

## Cricket 163

### Chapter 163

The morning sun stretched its golden fingers through the curtains, gently nudging Aarav awake. But he didn't stir with the usual grogginess. Today was different. It wasn't just another morning. It was the day he'd leave for Australia—the first international tour since his and Shraddha's confession and hopefully my test debut. The air itself felt heavier, as if aware of the meaning the day carried.

His fingers reached instinctively for his phone on the nightstand, eyes still half-closed. The glow of the screen brought a sleepy smile to his face, and in that little square of light, the weight of the world felt lighter.

Message to Shraddha: Hi Love! Good Morning! Getting ready for the tour! After getting ready, will call you!

He hit send and lay back for a moment, staring at the ceiling. Yesterday still played in his mind like a film reel—her eyes sparkling under streetlights, the nervous tremble in her voice when she'd whispered, "I love you Aarav," the way her fingers had fit so perfectly into his. It had been real, the kiss. They were real now.

Shaking himself back to reality, Aarav swung his legs over the bed and stood, stretching the sleep from his limbs. He padded into the bathroom for a quick shower, steam rising like mist over the glass door. The scent of sandalwood soap and peppermint shampoo mingled in the air.

He shaved with careful precision, wanting to look sharp—sharp enough that even the airport security would notice. He wanted to carry a piece of her pride with him. Once dressed in his travel gear, he walked to the mandir in the corner of their home. He lit a stick of incense, folded his hands, and bowed his head.

"Keep me safe," he whispered. "And... help me make my family, her and the nation proud."

His mother was already in the kitchen, the comforting aroma of homemade aloo parathas and sizzling ghee greeting him like a warm embrace. She turned with a smile, handing him a plate stacked high.

"Eat beta. You'll need strength for the flight. And cricket, too."

He nodded, sitting down at the kitchen table where he'd eaten countless meals, but today, each bite felt like a memory being created.

Across the table, his father read the newspaper—or pretended to. His eyes didn't move much, and Aarav noticed the tight grip on the paper's edges.

When he was done, he rose and knelt, touching their feet. "Don't worry," he said softly, "Everything is managed under protocol by the BCCI. Masks, distancing, everything. I'll be fine."

His mother's hand lingered on his head, fingers trembling slightly.

"We know," she whispered, "Just... take care. And call. Often."

He gave them a final hug, holding on a second longer than usual, before stepping outside into the sharp chill of morning. The breeze tugged gently at his jacket, as if urging him not to go.

The driver opened the back door with a polite nod. Aarav slid in, placing his cricket kit gently beside him as if it were made of glass. The seatbelt clicked into place, and the car hummed to life.

As the car started to move Forward.

He tapped on her contact and pressed the call button.

"Calling Shradhs 💕..."

It rang once.

Twice.

Then—

"Hi love!" Her voice burst through the speaker like sunshine through storm clouds.

He smiled instantly, leaning his head back. "Hi my Love."

"You sound sleepy," she teased, voice warm with affection.

"Naah, on my way to Airport, as you know na, I have flight for Australia!"

"Aww," she said, laughing, "I know, I know!"

They both laughed, a sweet, rhythmically aligned sound that felt like music to his ears.

There was a pause—comfortable, full of the weight of everything left unsaid.

"Are you... okay?" she asked, her voice dropping to a softer octave.

"Yeah. Just had breakfast. Did pooja. Said goodbye to mom and dad. Now in the car, heading to the airport."

"I wish I could come see you off," she murmured, and he could hear the longing tucked in every syllable.

"Me too," he said, voice just as soft. "But you're already with me. Here." He tapped his chest over his heart.

She was quiet for a second.

"I'm going to miss you," she finally admitted, breath shaky.

Aarav swallowed hard. "I know. But this isn't goodbye, okay? Just... a new beginning. When I come back, we would go on lots of dates, enjoy movies and do what couples generally do!"

"Promise?"

"Promise. On my cricket bat."

She chuckled through the sadness. "You better video call me every single day. Even if it's just to show me your messed-up room."

"Already scheduled. You're my coach now, remember? For life."

"Coach Shraddha. I like the sound of that."

He laughed. "Strict but loving."

"Exactly!" she said, her energy rising again. "And don't forget your vitamins. And water. And wear sunscreen in Australia. The sun there is ruthless."

"Yes Dr. Shradha," he grinned. "I should've known I was getting a coach, Doctor and a Love in one."

The roads had begun to thin, airport signs now visible in the distance. The moment was closing in.

"I was thinking," he said slowly, "When I score my first century on this tour..."

"Yes?" she asked, breath catching.

"I'll dedicate it to you. Raise the bat. Look at the sky. And whisper your name. And everyone watching will wonder what he is whispering."

Her silence said more than words. He imagined her blinking back tears, biting her lip the way she always did when overwhelmed.

"I love you," she said, voice a feather on the breeze.

"I love you more," he replied, voice filled with every ounce of sincerity in his soul.

"Text me when you land?"

"Always. And maybe even from the clouds if possible!"

The car slowed as the airport terminal came into view, passengers buzzing around with trolleys and goodbyes.

"I have to go," he said reluctantly.

"Then go make me proud, Aarav."

"Only if you're waiting when I come back."

"Always," she echoed with a promise heavier than time.

He ended the call, the warmth of her voice still echoing in his ears. He sat still for a moment, grounding himself in that feeling before stepping out.

Aarav slung his bag over his shoulder and took a deep breath. The airport bustled around him—rolling luggage, muffled announcements, the scent of coffee and sanitizer, masked faces all moving toward their own destinations.

But he walked through it all with a calm certainty.

In love.

In purpose.

For her.

And as he crossed the glass doors into the terminal, Aarav knew—this wasn't a goodbye.

This was the start of something beautiful, something enduring, something worth every mile between them.

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The sterile chill of the VIP terminal melted beneath the warmth of camaraderie. Aarav wheeled his kit bag past the final checkpoint, heart still echoing with the rhythm of Shraddha's voice from their earlier

call. But as he stepped into the lounge, a different kind of thrill surged through him. This was no ordinary waiting area—it felt like a gateway to his dreams.

They were all there.

He saw all his teammates, Virat Kohli sat at the head of one table, relaxed yet commanding, his cap tilted back and a confident smirk dancing across his face. Prithvi Shaw was showing something on his phone to Mayank Agarwal, who burst into laughter loud enough to turn heads. Ajinkya Rahane nodded thoughtfully in a conversation with Ravichandran Ashwin, while Mohammed Shami and Jasprit Bumrah joked with Wriddhiman Saha over a game of cards.

The lounge buzzed with energy but the spirited ease of a family before battle. Aarav paused, drinking it all in. The air smelled of espresso, muscle spray, and the faint musk of fresh sports gear.

Aarav took the empty seat between Shaw and Ashwin. The conversation flowed like water, effortless and electric. They discussed everything—IPL locker room pranks, missed flights, bizarre food from foreign tours, weird fan encounters, and who snores the loudest on overnight journeys. Shaw mimicked a hyper commentator, sending the whole group into hysterics. Bumrah offered Aarav a protein bar like an initiation rite. Even Saha, usually reserved, clapped him on the back after a sarcastic jab that Aarav returned with a well-timed roast.

They welcomed him not with formality but with playful jibes and inside jokes, as if they'd known him for years. Mayank even dragged him into a harmless debate on who had the worst fashion sense in the squad. "Definitely Ashwin," Aarav joked. "You can't wear cargo shorts to a press conference, bhaiya!"

Ashwin laughed. "Arre, comfort over couture, always. You'll learn."

But beneath the laughter, Aarav remained acutely aware of something deeper. He was no longer an outsider. These were no longer distant idols. They were teammates—equals on the field, brothers in pursuit of the same glory.

Kohli leaned in at one point, dropping the facade for a moment. "Nervous for your debut?"

Aarav nodded. "A little. But... more excited, I think. This is what I've worked for."

"Good," Kohli said, patting his shoulder. "Stay hungry, but stay grounded. Don't chase the century. Chase the moment. The game knows."

Those words settled deep within him. Not as advice, but as a mantra. He repeated them silently, sealing them into memory like a sacred prayer.

Someone ordered another round of chai and sandwiches. The lounge smelled now of toasted bread and cardamom, and the mood had shifted to one of light nostalgia. Ashwin told a story about his first overseas tour where he lost his passport the night before departure. Shami shared a hilarious tale of getting locked out of his hotel room in boxers. They roared with laughter, and Aarav felt his stomach ache from it.

This wasn't just a team—it was a traveling circus of shared stories, burnt pancakes, and unforgettable partnerships.

The overhead announcements crackled, signaling final boarding for their flight. The players rose, stretching, grabbing their bags. Ashwin yawned dramatically. "Australia better be ready. We've got a debutant with a new spark."

Prithvi slung an arm around Aarav's shoulders as they walked toward the gate. "First time's always magical, bro. Just soak it in. You won't believe how fast it all goes."

They filed toward the gate like a tide of blue thunder, leaving behind empty coffee cups and a lingering echo of laughter. Aarav walked among them—not behind, not ahead.

Beside them.

And for the first time, it hit him: he wasn't just part of the squad.

He was part of the legacy.