

Alice Henderson

On Debut

S R Silcox

Alice Henderson On Debut Extract
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ONE

The scoreboard says I'm one wicket down for 62 runs, which is a pretty good opening score for the first day of a backyard Test Match. The morning session's gone pretty well for me, except when I got out in the second over by hitting the ball over the fence into Mr Rammage's roses.

Adam's getting antsy and has started trash talking, just like he always does when I'm on top in a match, and I don't blame him. He lost the bat toss, which is never a good sign for him in our backyard series. Statistics show that since we started keeping score when I was seven, whoever lost the toss on the very first day was most likely to lose the series. Plus it's been a sticky-hot morning which means that bowling has been hard, and Adam's hoping the storm that's predicted for the afternoon might show up early, because a break for bad weather means that no matter what the score is, we have to swap and he'd get to bat as soon as the weather cleared.

Adam's wasting time farting around with his fielders, which are an old paint can that he's put in at mid-off, the recycle bin that's sitting at long-on and a plastic outdoor chair at cover. That's in addition to the permanent fielders - the palm trees at gully, the pool at third man, the shed is the wicketkeeper and three slips, with a big old fake wagon wheel covering square leg. We used to use Grandma's garden gnomes until Adam broke one with a cracker of a straight drive. We were banned from playing for a week until we'd done enough housework to pay for a replacement. And I won't mention the lazy twelfth man, our old red cattle dog Blue, who's never chased anything more than his tail in his life. He's spectating from the shade under the back steps.

Adam finishes setting his field and I have a funny feeling he's going to try to bounce me out. Over the fence or on a roof on the full is automatic out - no six-and-out for our games - and even though he surprised me with that one that got me out in the second over (I stuck my bat up when I

ducked which made the ball loop up and over the fence), I'm not stupid enough to get caught a second time.

Just as Adam gets back to his mark and is ready to bowl, I take a wander down the pitch and poke at the concrete driveway, knowing it'll annoy him.

"Oh come on," Adam whinges. "Seriously?"

I walk back to the crease and face up. "Just getting rid of a bug."

"There's no bugs on the pitch," Adam says, flicking the ball up in the air and catching it.

"Not now there isn't. I just got rid of it."

Adam shakes his head and squares his shoulders. "Ready?"

I nod once, tap my bat on the ground three times, and then bend my knees, ready and waiting for Adam to bowl. He does a little skip - a recent addition to his run-up - and runs in. Just before he gets to the crease I take a step forward. He still bowls it short, so I duck under it and let it bang into the shed behind me. He grins at me and I poke my tongue out before picking up the ball and tossing it back. "Is that all you've got?" I tease. He's got one more ball left in this over and I'm betting it'll be a yorker. He's so predictable it's not even funny.

He runs in again and this time I stay on my crease. Instead of a yorker he bowls a wide full toss, which I slash at, sending the ball sailing higher than I intended. I cringe as it bangs onto the roof of our house. Lucky Mum and Dad aren't home otherwise they'd be yelling at us for that.

"Bugger," I say under my breath. That's my number two out for forty-nine. My number two hasn't reached fifty in four summers.

Adam huffs. "Damn it, Alice. What'd you do that for?"

"That ball deserved it."

"You better not hit shots like that off me tomorrow." Adam picks up the metal stumps at the bowler's crease and pulls them onto the grass, which is his way of calling the day off.

“If you bowl at me like that I will.” I walk past him and collect the recycling bin from the footpath and pull it back around to the side of the shed.

“You’re supposed to be helping me impress that scout, not making me look bad.” Adam lifts the garden chair back over the pool fence and onto the deck.

I pick up the bat and point it at him. “You’re not impressing him with crap like that. Why would you bowl a full toss straight after a short one? Especially to someone who can bat.”

“It wasn’t meant to be a full toss. It was meant to be a slower one. It came out wrong.”

“Well you better get it right tomorrow, or just not bowl it at all.”

“Whatever,” Adam says, putting the paint can back beside the wagon wheel for the day. “I’ll go and see if the ball made it to the front yard.”

“I’m going in for a sandwich,” I reply. “And then I’m having a swim.”

“Can you make me a ham and cheese?”

“Make it yourself.” I jog up the back steps and Adam gives me the finger.

“Reckon we’ve got time to play pool cricket before we head over to see Nan?” he asks.

“As if you even have to ask,” I call back.

TWO

The summer after I turned eight, Mr Williams, our Phys. Ed. teacher, announced over the PA that if anyone wanted to play cricket for the school, they should line up by the bottom gate after the first lunch bell. My older brother Adam and I had grown up on cricket, so it was a no-brainer for me to be down by the gate that day. When Mr Parkinson turned up, he asked what I was doing there. When I told him I wanted to play cricket, he laughed. I had no idea what was so funny about that, but he pointed towards the netball courts and told me that I should be over there with the girls. Before I could protest, Mr Williams had turned up and told Mr Parkinson I could at least have one training session and see how I went.

Adam, of course, thought it was hilarious that I was the only girl at training, and when we got home that afternoon he couldn't wait to tell my parents how I'd embarrassed myself for thinking I could play cricket with the boys. My parents gave each other a funny sort of look, and Nan said, "If Alice wants to try her hand at cricket, then she should go for it."

Nan was always my biggest supporter, which is why I don't mind spending time with her at the nursing home every Friday night. Adam says she's losing her marbles, which Mum says is offensive and totally not okay to say to anyone outside of the family. I just think that once you get to her age, which is eighty-three, it's not surprising you start forgetting stuff with everything you've had to remember over the years.

When we arrive, Nan's sitting up in her bed watching TV, her headphones covering her ears making her look smaller than she actually is. She's almost deaf, so the headphones make sure no-one else has to listen to constant repeats of Wheel of Fortune. Nan's also got the early stages of dementia, so no matter how many times she watches a show, it's like the first time she's seen it. As we walk into the room, she yells at the TV, "It's Clarke Gable you bloody idiot!" Adam laughs and I

shove him. He thinks the fact that Nan swears and says inappropriate things sometimes is hilarious, and I guess it is. I just prefer to think of it as Nan finally coming out of her shell and saying what she wants, when she wants. Plus, she gets to forget she ever said it, and so long as no-one brings stuff up, she's never going to be embarrassed by anything again.

She smiles when she sees us and takes off her headphones. She can never remember who Adam is, although I think she just messes with him, but she always remembers me. And she calls Mum 'the nurse' sometimes instead of Jenny, but Mum doesn't mind. Dad puts the bags of takeaway on a table and Adam and I pull over some chairs.

"What did you bring?" Nan asks.

"Chinese," Dad replies. It's always Chinese.

"I love Chinese," Nan says, rubbing her hands together. "Did I ever tell you about the one time your grandfather cooked me dinner? Tried to pass the fried rice from the Chinese shop up the road as his own." She chuckles and we all laugh with her, even though this is the same story she tells us almost every Friday night. Sometimes she refers to Pop as 'a boy', because she forgets that we actually know who she's referring to. Adam gets annoyed when Nan tells the same stories over and over again, but I don't care. The ones she remembers are always the happiest, and I like to think that when she doesn't know who she is or where she is, that she's back in her memories, reliving those happy times over and over again.

I set out the plastic plates and cutlery and Dad starts dishing out the food. Having dinner with Nan every Friday night has been a ritual for as long as I can remember, even back when Pop was still alive and Nan still had all her marbles. We'd all sit around her kitchen table, Pop up one end, Nan the other, Mum and Dad on one side and Adam and I across from them. It was even noisier when my cousins were visiting from the city. Nan would put the dining chairs away and bring out the long bench seats and we'd all squeeze in along the sides of the table, banging elbows and picking

food off each others' plates, a million and one conversations going on all at once. Now Nan finds it hard to concentrate on one train of thought, although sometimes it's surprising what she remembers.

"Mum said you've got a big cricket match tomorrow, Adam," Nan says. She spoons honey chicken onto her plate, picks up a piece with her fingers and eats it, sucking the sauce that drips onto her hand.

Adam swallows a mouthful of fried rice. "Scouts are coming up from the city. They're looking for players for the grade sides down there. Could be a stepping stone to rep."

"Do you think you'll make it?" Nan asks.

Adam shrugs. "I hope so. Coach says I have a good chance. I've had the best bowling figures for the seniors for the last two years."

Nan turns to me. "And what about you, Alice. Are you playing?"

"Yeah, actually. First time in ages I've played in a proper match."

"It's not really a proper match, Alice," Adam says. "You're just playing in the other side."

I shoot Adam a look but before I can say anything, Dad says, "A match is a match, Adam. Don't belittle your sister."

I hate it when Dad comes to my rescue. Sometimes he makes things worse.

"I'm just saying," Adam says, his mouth full of sweet and sour pork. "The match is so the scouts can look at us in the A team. Alice is playing because they needed an extra player at last minute."

I stab a piece of chicken with my plastic fork. "If I was a boy I'd be in the A Team."

Adam laughs. "Yeah, right."

I drop my fork onto my plate and glare at him. "I've got a better batting average than half the guys in the A team. Plus, I can hit the stumps from the circle better than any of your team, so

stop thinking you're so hot."

Dad puts his hand on my arm. "That's enough, Alice." He turns to Adam. "No more cricket talk."

Nan bites into a prawn cracker and glances up at the TV. "Oh for God's sake you morons, it's Sydney Opera House." Adam and I both snort and Dad gives us the evil eye. "So," Nan says, turning back to me, a piece of prawn cracker stuck to her bottom lip. "Got any plans for tomorrow?" And just like that, the previous conversation is over.

Just as we're finishing our dinner, Mum rushes into the room. "Sorry I missed dinner. Old George had a fall in his room. Silly bugger woke up and forgot he didn't have his leg on."

Nan sniffs. "That man would forget his head if it wasn't on straight." Everyone cracks up laughing, but it seems like Nan has no idea that she's just made a joke at her own expense. Mum whispers to Dad that it's time Nan had her medication, which is our cue to leave.

"We should get going," Dad says, putting the dirty plates and rubbish onto a tray. "The kids have got a big day tomorrow."

"I haven't had dessert yet," Nan says.

"You had dinner with us tonight," Dad says. "There is no dessert."

Nan folds her arms across her chest and narrows her eyes. "Do you think I'd forget whether I've had dessert or not?"

Adam sniggers.

"They've got chocolate pudding tonight and I'm not going to bed until I have some."

Mum puts her hand on Nan's arm and uses her nurse voice. "I'll go and see if they have any left in the kitchen for you."

Nan takes Mum's hand and says, "Thanks, love."

I jump up. “I’ll come too. I need to go to the loo anyway.”

I have a funny feeling this is one of those times she knows exactly what’s going on, but if she wants chocolate pudding, I’ll go find her some.

As Mum and I walk down the hallway to the kitchen, Mum says, “I’ve managed to swap shifts with Leanne, so I can come and watch the game tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Mum.” Even though tomorrow is Adam’s big day to impress the scouts, Mum can go and watch him play any weekend in summer, but me? I hardly ever get to play and I like it when Mum and Dad are there to watch. It gives me someone to show off for.

Mum pushes open the kitchen door and I follow her in. “We better find Nan some pudding before she starts yelling at Dad instead of the TV.”

THREE

The big game on Saturday starts off with a meet and greet with the scouts who'll be watching the game. The coaches go on and on about the skills of the players in the A team, but don't even mention what any of us in the B team can do. Whatever. We know what we're there for so none of us really care.

Adam's team decided to bat first, only because their captain is the opening batsman and I guess he wanted to make sure he made a good impression on the scouts straight up before anyone else got a chance. Turned out to be a bad decision for him because he was out in the second over when he tried a slog to cow corner off Tommy Mackenzie's slow spin and only managed to hit it sky high. He was caught by our 'keeper for ten runs. After that though, you could really tell the difference between the A team and the B team. We don't have any good bowlers, except for Rory Smyth, and he's only bowled the one over because our captain, Troy Evans wanted to keep him fresh to bowl out the innings. Our bowlers were carted all over the ground and not many of the fielders actually had to do any fielding. Every time the ball went to the fence, or over it, someone in the crowd just tossed it back. I asked Troy to let me bowl a couple of the middle overs just to give our other bowlers a break but he wouldn't be in it. I might not be a recognised bowler but that's only because I'm not allowed to play in a proper team.

I'm sitting down at fine leg, twiddling my thumbs, just counting down the last couple of overs until we get to bat when Troy calls me in.

"What's up?" I ask.

"This is your ground," Troy says. "We're getting hammered. Any tips on where to bowl or what we should be doing?"

I can't believe he wants my advice now, with three overs to go. "What did you expect? That

we'd give them a run for their money?"

Rory shines the ball on his thigh. "We're just as good as that lot," he says. Maybe he is, and maybe I am and okay, maybe Troy is too on a good day, but the rest of our team are just ring ins, added to the team because they're the ones who could make the game.

"There's three overs to go, Troy. Why worry about it now?"

"Because, I thought we'd do better than we are."

I shake my head. "You're delusional."

"Come on, Alice. Haven't you got anything?" Troy's practically begging me to help Rory not look like an idiot in the final overs.

I let out a breath. It's a bit of a long shot but if anyone could pull it off, it might be Rory. "Look, there's a spot on the pitch, just outside off and a bit fuller than you've been bowling. Bowl the next ball and make sure you follow through to look at the pitch. You'll see where I mean. Try to hit that spot."

"What's there?" Rory asks.

I don't want to give away all the secrets of my home ground to players from other teams, so all I say is, "Just trust me. It's the lightest of scuff marks and if you hit it, you never know what might happen."

Rory nods. "Righto. I'll see how I go."

"And you might want to put in a slip," I tell Troy as I turn and jog back down the other end.

It takes Rory three balls to get it right. The first two he gets too full and straight and they sail straight back past him to the fence for four. The third one though he nails right on the spot I was talking about. The batsman's expecting it to sit up nicely for him to drive, just like the first two, but it jags away and catches the edge of his bat, giving our 'keeper a nice easy catch. We all run in to celebrate the wicket and I say to Rory, "Nice job."

“Thanks for the tip,” he replies as we high five.

The final two overs aren't too bad for us with Rory hitting that same spot a couple more times, and the final score of six wickets for 186 runs is pretty respectable considering what it could've been. As I look around at our team as we walk off the field for the innings break though, I'm not sure we have even half that many runs in us.

FOUR

I'm sorting through my kit bag at the innings break when someone sits down beside me on the bench. I'm so engrossed in what I'm doing, I don't pay too much attention. As I reach into my bag and pull out my gloves, a voice says, "Tough going out there, huh?"

I don't recognise the voice, so I turn my head to see who it is. One of the scouts that the coaches introduced earlier is sitting there, smiling at me. "Hi," he says. "Your coach told me you're Adam Henderson's sister. Alice, right?"

"That's me," I reply. I have no idea what he wants to ask about Adam, but I guess I could put in a good word for him.

"Got time for a chat?"

"Sure, but if you want to know about Adam, you should really be talking to him. Or Dad."

"It's not Adam I want to talk about. It's you."

"Oh."

The scout sticks out his hand. "John Waverly," he says.

I shake his hand. "Alice Henderson, but you already know that."

He smiles. "I just wanted to ask you about what you said to the bowler out there in the eighteenth over."

"I just told him to bowl fuller."

"I see," he says. "That ball that got that last wicket. It jagged away quite a bit. Did you know that was going to happen?"

I shrug. "Maybe." I'm not sure how much I should tell the scout, because technically, what I did could be called cheating. Although I could argue it does come under the rules about pitch condition and every player has the right to inspect the pitch. It's just that no-one does when they're

cement ones covered in fake grass. You just assume that they're all flat.

John chuckles. "Alice, I'm not interested in whether what you did was legal or not, I just want to know what you said."

I consider my options. Technically, it's not a recognised match, so even if I was cheating, there aren't any sanctions. Besides, what would they do? Ban me from playing? "There's a spot out there, just past a good length, that not many people know about."

"Oh?"

"It's a little crack in the pitch that you can't see unless you're looking for it because the fake grass has covered it up."

John looks out over the field. "Is that right?"

"Yep."

"And you told your bowler to hit that crack? Is that it?"

"Pretty much," I reply. I'm still not exactly sure where this is going, but I'm in deep enough now anyway so I keep going. "There's another one, a bit shorter on the leg side around middle and leg, that if you hit it with a slower ball, it stays low. That one's harder to hit though and only really has an effect on lefties."

"I see," John says. He's got a weird sort of smile, like maybe he's impressed but not sure whether he should be. He doesn't ask any more questions, so I go back to getting my kit ready for my batting innings, even though I don't know where I am in the order yet.

Troy sits down on the bench on my other side. "Hey. Sorry to interrupt," he says. "I could really do with some help sorting out the batting order. Rory's on a high so he wants to open the batting and I can't talk him out of it."

"Just let me get changed and I'll be over," I reply.

Troy smiles. "Thanks."

John stands up. "I'll let you get back to it. I'm looking forward to seeing you bat."

I watch as he weaves his way around the seats and heads off to the big stand near the canteen. I quickly change my socks, pull my batting shoes on and head over to where Troy's talking to the rest of the team.

I pick up my batting gear and stand up.

Troy stands up beside me. "What did the scout want?" he asks.

"Just talking about the game."

"Asking about Adam?"

I shrug but don't answer. Instead I say, "We better get the order sorted. We might have to draw straws if no-one wants to go in first."

Troy laughs. "I hope not."

FIVE

Our batting innings goes exactly as expected. No-one else put their hands up to open the batting with Rory, so it was left to me. Rory got us off to a flyer but holed out in the deep on twenty-five when he got a bit too excited about an Adam Henderson bouncer. After that, it was like watching a slow-motion car crash. Unfortunately for me, I could only watch it happen from the non-strikers' end because none of our batsmen were even giving me a chance to get to the strikers' end to face any balls.

By the time our last batsman, Trent, meets me in the middle, we're a paltry 9 for 54. Apart from Rory's twenty-five, I'm the next highest run scorer on eighteen, and the next highest after that is the extras. We've only got five overs left to face, but I doubt we're going to be able to see out the innings if Trent's jitteriness is anything to go by.

"How's the pitch playing?" Trent asks. He doesn't really want to know the answer. He's just asking out of habit. Besides, it's flat as a tack and Trent's not a batsman, so it's completely irrelevant what I tell him.

"Not as fast as it looks," I reply and pat him on the shoulder with a gloved hand. As Trent does some stretches, I take a quick look around at the field that Adam and Jason are setting. Adam's got two more balls left so Trent just needs to survive them and leave me on strike for the next one. It looks like Adam wants to give Trent some heat judging by the extra slip he's put in. He's also bringing all his fielders up into catching positions. It's intimidation pure and simple and one look at Trent's face tells me it's working.

"Just get bat on ball," I tell him. "You'll be right."

"Easy for you to say," he replies.

The umpire tells us to face up and I give Trent one last thumbs up as he heads to the

strikers' end. He stands off to the side of the crease and pats down every piece of protective equipment he's wearing, and some he's not. Finally, he loosens his shoulders and steps onto the pitch. I am absolutely certain this will be the last ball of the match.

I look back at Adam at the top of his run up and I can practically see the gleam in his eye. These are the moments fast bowlers live for, getting the other teams' bowlers on strike, giving them a taste of their own medicine. Only Trent's a spinner, so it's not really a fair comparison.

Adam runs in and he bowls one straight at Trent's body, making him play. Trent manages to get his bat on it and drop it down and in his panic he takes off for a run. I send him back and he only just makes it back into his ground. Once the wicketkeeper has the ball, I meet Trent in the middle of the pitch and poke at the grass. "Keep your eye on the ball," I tell him. "Don't panic. This'll be the last one you have to face, I promise."

Trent takes a couple of ragged breaths and nods.

Adam's final ball screams past Trent's ears and he does a really bad job of trying to look like it didn't affect him. We meet back in the middle of the pitch, ready for the change of ends. The next bowler is a spinner. "Can you handle spin?" I ask.

Trent shrugs. "Probably better than pace."

"Okay. I'll try to hit the fence if I can, but no singles until the end of the over. That way you don't have to face up. Deal?"

"Deal," Trent says.

I manage to hit two fours and a six and then on the second last ball, I hit a single to mid-wicket that should be an easy one, but Trent almost stuffs it up by ball-watching. I have to run wide off the pitch and only just manage to avoid being run out. Thankfully, he makes it up to me by surviving the last ball and leaving me on strike to face Adam's last over.

Rory runs out some water to Trent and I and whispers, "You need to keep Trent off strike.

He looks like he's going to faint."

"He'll be fine," I reply, even though I don't think Trent will be fine at all. He pulls his helmet down on his head and adjusts the chin strap, shaking his head a couple of times to make sure it's tight. I look over to Adam, standing at the top of his mark, tossing the ball up and catching it. I can see the smirk on his face from here. It's the same one he gives me in the back yard when he thinks he's got a plan that will get me out. Rory runs back off the field and as I wander back to the pitch with Trent, I overhear Jason's dad, who's run water out for his team, say, "We've got this covered, boys. These two aren't threats at all." Adam and the rest of his team agree with laughter. I want to smack them in the head with my bat. I look over to the canteen where the scouts are standing and see John Waverly leaning on the boundary fence. I decide then and there to teach the A team a lesson.

Alice Henderson On Debut Extract

Thanks for reading the extract of *Alice Henderson, On Debut*. [Click through to my website](#) to order your copy in ebook or paperback.

When I was ten, just like Alice, I presented myself to the cricket coach at my primary school in Queensland, Australia, wanting to play cricket for the school. It took quite a fight from my Principal, who fought hard on my behalf to get the other primary school Principals to agree to let me play with the boys, and I'll be forever grateful to him for showing this little girl that I was as good as the boys.

I'd been brought up on cricket. I would sit for hours with both sets of grandparents, watching Test Matches and Sheffield Shield games, listening to their armchair commentary. I'd have long talks with them about who should make the Australian team and why, who was out of form, and which opposition players we loved to hate.

Cricket is ingrained in my DNA but the one thing I never knew was that I could play it outside of school. I played back before the internet, so I had no idea that there were any Australian women's players, let alone that I could play representative cricket at any level way back then. How times have changed.

As I write this, in late August of 2016, the Australian Women's cricket team are the number one team in the world. Some of our players are household names, and we're coming in to the second year of the WBBL - the Women's Big Bash League - which has been an exciting addition to our summer and is compulsory viewing in my household (much to my wife's consternation).

And so, with all of that background, it was not entirely unexpected when Alice Henderson appeared and started begging me to tell her story. She's nothing like me although parts of her story may seem a little familiar. She is everything I wished I could be when I was her age.

I am re-living my childhood dreams through her. I hope you do too, and I hope she inspires you to pick up the willow and, as Charlie would so eloquently put it, 'have a crack at cricket'.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized initial 'A' followed by a horizontal line and a small flourish below it.

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