reports.

“Tell me even if it's the same as mine,” she said. “Then I'll know we're seeing the same thing.”

Piper tried. She was early and wrong once. The stone slowed more than she expected.

“Changed my mind,” she called, and gave the new estimate.

Wren used the update. When everything stopped, they talked about what they had seen.

Piper had wanted to be the girl who always knew. Saying that she had changed her mind was less impressive in her head and much more helpful down the sheet.

One Saturday, Maisie said she would not return for the second assessment.

Piper's first feeling was surprise. Maisie's guards had been better than hers.

“Didn't you like it?”

“Some of it. I liked the sweeping bit. I don't want all four extra mornings this season.”

“Have you told Tess?”

“My grown-up has. We talked about it properly.”

Maisie was putting her repaired glove away. The thumb seam had tiny, tidy stitches now.

“I want our games,” she said. “And the practice we've already got. I might want a block another time.”

Piper sat beside her.

She knew friends could choose different afternoons. She had chosen a kite once and been perfectly happy telling Nora about it afterward. A whole training block felt bigger, but Maisie was still sitting beside her with the same glove.

“Will you still help me?”

“With guards?”

“Yes.”

“If you help me with my corner.”

“That seems fair.”

Wren arrived and dropped her bag neatly under the bench. She was going back for the second morning. She had been asked to make her sweeping information clearer too.

Piper had assumed Wren's sheet would be full of excellent things.

“Mine has things to do on it,” Wren said. “That was partly why we went.”

They went to find Nora. She had brought a small puzzle for the wait before warm-up, and Maisie had decided one of the pieces looked like a grumpy duck.

Piper could not see the duck at first.

Then she could not see anything else.

CHAPTER 7

The Second Morning

Fern had a new patch sewn onto her broom bag.

Piper noticed it while they changed. The patch was a small, lopsided star.

“My brother made it,” Fern said. “He says all the points are deliberate.”

“One looks surprised,” Piper told her.

“That one's very deliberate.”

Piper laughed. It helped more than staring at the coaches' clipboards.

Before they went onto the ice, Tess reminded them of the morning's plan. The same kinds of individual tasks came first. After the break, they would work through short, set situations with other players. Those were drills, with stones placed by the coaches and cleared between attempts. There would be no game score.

The coaches checked equipment, readiness and how the last few weeks had felt. Piper told Tess that her guards were better some days than others.

“Show us today's,” Tess said.

At the delivery station, Piper took time to name the finish before settling at the hack.

Her first guard stopped in the intended area.

The second went into the very front of the house.

For a moment she felt the whole morning tilt toward that red.

Then the lane was cleared. She had the other turn to play.

The next guard reached the broad area they had chosen. So did the fourth, a little farther left than the previous one but still where it was useful for the task.

Three of four.

She looked toward Tess's clipboard, then made herself look back at the ice.

The draws came next. Three finished in the intended front-ring area. One was deep. For the open hits, her first two stayed after removing their targets. The third missed. The last took out the yellow, but her shooter rolled away too.

Two hit-and-stays out of four. Fewer than the first morning.

Piper could have disliked that fact for the rest of the day.

Fern's turn was coming. Piper moved to her waiting place and gave her room.

Fern made a good guard, then a draw that ran deep. At the sweeping station afterward, they would need to tell each other things that a list of successful hits could not say.

Piper drank water during the break. Wren came over from her own group and sat nearby.

“How many?” Piper asked.

Wren looked at her bottle. “Drinks?”

“No. Good ones.”

“Some. I haven't added them.”

Piper almost began adding her own aloud. Then she remembered the coaches were comparing all the work, including what happened while someone else delivered.

“My guards were better,” she said instead. “One hit ran away after it did the first part.”

Wren nodded. “I had one like that.”

Through the glass, a coach was setting stones for the next tasks. Piper recognized the shape of an open hit, and a different house with a protected stone.

She wanted to go back out.

She also wanted to be finished and already know.

Tess called the group together. Piper put down her empty snack wrapper, checked that it actually reached the bin and went to get her helmet.

CHAPTER 8

Someone Else Throws



Piper did not get to throw the difficult shot.

Tess had put her in a group with Fern and two girls from another club. For this task, Fern delivered. One girl held the target. Piper and the other girl, Etta, swept.

They were all taking turns in each job. Piper knew that. She had liked the arrangement much more when her own delivery turn was ahead of her.

The coaches had placed a red stone near the middle and a red guard in front, outside the house. Fern had a yellow to draw around the guard and finish nearer the middle than the red.

The target holder checked the intended finish with Fern. Piper checked which side Etta would sweep from and what words they would use for the weight. The coach watched their spacing.

It was a difficult little task. Piper wanted Fern to make it.

She wanted to make it herself as well.

Fern delivered. The yellow came toward them, moving more slowly than Piper first expected.

“Front,” Piper called. “I think it's short of the finish.”

Etta agreed. At the house, the caller asked them to sweep.

Piper put her brush down and worked beside Etta. They kept their feet and brushes clear of the stone. The yellow carried on, curling past the guard with room to spare.

“Up!”

Both brushes lifted.

The yellow finished in the house, just farther from the middle than the red they were trying to beat.

Close. It had not completed the task.

Fern came down the clear side after covering her slider.

“A bit light,” she said.

Piper nodded. “We thought so early.”

“I heard.”

Tess asked the group what had happened. Each player gave the part she had seen. Piper did not claim that sweeping had fixed the stone, because the finish was there for everyone to look at. She explained when she had called and what she had heard from Etta.

Before the reset, Tess asked what could change on the next try.

“More weight,” Fern said.

Piper agreed. She was about to offer the target holder a different line as well, then stopped to look at the actual route. The yellow had cleared the guard. Its finish was short of what Fern wanted.

She told them that.

“Same line first, then,” the target holder said after checking it with Fern.

Piper liked having something precise to offer. It did not require taking the broom from anybody.

They had another attempt after the coaches reset the stopped stones. Fern delivered a little more weight. This time Piper reported it clearly, the caller kept the brushes up, and the yellow finished nearer than the red.

Fern's face opened into a smile.

Piper met her glove.

Then the group changed jobs, safely between tasks. Piper's own draw came around the guard but stopped outside the chosen finish. On her second attempt it reached roughly level with the red but stayed too wide to beat it.

She had wanted a beautiful last picture for the coaches.

Instead, she had two ordinary misses to describe.

She did describe them. The first had needed more distance. The second had gone far enough but taken a line that left it too wide. Tess checked that explanation with the others rather than accepting it because Piper sounded certain.

Their observations agreed.

After changing, Piper found Wren by the warm-room window. The brooms were safely in the rack. On the ice, the coaches were clearing the last station.

“I didn't finish with a good one,” Piper said.

“Neither did I.”

Piper looked at her friend. Wren watched a yellow being moved into storage.

“Fern made hers.”

“Did you help?”

“Yes.”

Wren turned toward her. “Then they saw that too.”

Piper stayed at the window a little longer. She could not see her whole morning through one pair of rings.

CHAPTER 9

The Reply

The coaches had said the replies would come to families by the following Friday.

On Monday, Piper asked Ben whether anything had arrived.

“No.”

On Tuesday, she asked without meaning to sound as if Monday's answer had been his fault.

“Still no.”

On Wednesday, Ben looked up before she spoke.

“The spoon drawer hasn't received anything either.”

Piper had opened it by mistake.

“I wanted a fork.”

“That's the same drawer.”

She found one and closed it carefully.

Thursday was easier for several hours because she had other things to do. Then it became Thursday evening, and she remembered again.

Ben called her over after dinner.

The reply was open on the screen.

Piper read the first line, missed the next three and came back to them.

She had been offered a place.

“Oh,” she said.

Then, much louder, “Oh!”

Ben moved his glass away from her elbow.

The coaches had written that her short-shot control was becoming steadier, her open hits gave her

something useful to build on, and her communication had improved across the two mornings. She still needed work with both turns and with judging the finish of draws around a guard.

Piper read that part twice too.

Getting a place had not made the misses disappear.

The letter included the four dates, the arrangements they had already discussed and a question asking whether the family wanted to accept. Ben checked the calendar with her once more. They had talked through the travel and the longer mornings before applying. Piper still wanted them.

“Yes,” she said.

He sent the reply with her beside him.

For a moment she stood very still. Then she went to find her notebook.

She wrote the first date on a clean page. Beneath it she wrote what she wanted to ask about the draw she had missed.

Her letters became larger as she went along.

Ben came to the doorway.

“Happy?”

“Yes. Very.”

“Good.”

“I'm also thinking about the first morning.”

“The actual first morning?”

“Yes.”

She had spent so long wanting the reply that she had nearly forgotten the place came with somewhere to turn up. Now she could picture going through the rink door and finding out who else was there. She wanted to bring the notebook.

At regular practice on Saturday, Wren was already in the changing area.

“Did you hear?” Piper asked.

“Yes.”

They looked at each other.

“I got a place,” Wren said.

“So did I.”

Their gloves met so enthusiastically that Maisie, arriving behind them, asked whether someone had won a very small wrestling match.

Piper told her. Nora heard as she came around the corner and smiled.

“I want to know what Fern's star looks like,” Maisie said after the important parts were finished.

“That is not the important part,” Piper told her.

“It may be important to the star.”

Jo came over to congratulate Piper and Wren. She had the new dates too. They talked about fitting the extra work around their own team's practice and checking how the longer mornings felt once they began.

Piper asked whether Fern had a place.

“That's Fern's news to share,” Jo said. “You may see her at the first morning.”

Piper nodded. She had suddenly wanted a list of every name. Other girls had been waiting for replies too.

She could be happy about hers without turning theirs into a guessing game.

Nora lifted her broom.

“We still have something to do today.”

Piper looked through the doorway toward their sheet.

“Yes,” she said. “We do.”

CHAPTER 10

Their Usual Sheet

Maisie asked for her corner guard first.

Piper thought of suggesting the drill from the assessment morning. She could explain the set stones and the changing jobs. She had been turning the explanation over in her head all the way to the club.

Then she looked at Maisie, who was waiting for an answer to the thing she had actually asked.

“Your guard,” Piper said. “Then the draw.”

They were in their ordinary positions for this part of practice. Wren held the target. Maisie would deliver. Nora and Piper took their sweeping places. Jo watched from the side.

Maisie sent the guard.

“About right,” Nora called.

Piper gave her own estimate clearly. Wren kept them up. The red stopped in the chosen area on the left, outside the house.

Maisie came down pleased.

“There. Now I'd like to use it.”

For the next practice shot, Wren checked the route around that guard. Piper and Nora listened to the finish Maisie wanted. Jo made sure the lane was clear before Maisie went back.

Her draw started a little wide. Piper called the weight; Nora agreed. Wren watched the line and left the brushes up.

The red curled toward the house. It passed the guard and settled in the front-left rings, partly tucked behind it from the delivery end.

Maisie stood up carefully at the far end. Even from here, Piper could see her smile.

When she arrived, all four girls looked from the safe side.

“More hidden,” Wren said.

“Still a bit showing,” Nora said.

“A shy stone,” Maisie decided. “Trying its best.”

Piper laughed. She could see the exposed edge too. Jo asked Maisie what she wanted to try on the next visit to that shot. Maisie had an answer ready.

They took their break. Piper told Nora about the assessment task, including the two draws she had missed at the end.

“I thought you got in,” Maisie said.

“I did.”

“And they know about those?”

“They were standing there.”

Maisie nodded. “Very hard to conceal, then.”

Wren told them about her own feedback. Nora described the right-side draw she wanted to return to after the break. Nobody had to borrow Piper's new plan to have one of her own.

When they went back out, Jo gave them different work. Piper delivered in her usual third-player place. One red stayed after a hit. The next rolled farther than she wanted. Wren still had the final decisions, and Piper still had things to offer her.

The development mornings would start in two weeks. For now, they finished their regular session, changed their shoes and checked the area around their bags.

Piper found Maisie's repaired glove beneath the bench.

“Your thumb's waiting.”

Maisie collected it and counted both gloves before packing them.

Nora went to find her family. Wren held the changing-room door while Piper lifted her broom bag from the rack.

“Tell Fern I like her star,” Maisie said.

“If she's there.”

“If she's there.”

Piper had a new place to go, with coaches who would expect her to work and girls she was beginning to know. She was glad the first date was written in ink now.

She was glad about next Saturday here too.

Wren was still holding the door.

“Coming?”

Piper caught the strap properly on her shoulder and followed her friends out.