

## Cricket 113

### Chapter 113

The moment I saw the squad list for the upcoming Test series against the West Indies, my heart sank. My name wasn't there. I had prepared myself for any possibility, but seeing it in black and white made it real. But for now, I had another break—a long one, in fact. The Test series was scheduled to start on August 26 and would go on until September 15. That meant a whole month without any competitive cricket for me.

I had two clear plans for this break. First, I would go home, spend time with my parents, and celebrate my birthday with them. It had been months since I last saw them properly, and this seemed like the perfect time. The second part of my plan was a trip to the UK for some personal work.

The first few days after the squad announcement were tough. I had to sit back and watch my teammates prepare for the Test matches while I wasn't a part of it. But rather than letting it get to me, I decided to make the most of my time off. Cricket had consumed so much of my life lately that I had barely taken a moment to just breathe. Maybe, in some way, this break was a blessing in disguise.

On August 20, I packed my bags and took a flight home.

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The flight was smooth, and I managed to catch up on some much-needed rest. As the plane touched down at Mumbai airport, I looked out the window at the familiar city lights twinkling in the distance. It felt good to be home.

Walking through the terminal, I pulled my cap lower, hoping to move unnoticed. But as I exited the terminal, I heard murmurs and whispers. Within seconds, they turned into excited voices calling my name.

"Aarav! Aarav!"

I turned and saw a group of fans approaching. It started with a few, but within moments, more joined in. There were girls holding their phones up, already recording, and a few guys eagerly pushing forward with some notebooks and camera. I could see the excitement in their eyes, their admiration evident.

"Can I get a selfie, please?" a young woman asked, beaming.

"Of course," I said with a smile, posing for the picture.

Another girl, probably in her early twenties, handed me a notebook. "I've been following you since your debut. Your century in the last match was just phenomenal! Can you please sign this?"

I took the pen and signed the page, smiling as I saw my name scribbled on the front cover with hearts around it.

Another group of girls approached, giggling among themselves before one of them, a little bolder than the others, spoke up. "Aarav, you play with so much confidence. It's really inspiring! Can we take a group picture?"

"Of course," I chuckled.

I posed with them as their friend clicked the picture. As I moved on, a young girl of around twelve ran up to me with her father. "Bhaiya, I play cricket too! Will you sign my bat?"

I kneeled down to her level, took the bat from her, and signed it. "That's amazing! Keep practicing, and who knows? Maybe I'll see you playing for India one day."

She grinned brightly, holding the bat close to her chest, and ran back to her father, who gave me a nod as a thanking gesture.

The moment I took my sunglasses off, there was an audible gasp from a few girls. "Oh my God, he looks even better in real life!" I overheard someone whisper, making me chuckle.

After spending some time with the fans, security escorted me to my car.

As I got into the car, I waved at the remaining fans who were still trying to capture pictures. Some were shouting my name, and a few were even chanting, "Aarav! Aarav!"

I leaned back into my seat, exhaling deeply. Moments like these reminded me why I loved playing cricket. It wasn't just about runs or wickets; it was about inspiring people, making them feel something special. And the fact that so many of my fans were young women, breaking stereotypes and showing love for the game, made it even more fulfilling.

The car pulled away from the airport, and I was finally heading home. The break had just begun, and I was looking forward to every moment of it.

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"As soon as I reached the comforting embrace of my mother and stepped inside the house, I felt at peace. No matter where life took me, this place would always be my foundation."

"Look at you! You've lost weight," my mother said, examining me from head to toe.

I laughed. "Ma, I've been training, playing matches. I'm in the best shape of my life."

She shook her head. "Nothing that a few homemade meals can't fix."

The next few days were filled with warmth and nostalgia. I spent time with my parents, caught up with old friends, and revisited some of my favorite places. My birthday was on August 31, and my family made sure it was special. It wasn't about grand celebrations, but just being surrounded by my family.

The morning of my birthday, I woke up to the aroma of my favorite dishes being prepared in the kitchen. My mother had woken up early to make everything from scratch. My father, usually a man of few words, greeted me with a proud smile and a big hug.

"Another year older, another year wiser," he said.

The day was filled with laughter, food, and heartfelt conversations. My friends came over in the evening, and we had a small get-together. It was a simple yet beautiful day.

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Just as I settled into my bed, my phone buzzed with an incoming video call from my friends who were currently in South Africa, playing for India A—Abhishek Sharma, Shubhman Gill, Yashasvi Jaiswal, and Arshdeep Singh.

I answered the call, and immediately, the screen was filled with their familiar, grinning faces.

"Look who finally decided to grace us with his presence!" Abhishek teased. "The superstar himself"

Shubman smirked. "Aarav, we saw the clips from the airport. Bro, the ratio of female fans to male fans is insane!"

Arshdeep laughed. "Forget cricket, your real talent is attracting female fans! Look at this guy, acting all modest!"

I shook my head, grinning. "Shut up, you guys! It's not like that. Just regular fans showing support."

Yashasvi grinned. "Oh yeah? Then explain the thousands of new female followers you gained on Instagram in the last few days?"

I opened my Instagram out of curiosity and saw the notification flood—skyrocketing followers, a crazy number of likes and comments, and tons of messages.

Abhishek whistled. "Bro, at this rate, you're going to be the next Bollywood heartthrob!"

"Cricketer by profession, heartbreaker by reputation!" Arshdeep added with a wink.

I rolled my eyes. "You guys need to stop! I'm just focusing on my game."

Shubman smirked. "Sure, sure. But for real, man, we're proud of you. You've been consistently playing for the national team, and now, everyone's talking about you."

Yashasvi nodded. "Yeah, bro. From U-19 to this, it's been a journey. And you've made it big. You deserve all of this."

I felt a swell of pride and gratitude. "Thanks, guys. That means a lot coming from you all. You know how much we've all worked for this."

Abhishek grinned. "Okay, enough of this emotional speech. Let's talk about the real deal. When are you throwing a party for your Birthday?"

Arshdeep laughed. "Yes, the 'Aarav Pathak Special Party'! We're waiting!"

I smirked. "How about when you guys get back from South Africa? We'll have a proper get-together."

Shubman grinned. "Done deal! And until then, enjoy your break. Just don't get lost in all the fan attention!"

I chuckled. "You guys are impossible! But yeah, see you soon!"

The call ended, and I leaned back in my seat, smiling. It felt great to catch up with my friends and hear their words of encouragement. Despite all the fame and attention, moments like these reminded me of my roots and the people who had been with me through it all.

I scrolled through my Instagram for a bit, looking at the recent photos that had gone viral. There were endless fan edits, some hilarious memes, and a few headlines calling me "India's Rising Cricket Star." I couldn't help but smile at the overwhelming support.

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After spending a few days at home, it was time for the next part of my plan. The trip to the UK. There were some personal matters I had to take care of, and this was the best time to do it.

I booked my tickets and left for London on September 4. As much as I loved being home, I was also looking forward to this trip.

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As I landed in London, a car from The Wentworth Club, which is a 5 Star Luxury Hotel in London, was already waiting to pick me up. The prestigious five-star hotel had arranged everything perfectly, and I was driven in comfort through the scenic roads leading to the grand entrance. The moment I stepped into the lobby, I was greeted with warm hospitality, and the check-in process was smooth.

"Welcome, Mr. Pathak," the receptionist said with a polite smile. "Your suite is ready as per your reservation. If you need anything, our staff is at your service."

"Thank you," I replied, taking the key card and heading to my room.

The suite was breathtaking—luxuriously furnished with a large king-size bed, a panoramic view of the golf course, and a private lounge area. After the long flight, all I wanted was to crash into the plush bedding. But before sleeping, I had one last thing to take care of.

With the help of the hotel staff, I arranged for a rental car—a sleek, black Audi R8. The powerful machine would be delivered to the hotel the next morning, ready for my use. Satisfied with the arrangement, I finally lay down, letting the exhaustion of the day take over. Tomorrow was going to be busy, but for now, I allowed myself to drift into a deep, restful sleep.

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As I woke up in the morning, I reminded myself of the tight schedule ahead. This month was packed—around a week or two of work here in London, followed by some ad shoots in India. There wasn't much time to relax, but I was looking forward to what lay ahead.

After freshening up, I picked up my phone and made a call. The moment the other person answered, I said, "I'm coming now."

"Alright," he replied, before sending me an ID card over the chat.

I got dressed in a casual yet polished look—jeans, a crisp shirt with the sleeves folded to my elbows, and a sleek silver watch that added a finishing touch. Once ready, I headed down to the hotel parking and took my Audi R8, which had been delivered as promised.

Driving through the streets of London, the crisp morning air and the hum of the engine made for a perfect start to the day. Soon, I arrived at the University of London. As I pulled into the campus, I noticed heads turning. People were whispering—some about me, others about the car.

The moment I stepped out, a man emerged from the academic building. He appeared to be in his mid-forties, dressed in professional attire, with a welcoming yet authoritative demeanor. His name was John, a senior official in the academic block of the University of London.

John approached me with a polite smile. "Mr. Aarav, welcome. I trust your journey here was comfortable?"

I nodded. "Yes, it was. Thank you."

He gestured towards the entrance. "Shall we proceed? We have some formalities to complete for your enrollment."

I followed him inside, knowing that this was the beginning of another important chapter in my journey—pursuing an online Business Administration course at one of the world's most prestigious institutions.

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Inside the office, I was greeted by the dean, Mrs. Wendy Thomson, a poised woman with an air of authority. She welcomed me with a warm smile as I took a seat across from her desk.

"Mr. Aarav, it's a pleasure to have you here. I understand you're here to finalize your admission process," she said, adjusting her glasses.

"Yes, ma'am," I nodded. "I believe all necessary documents have already been submitted to Mr. John."

John, who was standing beside me, placed a neatly organized file on her desk. "Everything is in order, Mrs. Thomson. All required documents have been verified and processed."

She flipped through the papers, nodding approvingly. "Excellent. Now, let me brief you about your degree program."

She placed a brochure in front of me and continued, "The University of London offers a Bachelor of Science (BSc) in Business Administration, a comprehensive program designed to equip students with critical business skills. The curriculum is structured under the academic direction of Royal Holloway, ensuring a high standard of education."

I skimmed through the brochure while listening. The program seemed rigorous but flexible—exactly what I needed.

Mrs. Thomson continued, "Since you're enrolling in the online format, you'll have access to digital learning resources, recorded lectures, and interactive sessions with professors. At the end of each academic year, you'll be required to appear for online exams. You can complete the degree within a flexible timeframe of three to six years, depending on your pace."

"That sounds perfect," I said.

"Your assigned section is Class A-Online," she added. "You'll receive access to the university portal within 48 hours, where you can find your schedule, coursework, and faculty details."

"Got it," I replied. "Is there anything else I need to do?"

"Just sign here to confirm your enrollment," she said, sliding a document toward me.

I signed the form, making it official. Mrs. Thomson handed me a welcome packet along with my student ID card.

"Welcome to the University of London, Aarav. We're glad to have you on board," she said with a smile.

"Thank you, ma'am," I said, shaking her hand.

With that, the formalities were done. John escorted me out, and as we walked back, I couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement.