

## Cricket 159

### Chapter 159

The floodlights were dimming. The night was warm and heavy, filled with the scent of grass, sweat, and the lingering echo of celebration. But the real magic, the real heart of victory, often doesn't unfold on the stage or in front of the cameras. It happens in the small, intimate moments that follow—the ones that never make the highlight reel.

We sat on the soft, cool grass near the boundary line of the now-empty pitch. Me, Hardik Pandya, Jassi bhaiya (Jasprit Bumrah), Rohit bhaiya, and Siraj bhai, all sprawled out like carefree schoolboys after a long cricket match in the gullies of Mumbai or Baroda.

We weren't rivals here. There were no franchises, no opposing jerseys. Just five Indian boys, hearts light, faces sunburned, spirits higher than they had ever been.

"Ab toh India ko ek aur star mil gaya," Hardik said with a smirk, nudging me with his elbow.

"Bas consistency maintain karna, bhai," Jassi bhaiya added.

"Consistency aur ek acchi girlfriend!" Siraj chimed in with a laugh that made all of us break into chuckles.

Rohit bhaiya, always the funny one, grinned and shook his head. "Pehle yeh bata, cake kaun kaat raha hai party mein?"

The banter was endless, playful, and perfect. It was that sacred hour after a dream had come true—when reality still felt like a dream. We were sweaty, tired, sore—but nothing could wipe the smiles off our faces.

After a while, I pulled out my phone. The screen was flooded with messages—journalists, old friends, teammates, even some random people I hadn't heard from in years. But there were two people I needed to talk to right away.

I called home.

"Dad? Mom?"

Their voices crackled through the speaker, and the emotion in them was impossible to hide.

"You did it," my dad said, his voice tight with pride.

"We're so proud of you," Mom whispered.

They didn't say much, but they didn't have to. Their silence was filled with love, their words soaked in years of prayers, hope, and belief.

After we hung up, I texted Shraddha.

"Will talk soon. Just wanted to say—today was everything."

I stared at the message for a second before hitting send. No celebration sticker. Just words. Real and raw.

Later that night, the RCB team hosted a private celebration. It wasn't a grand Bollywood-style bash. No media, no paparazzi. Just us. The team that had fought, fallen, risen, and finally conquered.

The hotel banquet room was transformed into a zone of joy. There was a cake—shaped like the IPL trophy, of course. Kohli cut the first slice and shoved it into my mouth with that devilish grin of his.

"Orange cap, purple cap, and a mouthful of cake—ab sab mil gaya tujhe," he joked.

There was music. Loud, upbeat Punjabi and Bollywood songs. Someone brought out a dhol. We danced like maniacs—Dube's Bhangra moves were outrageous, and Yuzi tried doing a backflip and nearly took out a table.

Dinner was served but mostly forgotten in the laughter and dancing. Everyone had phones out, recording reels, clicking selfies, shouting over each other. For a night, we weren't athletes. We were just a bunch of ecstatic boys who had reached the mountaintop.

Sometime around 2 a.m., we piled into the team bus. The energy was lower now but still warm. Heads rested against windows. Some of us hummed songs. Some just stared into the distance with dreamy smiles.

I leaned back in my seat, the trophy case glinting in the corner, and closed my eyes.

Back at the hotel, I headed straight to my room. The silence there hit me like a wave. The contrast to the noise and movement of the stadium and party was almost jarring.

I peeled off my jersey, letting the fabric fall to the floor. My muscles ached as I walked into the bathroom. The water cascaded over my skin, washing away the grime, the tension, the pressure.

And when I stepped out, I caught my reflection in the mirror. Wet hair. Tired eyes. A soft smile.

This was me.

Aarav Pathak.

IPL Champion.

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The night had finally settled into a warm silence, the kind that hums gently after a thunderstorm of cheers, fireworks, and the clinking of champagne glasses. Aarav sat in his hotel room, freshly bathed, wrapped in the afterglow of what had undoubtedly become the greatest day of his cricketering journey.

Lying back on the plush hotel bed, Aarav exhaled a long breath, the kind that carries the weight of years spent hustling, hoping, and holding on. He looked up at the ceiling, trying to process it all. RCB had won. Finally. But amid the roaring joy, there was one thought that had quietly danced through his mind the entire evening—Shradha.

His heart picked up pace as he reached for his phone. There was a kind of nervous excitement in his fingertips as he tapped on her name, the familiar ring tone filling the quiet room. The screen flickered, and then she appeared.

There she was.

Her hair tied up in a lazy bun, cheeks slightly flushed from sleep, wearing a soft night suit printed with tiny stars. Her eyes sparkled with a warmth that no trophy could rival, and her lips curled into a smile that reached straight into Aarav's soul.

"Hey champ," she said softly, her voice as comforting as a lullaby after a storm.

Aarav couldn't help but stare for a moment, taking in the sight of her. The familiarity, the comfort, the calm she exuded—it was everything he didn't know he'd missed all evening. And then he broke into laughter, loud and hearty.

"Haa haa! RCB won the IPL! Can you believe it?" he said, eyes dancing with childlike glee.

Shradha laughed too, her smile growing wider. "Yeah! I saw every ball. Screamed my lungs out when you hit that winning six."

Aarav raised an eyebrow, mock-serious. "But wait... weren't you rooting for Mumbai Indians? You traitor!"

She crossed her arms with playful defiance. "Yeah, maybe. But when did I ever say I wouldn't be happy if you won?"

He blinked, her words hitting him harder than he expected. A moment of silence passed between them, charged and warm, and then he burst out laughing again.

"What's so funny now?" she asked, amused.

"Nothing," he chuckled, his voice gentler now. "It's just... you look amazing tonight. Like, really amazing."

Shradha blushed, caught off guard, and instinctively began twirling a strand of hair around her finger. Her cheeks turned a soft pink, and her eyes dropped for a moment before meeting his again.

Trying to ease the sudden flutter in his chest, Aarav leaned forward. "Hey, I've got a request. Now that I'm officially an IPL champion... can you please wear an RCB jersey for me? Just this once? Cheer for me properly?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Nope. Not happening."

He folded his hands and gave her the most dramatic puppy eyes he could muster. "Pretty please? Pleaaase? For the man who just brought glory to Bangalore?"

She let out a dramatic sigh. "Ugh, you're impossible. Fine! You win. But just for five minutes, okay?"

Aarav whooped with excitement as she placed the phone on her study table. The camera now gave him a peek into her room—shelves lined with books, scented candles flickering, and a small polaroid of the two of them from the New Zealand tour, tacked lovingly above the desk.

He watched with a big grin as she opened her wardrobe, sifted through some clothes, and then, as if pulling out a secret, retrieved a crimson and black RCB jersey with number 4.

"So, you did have my jersey! Closet supporter, huh?" he teased.

She rolled her eyes and disappeared into the washroom. The door clicked shut, and Aarav was left staring at the blank screen, waiting like a teenager before his first date.

Minutes passed, slow and thick like honey. He tapped his fingers on his thighs, occasionally checking his reflection in the phone screen.

Then the door opened.

And out came Shradha.

Her hair now loose, cascading over her shoulders, the jersey fitting her in a way that made his breath catch. She walked toward the screen with mock attitude, strutting like a runway model, and then did a dramatic twirl.

"Presenting... the newest, and probably the most reluctant, RCB supporter."

Aarav clapped exaggeratedly, a grin stretching from ear to ear. "Now this is a true victory celebration."

She came closer to the screen, eyes glowing. "You were incredible today. That six in the final over? My dad thought something went wrong when I screamed."

He chuckled. "Honestly, all I could think of was ending it in style. And maybe... hoping you were watching."

Her gaze softened, her voice quieter. "I wouldn't have missed it for the world. You deserve everything, Aarav. The win, the spotlight, the love. But promise me something?"

"Anything."

"Don't lose yourself in all this. Don't become someone I won't recognize."

He leaned in slightly, the laughter fading into something deeper, steadier. "I won't. No matter what comes next... you'll always be one of the first people I'll want to share it with."

There was silence again. Not awkward. Just warm. The kind that made the moment feel sacred.

"By the way," Aarav grinned suddenly, "that RCB jersey looks way better on you than it ever did on me. You might just be my lucky charm."

"Enjoy it while it lasts. It's going straight back into the wardrobe tomorrow," she said, trying to act stern but unable to hide her giggles.

He laughed, then leaned back against the headboard, holding the phone to his chest, letting the soft sound of her breathing fill the silence.

"I wish you were here tonight," he murmured.

"Me too," she whispered. "But we'll see each other soon, right?"

"Definitely. Once the madness and covid... all calms down. Then... dinner? Just us, then I will tell you something."

She smiled, tilting her head. "Only if you wear a Mumbai Indians jersey."

He groaned, placing a hand over his heart. "You drive a hard bargain, woman."

They laughed. Talked a little more. Teased, reminisced, even planned a short getaway in hushed tones, like they were sharing secrets beneath a blanket fort.

As sleep crept into their voices and their eyes grew heavier, Aarav whispered, "Goodnight, Shrads."

"Goodnight, my champion," she replied, her voice like a soft lullaby.

The call ended, but the warmth remained. Aarav placed the phone beside him and looked out the window. The city lights still sparkled in the distance, but inside his chest, a different kind of glow had taken hold.

The medals had been put away. But in his heart, the sight of a girl wearing his jersey, smiling with pride—that was the real win.

And as he drifted into sleep, the last image in his mind was her face—glowing, laughing, real. Love, after all, was the best kind of glory.

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The night was beginning to wind down, but my adrenaline refused to cooperate.

I got up, pulled on my hoodie, and tiptoed down the hall like a thief in the night. The nameplate on the door read Virat Kohli. A few seconds later, the door creaked open. There he stood—Virat bhaiya—still in his team jersey, his hair slightly messy, his expression tired but peaceful.

"Aarav? Everything okay?"

I smiled sheepishly. "Bhaiya... I have a small request."

He raised an eyebrow. "At this hour?"

I nodded, biting my lip. "Can I... hold the trophy? Just for a bit? And maybe... can you click a picture of me with it?"

He looked at me, the corner of his lips twitching upward. Then, without a word, he stepped aside and gestured toward the glittering trophy on his table.

"Come in. But you're buying me a coffee tomorrow morning," he teased.

"Deal!" I grinned.

Moments later, I was cradling the trophy like it was the most precious thing in the world. Its golden shimmer under the dim hotel lights made it look almost divine. Virat bhaiya watched, amused, as I gently lifted it, the weight both literal and symbolic pressing into my palms.

"Let's go to my room," I said suddenly.

He gave me a confused look. "Huh?"

"Trust me, bhaiya."

So there we were, two grown men sneaking through the hotel hallway with the IPL trophy, like schoolboys with a mischief plan. Back in my room, I placed the trophy right in the center of the bed, fluffed the pillows around it, and then dramatically laid down beside it as if it were my sleeping companion.

Virat bhaiya laughed out loud. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Memory of a lifetime! C'mon, click it!" I chuckled.

He shook his head but played along, capturing multiple angles like a professional photographer. When I looked at the photos later, I couldn't stop grinning. There I was—Aarav Pathak, lying next to the IPL trophy like a man who had just married cricket itself.

I didn't wait.

I opened Instagram, added a cheeky caption—"When you sleep next to your dreams, literally."  
"Cameraman - @virat.kohli"—and hit post.

The explosion was instant.

My phone buzzed with likes, comments, and DMs like it had come alive. My Instagram Followers were currently - 40.34 million. I rubbed my eyes at the number, thinking it had to be a glitch. But it wasn't.

The world had taken notice.

Fans, celebrities, even cricketers I had idolized growing up commented on the post. Some laughed, others congratulated me, and a few joked about the unusual pose. But I didn't care. That moment was mine. And I'd made sure it would live on forever.

The next few days were a whirlwind of celebration, interviews, video calls with family and old coaches, and yes—plenty of free food from hotel staff who now treated me like royalty.

Then came the journey back home.

We boarded the team flight bound for India. There was a strange calm in the cabin, a blend of exhaustion and pride. We followed every COVID-19 protocol—masks, sanitizers, testing—because safety still came first.

As the plane soared over the clouds, I looked out the window, reflecting on everything. From the nervous net sessions to this triumphant return, the journey had been nothing short of magical.

When we landed in Mumbai, the applause of airport staff was muted by masks, but the eyes above them sparkled with pride. We were immediately taken to a luxury hotel for a strict 21-day quarantine.

Those 21 days became a strange kind of bliss.

Every morning, I'd wake up to breakfast by the window, watching Mumbai rise with its usual chaotic grace. I'd journal what I remembered about the finals—every ball, every cheer. I even sketched the trophy once, not that I'm good at drawing, but it felt... intimate.

I also talked to Shradha every day. Our calls grew longer, deeper. She even wore the RCB jersey again—"just for quarantine," she claimed. I knew better.

Day by day, the outside world buzzed with posts, memes, tributes, and flashbacks. But inside my room, I found something rarer peace.

And as I stepped into the arms of my waiting family at the gate, all masked and misty-eyed, I realized something:

The trophy was a dream. The journey was a story.

But this? Coming home... this was everything.