

## Cricket 161

### Chapter 161

The afternoon sun dipped lazily toward the horizon, casting the entire coastline in a soft, golden hue. The salt in the air was heavy, and the rhythmic roar of the ocean waves sounded like the pulse of another world — vast, endless, and full of mysteries yet to unfold.

I leaned into the steering wheel, my fingers tapping out a nervous rhythm against it. The Australia tour was looming closer, and with it, the possibility of something I had dreamt about since the day I first picked up a bat — my debut in Test cricket.

The nets sessions had been brutal, the gym even more so. Every muscle in my body ached with that deep, satisfying pain that told me I was getting stronger. That I was preparing not just my body, but my soul, for what lay ahead.

Still, something inside me urged for a few moments of peace — a moment to breathe before the storm.

On a whim, I turned my car toward the beach road, feeling the tension begin to unravel with every passing mile. The farther I drove, the lighter the city noise became, fading into the background until only the ocean's roar remained.

Parking the car near a small, almost forgotten stretch of sand, I stepped out, slipping off my shoes to feel the coolness of the earth beneath me. My six assigned security guards followed silently, keeping a respectful distance — close enough if needed, but far enough to allow me to feel free.

The beach was nearly deserted, save for a few scattered families and an old man walking a dog that barked half-heartedly at the seagulls. The air was cool and crisp, wrapping itself around me in a comforting embrace.

I walked slowly, my toes sinking into the soft, damp sand, until I reached the water's edge.

The first touch of the ocean on my feet sent a chill racing up my spine. I smiled, letting the sensation wash over me. I sat down, legs stretched out, arms braced behind me, staring at the endless horizon where the sky kissed the sea.

Here, in this quiet place, I could almost forget the pressure, the expectations, the unspoken burden of carrying a nation's hopes into the battlefield of cricket.

I let the waves lap against my legs, again and again, washing away the stress, the fears, the doubts.

And then, out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of something — no, someone.

A familiar figure, just a little down the beach.

I squinted, brushing the hair away from my face as the wind picked up. It was a young man, tall and athletic, laughing as he leaned closer to a girl who sat beside him.

They were holding hands, their fingers tangled together in a way that screamed intimacy. The boy threw his head back and laughed — a laugh I would recognize anywhere.

It was Shubman Gill.

My teammate. My friend.

At first, I smiled, thinking it must be his sister or a cousin — Shub was always close to his family.

But as I casually stood up and began walking toward them, a strange feeling prickled at the back of my neck.

The girl wasn't acting like a sister. The way she looked at him, the way he leaned into her — it wasn't familial.

It was something else entirely.

I called out, loud enough to reach him over the sound of the ocean. "Shub!"

The reaction was instantaneous.

Shubman's head snapped around so fast it looked like it might detach from his shoulders. His face — normally the picture of calm confidence — was a mask of sheer terror.

I stopped in my tracks, heart hammering in curiosity.

The girl beside him also flinched, her hands flying to her lap, eyes wide and panicked. A bead of sweat rolled down her temple despite the breezy air.

Something was wrong.

Very wrong.

As I closed the distance between us, their faces became clearer under the golden light — and that's when the shock hit me like a runaway train.

I blinked once, twice, not trusting my eyes.

Because the girl sitting next to Shubman, holding his hand, laughing moments ago like the world was theirs alone — was someone I knew.

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For a moment, time seemed to freeze.

The ocean breeze whipped around us, but none of us moved. The crashing of the waves against the shore, once so calming, now sounded almost deafening in the thick silence between the three of us.

Standing just a few feet away from them, I stared — utterly gobsmacked.

Because the girl sitting beside Shubman Gill, holding his hand only moments ago, was none other than Sara Tendulkar.

Yes. Sara Tendulkar. Daughter of the legendary Sachin Tendulkar.

Sister of my friend, Shraddha Tendulkar.

My mind raced to piece together what I was seeing, but before I could even process the shock, both Shubman and Sara reacted like they had been electrocuted.

They practically leapt away from each other, putting enough space between them to satisfy any COVID-era health official. It would've been hilarious if it weren't so utterly bizarre.

They were both talking at once, voices tumbling over each other like two clumsy gymnasts crashing mid-air.

"Uh, no, it's not what it looks like—"

"We were just—"

"I mean, we're friends but—"

"Wait, no, that's not—"

Their hands flailed in the air like they were trying to conduct an invisible orchestra. Their faces flushed crimson under the soft sunset light, and Sara nervously tugged at the hem of her blue denim jacket while Shub adjusted his cap for the fiftieth time in two seconds.

I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing.

"Calm down! Calm down, you two!" I said, raising both hands like a referee breaking up a brawl.

"Take a breath before you both pass out."

They froze, staring at me like deer caught in headlights, then simultaneously sucked in huge, desperate breaths.

I shook my head, still chuckling. "Alright," I said, folding my arms across my chest. "Now... someone want to explain what exactly is happening here?"

Shub looked at Sara, Sara looked at Shub. It was like watching two first graders get caught sneaking candy in class.

Finally, after what felt like forever, Shubman cleared his throat and spoke, voice low but steady.

"Yeah... we're, um... dating," he admitted, scratching the back of his head awkwardly. "But please... please don't tell anyone, Aarav!"

He looked genuinely terrified, and Sara nodded rapidly beside him, her hands clasped together in a silent plea.

I couldn't stop myself from grinning. I threw my hands up theatrically.

"Relax, Romeo and Juliet!" I teased, letting the ocean breeze carry my words to them. "I'm not about to go live on Instagram or anything."

Both of them exhaled heavily, shoulders sagging in relief. It was like they had been holding their breath for hours.

"Hoooof!" they both let out in unison, making me laugh even harder.

I winked at them. "Seriously though... you guys looked like you were practicing social distancing faster than the government guidelines!"

Sara giggled, a pretty sound lost half in embarrassment, half in amusement.

Shubman rolled his eyes and muttered, "Yeah, yeah, laugh it up, bro."

I shook my head, smiling warmly now. "Come on, man. You know me. I won't tell a soul. Cross my heart."

He nodded, visibly relaxing now, and Sara offered a grateful smile.

Still, my curiosity burned too brightly to ignore.

"So...," I said, waggling my eyebrows mischievously. "How did this happen, huh? I mean, the cricketing upcoming star and the cricketing princess?"

Shubman chuckled awkwardly, rubbing his neck.

"Well," he began, "we first properly met at that charity event in 2018 — remember the one in Mumbai for youth education?"

"Yeah, so," he continued, "we got talking there... just casual stuff at first. Then we realized we had actually gone to the same college. Different years, but still. Small world, right?"

Sara picked up the story, her voice soft but excited. "Yeah, we bumped into each other a few times after that — events, college reunions... and somewhere along the way, it just... clicked."

She looked at Shub with an affection so clear it made my teasing instincts back off, just for a moment.

"Wow," I said, genuinely touched. "That's actually pretty sweet."

Shubman shrugged, a crooked smile on his face. "Yeah. We just didn't want... you know, the media circus. So we kept it under wraps."

"Smart move," I agreed. "Paparazzi would have a field day otherwise."

We all laughed, the earlier awkwardness melting away into the sea air.

Just then, a sharp trill broke the calm — Sara's phone, vibrating insistently in her jacket pocket.

She fumbled to pull it out, checking the screen. Her eyes widened comically. "Oh no."

"What?" I asked, eyebrows rising.

She slowly turned the screen toward me.

Incoming Video Call: Shraddha 

I blinked. Then my heart sank.

Because at that very moment, I remembered something critical — something that made my blood run cold.

I was wearing my smart glasses.

And Shraddha — dear, mischievous Shraddha — was on a live video call with me this entire time, connected through the glasses' built-in camera and mic.

Which meant...

She had seen everything.

Heard everything.

The teasing, the panicking, the confession — the whole beachside soap opera!

I slowly turned my head, as if Shraddha might materialize out of thin air, laughing her heart out.

Sara's hand flew to her mouth, realization dawning in horror.

Shubman looked like he wanted the sand to swallow him whole.

Before anyone could say anything, Sara answered the call. Shraddha's grinning face filled the screen, practically vibrating with excitement.

"Oye hoye!" Shraddha crowed, clapping her hands gleefully. "Caught red-handed, lovebirds!"

Shub buried his face in his hands, groaning audibly. Sara turned beet red, hiding behind her hair.

I was laughing so hard I nearly doubled over.

Shraddha wasn't done. She leaned closer to her camera, whispering dramatically, "Don't worry, Mummy and Daddy haven't seen it yet. Yet being the key word!"

"Shraddha!" Sara squeaked in horror.

Shraddha just laughed, twirling a pen between her fingers like a villain plotting her next move.

"Relax, relax," she said eventually. "Your secret's safe with me. For now."

"But," she added wickedly, "both of you owe me big time. I'm talking ice cream, movie night, dinner... and maybe something even more!"

Shubman groaned again, muttering under his breath, "This is blackmail. This is pure blackmail."

Sara, still mortified, nodded solemnly.

I shook my head, wiping tears of laughter from my eyes. "Well, at least the first family scandal didn't break in the newspapers."

Shraddha winked from the screen. "Yet."

And with that, she blew us a kiss and hung up, leaving behind a stunned silence broken only by the crash of the waves.

The three of us looked at each other, faces a mix of embarrassment, relief, and sheer disbelief.

Finally, I clapped Shubman on the back so hard he staggered forward a step.

"Well, buddy," I said, laughing. "Welcome to the crazy club. No membership fee — just lifetime teasing rights!"

Sara laughed too, and even Shubman finally cracked a sheepish smile.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting the sky in a brilliant wash of oranges and purples, I realized something.

In a world of cricket matches, media scrutiny, and endless expectations, it was these moments — these simple, messy, hilarious human moments — that made it all worthwhile.

No centuries scored, no trophies lifted could ever match the beauty of true friendship, love, and a little bit of chaos.

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If the whole beachside drama had taught me anything, it was that life with Shraddha Tendulkar around was never boring.

After that unforgettable evening, things somehow shifted into a different, softer gear. I guess it was the holiday season, or maybe just the strange magic of an unexpected summer, but for once, there were no hurried schedules, no cricket matches, no PR events.

Just... us.

Me, stuck at home thanks to the never-ending COVID-19 restrictions. Shraddha, equally house-arrested, craving every forbidden food imaginable.

"I swear to God, Aarav," she whined over a video call one evening, her face a picture of sheer drama, "if I don't eat vada-pav in the next twenty-four hours, I might actually cry."

I laughed, propping my phone against a water bottle on the kitchen counter. "You could just make it yourself, you know."

She gasped like I had suggested she climb Mount Everest barefoot.

"ME? Cook?" she said, clutching her heart theatrically. "I'm not trying to poison myself!"

"Lucky for you," I said, picking up a potato with a flourish, "you've got MasterChef Aarav at your service."

Her eyes lit up like a kid offered unlimited candy. "You're serious? You'll teach me?"

"Absolutely," I said, grinning. "By the time I'm done with you, Gordon Ramsay will be offering you a job."

"Challenge accepted!" she squealed, tying her hair into a messy bun and pulling out a notebook to write down — and doodle all over — my instructions.

It started with vada-pav.

"First rule," I said, as she tried peeling potatoes with the finesse of a blindfolded penguin, "no screaming unless absolutely necessary."

"I make no promises," she muttered, concentrating fiercely.

The kitchen on her side was soon filled with the chaos of clattering utensils, frantic running for "forgotten" ingredients, and Shraddha cursing the stubbornness of kitchen knives that apparently had a personal vendetta against her.

Still, despite the many misadventures — flour on her face, turmeric on her shirt, oil almost setting her kitchen ablaze — she eventually managed a presentable, golden-brown vada-pav.

"Moment of truth," I said, watching her lift it to her mouth.

She took a big, enthusiastic bite... and immediately coughed, eyes watering.

"Oh my God!" she wheezed. "Spicy!"

I laughed so hard I nearly dropped my phone.

"You said extra chilies!" she croaked, reaching for water.

"I didn't say chili apocalypse!" I howled.

We both ended up laughing so much that tears streamed down our faces, and just like that, the ice melted even more between us.

From there, it became a thing.

Every other evening, we had our little "Cooking with Aarav" sessions.

Puddings — where Shraddha somehow managed to whip cream onto the ceiling. Ice creams — where we debated endlessly over vanilla vs. chocolate. Missal-pav — where she kept "taste-testing" until half the sprouts were gone. Manchurian — "Why do these smell like socks before they're fried?" she'd asked, wrinkling her nose. Momos — where we both tried (and failed) to make perfect folds, ending up with doughy, mutant creatures.

It wasn't just cooking. It was banter, laughter, and a steady stream of teasing that blurred the lines of "just friends" more and more with each call.

"If I ever open a restaurant," she said once, brandishing a rolling pin, "I'll call it Disaster Delights."

"Perfect," I said. "Special discount for anyone who survives your cooking!"

Sometimes, after dinner, the calls didn't end.

We'd sit there, still connected, chatting about everything and nothing. Favorite childhood memories. Dream travel destinations. Fears we didn't usually say out loud.

One night, after a particularly long call filled with giggles and terrible food puns, Shraddha yawned, curling up against her pillow.

"Stay on the call," she mumbled sleepily, her voice thick with exhaustion. "Just until I fall asleep."

"Okay," I said softly, settling into my own bed, the glow of her face lighting up my screen.

I watched as her eyes fluttered closed, her breathing slowing, a peaceful smile on her lips.

Somewhere between teaching her to make momos and falling asleep with her still on video, something shifted in my chest.

Something real.

I didn't dare name it yet.

Didn't dare disturb the fragile, beautiful thing growing between us.

So I just whispered, too quietly for her to hear:

"Sweet dreams, Shraddha and I really really Lov.... nothing, just Good night!😊"

And drifted off myself, the last thing I saw before sleep claiming me — her.

The world outside stayed crazy. COVID numbers rose and fell like a mad symphony. News channels screamed endlessly. Rules changed by the hour.

But inside our little bubble, life was simple.

Full of laughter.

Full of vada-pav and pudding disasters.

Full of late-night talks and shared secrets.

The kind of life you didn't realize you'd been starving for until you finally had a taste.

And God, was it sweet.

