

# Wicket *Maiden*

**Chrissie Harrison**



wicket maiden (n.)

- 1: an over in which no runs are scored with the bat and at least one wicket is taken by the bowler
- 2: a groundbreaking romantic comedy novel

# 1st Over

*B*reathe. I've got this.

Ellie gazed around, revelling in the atmosphere.

The music pumping around the stadium dipped in volume, allowing the announcer's enthusiastic voice to carry across the crowd.

'Please welcome your opening batters for the Scorpions, Ellie Waites and Bryony Taylor.'

Cheers rippled through the stands.

Ellie's neck prickled. How she'd missed this.

The opposition fanned out into their fielding positions. Bryony broke into a jog. Ellie swung her bat in vertical loops, readying her right shoulder, then strode out. No point in running. What's thirty seconds when you've waited eight months?

Thirty-seven weeks.

Two hundred and sixty-one days.

Not that Ellie had been counting. Much.

With every step towards the middle, she pushed herself into the mental zone.

*Focus. I've got this.*

She passed Bryony at the non-striker's end, exchanging a fist bump, then went to the crease.

'Two, please,' she called to the umpire, asking for an indication of where her middle stump was.

The umpire motioned for Ellie to move the toe of her bat slightly left. Ellie scratched out her mark, adjusted the helmet's chin strap, then surveyed the field.

Beneath the red shirt, her heart pounded.

'Bowling from the Pavilion End, for the Warriors, Georgia Bright.'

A smatter of applause from the Away fans.

Ellie took stock of the positives, everything to alleviate any silly nerves. A home game at the Aurora Stadium, a ground she knew like the back of her hand. Weeks of intense practice and fitness training. A batting partner she had a great rapport with. Above everything, cricket was a team sport. Today wasn't about her. It never was. What did the circumstances demand? The same as ever: a strong start.

*Still.*

*Two hundred and fifty-six days.*

*All the prep in the world is no substitute for a match day.*

*Don't screw it up.*

She moistened dry lips, taking deep, even breaths.

The announcer counted down from 10, matching the visuals on the big screens, the pulses of the music. At 0, a cheer encircled the ground.

Then the world fell silent. The eye of the storm. Ellie gripped the bat tighter.

The umpire's outstretched arm dropped. 'Play.'

Georgia ran in. Right arm, fast medium, sometimes took an over to find line and length.

*Let's hope so today. Could do with a few sighters.*

The white ball arced down out of the cloudy sky.

Ellie swung. Missed. The ball rapped into the knee roll of her left pad.

Georgia threw her arms aloft. 'Howzaaaat!' The wicketkeeper shouted likewise, appealing for Leg Before Wicket.

Ellie regained her balance and tapped the bat on the ground. With fake nonchalance, she stepped away, studiously avoiding eye contact with anyone. Her pulse raced. Perspiration leached into her gloves.

*Not LBW first ball. Please, not first ball.*

The delivery had edged to Ellie's left, down Leg side... missing the wickets? Surely?

*Going down Leg, umpire?* Ellie pleaded silently, a lump in her throat.

'Not out,' the umpire called.

Ellie's held breath burst from her.

The bowler's shoulders fell. She trudged back to her mark.

Ellie walked towards Bryony, meeting her halfway. A gentle grimace and a fist bump acknowledged the near miss, then Ellie returned to the crease.

*Focus. Watch the ball. I've got this.*

The bowler ran in. Ellie picked the ball's line and length better this time. For a split-second, she considered chasing the wide delivery, helping it round to Fine Leg, but passed up the chance. No point in risking snicking it to the keeper.

*Definitely not on my second ball.*

The umpire's arms indicated a Wide.

Ellie tamped down the cropped grass, shook the tension from her shoulders, then reassessed the fielders, noting the gaps. Georgia ran in again, concentrating hard. Would she overcompensate for the last two deliveries, her line veering too far down the Off side?

*Play the actual delivery, not what you want it to be.*

The delivery was short and wide. With a slash of the bat, Ellie cracked the ball past the Point fielder and it raced to the boundary.

A cheer from the crowd, accompanied by a burst of thumping music from the DJ, said more than the umpire's signal of 4.

*Off the mark. Phew.*

The next delivery was an easy single, then Ellie leant on her bat at the non-striker's end and stole a moment to absorb the surroundings, the buzz, the challenge.

*This. Give me this forever.*

Except she didn't have forever. Female pros seldom played beyond age 36, so at 32, Ellie had maybe three good years left. She had to make them count. There was unfinished business. Goals. Dreams.

Today was the first step back on that road.

'At the end of the Powerplay, the Scorpions are forty-eight without loss.'

The big screens showed Bryony's current score of 16 and Ellie's 28. Despite the difference, Bryony was doubtless in better touch. She was a rising star, ten years Ellie's junior and with a grace Ellie didn't exactly *envy*... although Bryony essentially taking Ellie's spot in the England squad last year did hurt a little. But there was no room for ill-will. Bryony was the future, and Ellie enjoyed mentoring the junior players.

Ellie took guard at the batting crease, then reviewed the changed field.

Beyond the boundary rope, the stands were decorated with familiar blobs of red, spectators in their replica shirts. Couples, families, and many wide-eyed young girls. The future of women's cricket. Ellie had missed that as much as she'd missed playing. The engagement with fans, the sense of being someone to look up to. As a youngster, she had admired the greats of the game, and it was her duty—and pleasure—to pay it forward.

To her left, a flash of colour caught her eye. Someone in a yellow top.

*A young woman. Paige?*

The bowler ran in.

Momentarily distracted, Ellie picked the line but not the pace. She was caught between playing forwards and staying back. She cut her hands down. Too late.

A familiar thwack behind. Her spirits dived. Shouts from the bowler and wicketkeeper. Ellie glanced round, knowing precisely what she'd see. All three stumps were askew.

*Castled. Shit.*

She whacked the bat against her right pad, exchanged a resigned fist bump with Bryony, then trudged back towards the pavilion.

Halfway there, she glanced heavenwards. It couldn't have been Paige in the crowd, wearing her favourite colour. Ellie might wish her sister was there, but she wasn't and would never be.

Ellie's heart clouded. She shook her head, downcast and disappointed.

The applause rippled and abated.

*Oh well. 28. Three fours. Could have been worse.*

*But they're not applauding that. They're just happy to see me back.*

Her spiked boots clacked up the stone steps. She pulled off her helmet. Failure was part of the job—a statistical inevitability, like picking up injuries or being left out of the XI. She only wished a loss of focus hadn't caused today's premature end. It wasn't the first time.

*Still. First game back. Have to start somewhere.*

As she climbed the last step, nearby in the crowd a girl was holding aloft a homemade sign: "WELCOME BACK ELLIE".

Ellie's mood immediately lifted.

*Grace is a darling. You can't buy supporters like that.*

Grace was one of Ellie's superfans, a poster child for the Scorpions' engagement with local schools and the community. Ellie offered a wave, then climbed the metal staircase to the first floor of the pavilion.

She sank onto the dressing room bench and pulled off her gloves and pads.

For five minutes, she sat with her thoughts, wishing the disappointment away. Emotional distractions were a weakness, something she desperately wanted to eliminate from her game. She was a fine player—when she focussed on cricket and didn't get sidetracked. She tucked an index finger inside the front of her collar and caressed the small chain pendant.

The door swung open. One of the staff, Ops Director Sandy, entered. She was carrying what looked like mail-order flowers.

Ellie frowned. 'Whose birthday?'

Sandy proffered the bouquet. 'Not yours, Ells. Even so...'

She took the unexpected delivery and set it on the bench. 'Interesting.'

Sandy thumbed at the door. 'I'll leave you be.'

'Thanks, Sands.'

Curious, Ellie inspected the bouquet, inhaling the rich perfume, then fingered the tiny card from its cream-coloured envelope.

"Good luck today, Eleanor darling. Pleased to hear you're on the mend. Love, Mum and Dad."

*Wow.*

Her parents were passively supportive rather than active cheerleaders. In the last fifteen years, there hadn't been *explicit* grumbles about Ellie pursuing a sporting career, instead of something sensible and long-lasting, like medicine or law, but the signs were there. Yes, they'd attended her first senior game for the Scorpions, many years ago, and her first England cap, but nothing since.



When she'd torn her adductor tendon eight months ago, and the initial signs weren't good, Ellie sensed they were hoping it was curtains for her cricketing life. Then they could have, perhaps smugly, watched—even encouraged—a new direction. As it was, Ellie wouldn't let go of her passion that easily.

*Do them proud by your deeds, not by getting sentimental or pissy.*

She closed her eyes and spent a few minutes doing box breathing, centring herself. Fragrances of hyacinth and winter hazel—her favourites—tickled her nostrils.

A smile spread across her face.

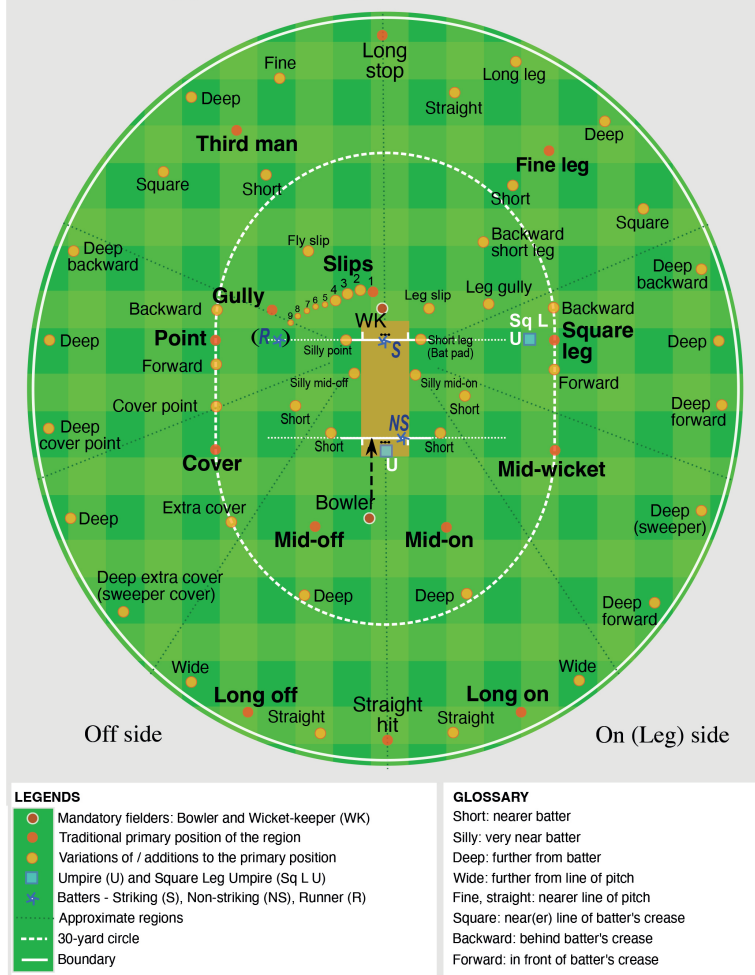
She stowed the kit in her bag, released her long, mousy brown hair from its clasp and retied it. Then she pulled on her Scorpions hoodie and headed to the pitch side to support the team.

*You've got this.*

*You're back.*

# Fielding Positions

### Cricket: Fielding positions for a right-handed batter



## Acknowledgements

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## About the Author

I'm an incurable romantic, and a sucker for great humour. I've been writing for many years, and all the stories contain love, humour, or both – I simply can't keep these elements out of my work. I have a soft spot for stories with strong women and bittersweet vibes. I like the connection between my protagonists to be more than physical; a way for them to bond and help solve each other's problems. I'm also keen to shine a light on mental health issues, especially anxiety and neurodiversity, as these are close to my heart. My novels are dual POV stories, sweet rather than spicy, and often put a twist on genre staples whilst being centred on relatable relationships and situations. Fundamentally, I try to write the books I like to read – those with wit, heart and intelligence.

Outside of writing, I enjoy photography, great scenery, a relaxing train ride, delicious coffee and cake, and catching up with friends and fellow writers.

Chrissie Harrison is a pen name.

## Also by the Author

### **The Cathedral City Comedies – a romantic comedy series**

"Floored"

Book 2 – Coming October 2025

Book 3 – TBC

### **Touchline Girls – a sports rom-com series**

"Match Daze"

Book 2 – TBC

Book 3 – TBC

### **Pavilion Girls – a women's cricket rom-com series**

"Wicket Maiden" – May 2025

Book 2 – 2026

Book 3 – TBC