

ABBY
AND THE
CURLING CHICKS

J e a n M i l l s

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Chapter One

I wasn't going to go. I wasn't going to go. I wasn't going to go. I was determined not to go.

My mom was determined that I was going to go.

Guess what? I went.

But at least I didn't go alone. Four of us showed up at the curling club together, all wearing exactly the same expressions of rebellion.

"I would never have come if you hadn't," Sylvie said to me, her dark eyes narrowed and her hands jammed into the pockets of her brother's borrowed hockey jacket. Under her arm she carried one of the curling brooms my mother had scrounged for us.

"Me neither," insisted Betsy. Her blonde hair was pulled into its usual ponytail and she was carrying her broom as if had a flag on the end. "I wouldn't be here if your mother hadn't called my mother and told her about this junior curling program. My mom got all excited when your

mom said something about going to bun peels, whatever that is.”

“Bonspiels,” I corrected her crossly. Why were they blaming me? Just because my mother insisted I take up a winter sport this year didn't mean it was all my fault we were standing at the door of the Vankleek Hill Curling Club about to enter the wonderful world of standing in the cold for two hours throwing rocks down the ice and sweeping.

I knew about curling. I had endured hours and hours of boredom watching my parents out there doing their thing at the club. I always swore I would never, never play such a stupid game. But about three years ago, one of the members, Mrs. MacDonald, started a junior curling program. Some of the members' kids (under protest, I'm sure. I mean, curling isn't exactly the hottest sport in town) joined up, and then some kids from the high school got sucked in, and last year a team from the club actually got to the junior provincial playdowns. (Please don't think this means I'm excited about curling - I'm just reporting the facts.)

I had managed to stay out of it - until the phone call.

“Oh really?” my mother said into the phone. I knew it was Mrs. MacDonald because I had answered. “No kidding.” Mom’s blue eyes rested thoughtfully on me. “It would be a shame, you’re right. Sure, count us in. I’ll have a word with Abby and Noah and get back to you.”

I didn’t like the sound of it. She had that safari look in her eyes, where she’s hunting lions and finds something interesting in her sights.

“Abby, how would you like to join the curling club this year?”

“I wouldn’t,” I replied as firmly as I could. I didn’t want there to be any mistake. If she thought for a minute I would entertain any idea of getting those slidey boots on and slipping around out there sweeping the ice -- forget it. Maybe my little brother Noah could do it, but not me.

“Well, let me explain,” my mom continued. She’s very unflappable, is my mom. Very determined, too, which is probably where I get it from.

“You see,” she explained, “Mrs. MacDonald had a great junior program going at the club, then Cassburn got that big grant and built their own club. So now a lot of our members - and the

juniors - have gone over to the new club, and we're struggling a bit to keep our membership up. Mrs. MacDonald is trying to boost the junior program, hoping to draw some more kids, and their parents, to join.”

I just looked at her. I tried not to let it show on my face that I knew exactly where this was heading. But I knew alright.

“So?” I said as politely as possible.

“Well, Mrs. MacDonald asked if you and some of the girls from Pleasant Corners might like to join, to get a Bantam group going. It seems there's already some boys interested, Will and Darcy, as well as two of the Larsen boys. But they're short on girls.”

“What about Julie Leebright and that crowd?”

“Well, I don't know about Julie, but I guess some of them are going to the new club,” my mother pursed her lips a bit, so I knew she or Mrs. MacDonald had decided this was a bad thing. “You'll have a good time, Abby. And it wouldn't hurt you to get a little exercise this winter either.”

She cocked one eyebrow at me and I looked away. This is a subject I try to avoid. So what if I

prefer to lie on my bed reading, or to sit at my desk writing the next great mystery novel? I'm no athlete, that's for sure. Although I did belong to the local swim club for a while. A short while. Until I found out at my first meet that I get so nervous that I feel like throwing up. I'm just not competitive.

But my mother is, and the contest of the moment was to get Abby to join the curling club.

And of course, she won, but it was because we made a bargain. She told me if I gave curling a fair chance, she and Dad would sign me up for that creative writing camp this summer, the one I'd heard about at school. It was my dream to write a Really Good Novel, but I felt I needed a bit of coaching. Our librarian, Mrs. King, had tried to get me to go last year, but by the time I convinced my parents I really wanted to go, I was too late to register.

So here I was, after school on a cold Wednesday afternoon in late October, standing at the door of the Vankleek Hill Curling Club taking abuse from my three best friends for getting us into this mess.

“Well I'm looking forward to it,” piped up Jess.

We all looked at her. Jess is short, cheerful, and a perfect replica of one of Santa's elves. She was always ready to try something new. We all thought she was nuts.

“Well, fine. You can be the skip then,” I said to her.

The others looked at me and said, “Hunh?”

“The skip,” I told them. “You know, the captain. The one who tells everybody else what shots to make.”

“Sounds fine to me,” laughed Jess. “You guys will have to do what I say.”

“Fat chance,” muttered Betsy and she yanked the door open.

We all followed her in, our borrowed brooms banging together, so that we entered the dark hall of the curling club in tangled, giggling confusion.

“Hi girls!” Mrs. MacDonald came striding over. Her son Liam was a high school curler, and I had seen Mr. and Mrs. MacDonald curling with my parents for years. She was tall and loud, a no-nonsense kind of person, but always smiling. If we had to have a coach, we could do a lot worse than Mrs. MacDonald. “This is great, Abby. We really needed some new girls this year. Hi Jess,

and Sylvie. And Betsy too. Wonderful! Come on in and we'll have a little meeting before we go out on the ice for our first session.”

We followed Mrs. MacDonald over to the tables by the glass windows overlooking the curling ice and sat together. I had seen ice before, but the others had never been in the club. They took a moment to stare at the two gleaming sheets of pebbled ice stretching out white and cold under the bright lights, the red and blue rings at each end looking very much like giant targets.

“Wow,” whispered Jess. She was impressed, but I was more interested in seeing who else was going to be there watching me humiliate myself on that ice.

There were some kids from our school, Pleasant Corners. I caught a glimpse of Lars and Magnus Larsen, two really shy brothers whose parents had a dairy farm out towards St. Eugene. Will Lindhurst was lounging over at the last table, looking as cool and uninterested in his surroundings as ever. I think it's hard to look cool in a curling club, but Will was managing quite nicely.

I sighed loudly. Fortunately, Mrs. MacDonald

was talking to Liam, her son, and didn't hear me, but Will did. He glanced over. I felt Betsy perk up beside me (she thinks Will is hot). I've known Will since we were born and I see him chiefly as the boy who never lets me forget I sucked my thumb till I was nine years old (which wasn't that long ago, since we're both 12). We're distantly related on my father's side.

"Don't worry, Abigail," he drawled in my direction, tilting his head back so I could see his eyes under his baseball cap. Will and my grandmother (his great aunt Clara) are the only people who call me by my full name. "I won't tell her you're a klutz."

"Thanks," I replied sweetly. "I won't tell her you taught me everything I know."

"Ok, everybody," Mrs. MacDonald clapped her hands to get everybody's attention, and we turned our eyes forward, but not until I'd had a chance to note some of the high school girls sitting near the back, and a few other older boys near them. And there was Will's cousin, Darcy, another even more distant cousin of mine, who had long dark hair in a ponytail and played bass in a garage band somewhere in town. Sylvie leaned

over and whispered in my ear “What's HE doing here?”

And I sighed again. We weren't exactly the In Crowd. More like the Out Crowd.

“It doesn't matter if you're not in the In Crowd,” my mother said to me once when I refused to go to a school dance because I knew none of the boys would ask me to dance. Except Will, and he doesn't count. “Just stick with your friends and have fun. And smile!” she was always ordering me.

Well, smiling isn't effortless for me. It takes quite a bit of effort. And I'm not a natural at things, things like going to parties or playing sports. I like to read, and write stories and poems, but those aren't exactly team activities, are they?

I felt as if I were being sucked down into a big hole that was going to be pretty hard to climb out of. Let's face it: curling is not quite the mainstream winter activity that, say, hockey is. Even broomball is a pretty big sport in our town, with tournaments all winter long. But the curling club is tucked away on a side street that hardly even gets plowed in the winter. Out of sight, out of mind.

Well, what else could I do but sigh?

“Thanks for coming today,” Mrs. MacDonald began. “I know you're eager to get out on the ice,” Sylvie poked me in the ribs at this point, “so I'll keep this brief. Our junior program has shrunk a bit this year, partly because of the new club up the road in Cassburn attracting some of our previous members -”

“And partly because this is a dumb game!” Betsy hissed in my ear.

“- so it looks as if we'll have lots of ice time to work together and get the feel for curling. We'll start off with the fundamentals, for you beginners. You know, sliding, sweeping, throwing the rocks. Then we'll work on team playing and strategies. I hope by part way through the season, you'll be ready to go to a bonspiel or two -”

“Bun peels!” Sylvie and Betsy intoned without much volume or enthusiasm directly into both my ears.

“- and you more experienced curlers will, of course, help out with the beginners. We also have a program for even younger kids,” Mrs. MacDonald was looking kindly at us beginners, “but I didn't think you'd want to start out throwing

little rocks with the 7-year-olds on Sunday afternoons.”

Somebody guffawed loudly behind us, probably somebody who was picturing me out there throwing pint-sized rocks with Noah, my little brother. None of us turned around, but I saw Betsy's eyes narrow and I knew she was memorizing the sound so we could compare notes later and trash whoever it was.

“Now, let's get going!” Mrs. MacDonald said brightly. “Catherine, Liam and the others, you can go out on sheet two and do some warm-up stretches and practice your slides. I'll be out in a few minutes.” The high school crowd gathered their gear together and headed out the glass door towards the ice, leaving about a dozen of us waiting for our instructions. We sat silently watching them stomp past in their special shoes, brooms held under one arm as they did up their colourful curling jackets. Catherine McRae, who had played on Julie Leebright's team last year, had bright pins all over hers, and a big crest on the arm. We all pretended not to stare, but we did stare anyway.

And then Mrs. MacDonald turned to us.