

Cricket 172

Chapter 172

The sun had dipped below the Oval skyline, casting golden light over the city's high-rises as we returned to our hotel. The team was quiet, spent—not defeated, but tired in the way only Test cricket could leave you. It wasn't just the body that ached. It was the mind too.

I walked into my room, the door clicking shut behind me. The silence was comforting. I tossed my kit bag to the corner, peeled off the sweat-drenched jersey, and stepped into a hot shower. The water thundered down, washing away the dust, the grime, the missed chances. But not the thoughts.

Fifteen minutes later, in fresh cotton shorts and a tee, I sat on the edge of the bed and opened my phone. There was only one person I wanted to talk to.

Shradha.

Video Call: Connected

Her face popped onto the screen like sunlight through clouds.

"Hi babe!"

Her smile was the kind that melted days off your shoulders.

"Hey love!" she beamed. "How are you? Are you tired? Are you missing me? And—I love you a lot!"

I laughed, leaning back against the headboard.

"Hey hey, one question at a time! I was tired, yeah. But seeing you? I could play another five-day match right now. And yes—I miss you. Like crazy. And for that last question... I love you too, Shradhs."

She giggled, brushing her hair back. "I saw your wickets today! When you shouted like a madman after that wicket, God, you looked so hot! Dad says he sees Dale Steyn in you when you bowl."

I shook my head and chuckled. "That's high praise. I'll try to live up to it. But honestly, the Aussies batted well today. Tomorrow, though, with my lucky charm blessing me from afar..."

She cut in, playfully. "We'll take all the wickets, right Mr. Confident?"

"Right, Ms. Lucky Charm," I winked.

She leaned closer to the camera, lowering her voice dramatically. "You know... if sweet-talking was a sport, you'd be world champion."

I grinned. "No need. I'm already a champion in one sport, remember?"

"Hmm..." she mused, pretending to think. "Cricket... or flirting?"

We both burst into laughter.

After a moment, the mood softened. She rested her chin in her palm. "I miss you, Aarav. Nights are weird without your calls. And mornings feel incomplete without you teaching me how to cook food or just we doing online gyms."

I exhaled. "I miss our small things too. Like you stealing fries from my plate, even after ordering your own."

"That's called love, mister. It's in the girlfriend manual."

"Oh really? Do I get a manual too?"

"Nope," she teased. "You get instincts. And hopefully good Wi-Fi."

We talked for a long time. About her day at work. About the match. About how her mom had made paneer butter masala, and I groaned because room service food just didn't compare.

Then we fell into silence. The comfortable kind.

"I wish I could be there," she said quietly.

"I wish I could teleport you here. You'd love the city lights. And this hotel has the coziest window seat."

"Perfect for cuddling," she whispered.

"Exactly."

She sighed. "You better take me to any of your restaurants when you're back. I've been dreaming of their coffee and your company."

"It's a date," I promised.

"And this time, no fans interrupting?"

"I'll wear a disguise. Maybe fake a limp."

She laughed. "You're ridiculous."

"You love that about me."

"Unfortunately, yes."

It was getting late. She had work. I had another day of bowling ahead. But neither of us wanted to hang up.

"Goodnight, Aarav."

"Goodnight, Shradhs. Sleep well."

She smiled. "Love you Babe!."

I smiled back. "Love you too."

The screen dimmed. The silence returned. But this time, it didn't feel empty.

It felt full—with love, with calm, with purpose.

Test cricket had taken everything out of me that day.

But one call had put it all back in.

Tomorrow, we go again.

Day 3.

The first light touched the Oval sky like a slow-drawn curtain, golden over blue. The oval had begun to hum before the gates even opened. Sunlight dawn on the ground, fluttered the flags. The pitch, worn yet holding, awaited its third day of scrutiny. The energy in the air was electric, like the calm before a storm. The Indian and Australian flags waved proudly from the stands, as loyal fans clad in their team colors streamed in, singing and chanting.

India vs. Australia. Day 3 of the first Test of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. Australia at 135/4, with Travis Head and Cameron Green at the crease, a 117-run partnership standing defiant. And as the Indian players stretched and jogged onto the field, the crowd rumbled with anticipation, their hopes pinned to every ball.

Virat Kohli clapped his hands, gathered us around in a tight huddle. His eyes were sharp, voice controlled yet fierce. "We get one, the rest fall. Stay sharp. Play the long game. Aarav, new ball. Let's change the game."

The leather was hard and gleaming cherry red. I felt its seam run across my fingers as I jogged back to my mark. Every cricketer knows it—the new ball is an opportunity, a weapon, a statement.

Harsha Bhogle (Commentary):

"Good morning from the Oval! A crisp afternoon, a full house, and a crucial passage of play coming up. Travis Head and Cameron Green have frustrated the Indian bowlers, but here's the new ball. And who else but the young sensation Aarav Pathak to take it."

My first over to Head was precise. Lines tight. Lengths probing. The bat offered no liberty. A maiden. Control had to be earned before destruction could follow.

Next came Bumrah. He thundered in, hips snapping, arms slicing through air. Green met him with a solid front foot. Another maiden. The pressure cooked silently beneath the surface.

Now, the 48th over. I marked my run. Travis Head stood tall, tapping his bat, eyes alert.

First ball – back of a length, Head defended solidly.

Second – shorter, it zipped past his shoulder. I saw his weight shift, a moment of indecision.

Third – this was the one. The trap.

Harsha Bhogle:

"OH GONE! He's edged it! That's the end of Travis Head! And just listen to that roar! Aarav Pathak, what a set-up!"

Ricky Ponting:

"That's brilliant bowling. Pure setup. He went short the previous delivery, pulled Head onto the back foot, then bowled one just a fraction fuller outside off. Head couldn't resist the drive. All hands, no feet. Straight off the outside edge to Saha."

Sunil Gavaskar:

"Textbook dismissal. What impressed me most—Aarav's patience. That's what Test cricket is all about. You wear the batter down. And we could see the patience of test cricket in the upcoming generation so they could carry the legacy of test cricket in future too."

I roared. Fists clenched. Looked Head in the eye. Not out of malice—but out of release. Kohli was shouting something wild behind me. The crowd exploded. But for that one second, it was just me. Me, the ball, the moment. The release of days, weeks, months of sweat and discipline.

135/5. The partnership of 117 cracked like glass underfoot.

Cameron Green stood tall, jaw tight, bat tapping the turf with more urgency now. But the shift in energy was undeniable. The mood changed like a drop in atmospheric pressure before rain.

Ashwin came in with guile. Bumrah continued with fire. I rotated in spells—keeping the batsmen uncertain.

Overs ticked on. Australia resisted. They took blows. They left balls. They earned their singles. 30 overs passed. Patience tested. Limits explored.

Then came the 88th over. Ashwin looped a teasing delivery to Nathan Lyon. The ball dipped, turned, Lyon lunged forward—but the bat betrayed him. An edge. Straight to Aarav at slip.

Harsha Bhogle:

"And that's it! Ashwin finishes it! Nathan Lyon perishes, and Australia are all out for 257."

Sunil Gavaskar:

"India have a lead of 119 runs. That's significant. Especially on a wearing pitch like this. And credit to the bowlers. Aarav Pathak—what a performance. Four wickets."

Ricky Ponting:

"He's a star in the making. And Bumrah -> 3 Wickets, was relentless. Ashwin -> 3 Wicket cleaned up the tail nicely. India will be thrilled with this."

We sprinted in. High-fives flew. Backs were slapped. Words were few, but the satisfaction was deep. I could still hear the Indian crowd chanting my name.

Aarav. Aarav. Aarav.

Inside the pavilion, cool towels and warm grins awaited us. The physios did their rounds. Kohli nudged me with a grin.

"That roar—you have got some amazing following in Australia, bro. You looked like a beast out there."

I chuckled. Gill tossed me a bottle of water and a protein bar.

"Keep that energy for the next innings, champ," said Bumrah, patting me on the back. Ashwin offered a knowing nod.

The adrenaline was finally dipping, but the pride in the room was rising.

Then after the break, out on the field, the umpires returned. The second innings was upon us.

Prithvi Shaw and Mayank Agarwal stepped out, bats under arms, helmets in hand. Shaw wore his usual swagger, chewing gum, scanning the field with mischief in his eyes. Agarwal looked determined, muttering something to himself.

And then came Mitchell Starc. Lean. Sharp. Left arm fury. He stood with the new pink ball, eyes narrowing as he surveyed the pitch.

Harsha Bhogle:

"And we're back. India with a lead of 119. The openers—Prithvi Shaw and Mayank Agarwal—walk out under a slightly cloudy sky. The pink ball glistens. Starc has it. Here we go again."

Ricky Ponting:

"India should look to build on this lead. But with the pink ball, under these conditions, anything can happen. The Aussie pacers will fancy their chances."

Sunil Gavaskar:

"Discipline will be key. These first ten overs could shape the entire match. Shaw and Agarwal will have to dig deep."

I leaned against the balcony rail of the dressing room. My heart still drummed. The smell of the turf, the distant echoes of the crowd, the tension—it was all part of the dance.

The stadium buzzed with anticipation. The crowd at the Oval was a living organism—chanting, waving flags, rising and falling with the rhythm of the game. And now, with India set to begin their second innings, the pulse quickened.

India led by 119 runs. It was a good lead. But not safe.

From the balcony of the visitors' dressing room, I watched as Prithvi Shaw and Mayank Agarwal marched down the stairs and into the light. Both wore the intensity of warriors stepping into the arena, yet their body language couldn't have been more different. Shaw chewed his gum, rolling his shoulders like a street brawler. Mayank was deliberate, eyes scanning the pitch like a general.

Below, the Australians assembled. Mitchell Starc wasn't opening today. No, this was Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood—twin towers of menace. The new pink ball gleamed in Cummins' hand. Its lacquered surface reflected the dying gold of the evening sun.

Harsha Bhogle (Commentary):

"Well, well. This is going to be an intense session. India with a handy lead, but this pink ball under the lights—it'll talk. Cummins and Hazlewood are starting. Shaw and Agarwal need to weather this early storm."

Sunil Gavaskar:

"It's a tough ask. But Shaw has the ability. He just needs to play tight. This is not the time for flamboyance."

Ricky Ponting:

"Spot on, Sunny. Cummins is relentless. He'll keep asking questions outside off. And if there's even a slight gap between bat and pad—he'll find it."

Cummins marked his run-up. Shaw adjusted his gloves and took his stance.

Ball 1 – Good length, outside off. Shaw watched it closely and let it go.

Ball 2 – Back of a length. Shaw rose with it and dead-batted it into the turf.

Ball 3 – Full and straight. Shaw leaned forward, solid in defense.

A maiden. A quiet start, but one thick with tension. Cummins glared back down the pitch, already plotting.

Hazlewood began from the other end. Similar precision. Mayank looked solid. Compact. Every shot a statement of control.

Then came the third over.

Cummins again.

Shaw on strike.

The tension had settled like dew.

Harsha Bhogle:

"Cummins steaming in. Shaw on strike. 3.1 coming up."

Ricky Ponting:

"Look at that seam position. Perfect."

Sunil Gavaskar:

"Uh-oh. Trouble."

Ball 3.1 – Good length, just outside off. The seam stood proud, wobbling slightly. Shaw stepped forward to defend—but a fraction late. The ball nipped back in sharply, threading the needle between bat and pad.

Clatter.

The stumps exploded.

Harsha Bhogle:

"THROUGH HIM! Prithvi Shaw is gone! And it's that all-too-familiar sight—gap between bat and pad, and Cummins cashes in!"

Ricky Ponting:

"That's textbook Cummins. That's why he's world-class. Good length, perfect seam, and just enough nip. Shaw was still moving forward when the ball beat him."

Sunil Gavaskar:

"This is exactly what we feared. Shaw has struggled with this dismissal. And it's cost India an early wicket. 7 for 1."

Shaw stood frozen. Disbelief on his face. The bails lay crooked. The crowd roared—mostly Australian voices.

He trudged back, dragging his bat behind him. Kohli met him halfway up the stairs. A hand on the shoulder, a quiet word. The cameras didn't catch it.

Aarav Pathak, helmet on, gloves tight, bat tucked under one arm, he strode into the arena with a calmness that belied the circumstances. The scoreboard read 7/1. Prithvi Shaw had already departed. Tension buzzed like a live wire.

Harsha Bhogle (Commentary):

"Here he comes again! The debutant wonder—century in the first innings, four wickets, and now he's back with the bat. What a story this young man is writing."

Gavaskar:

"If he can keep his cool and do even half of what he did in the first innings, we're in for a treat."

As Aarav reached the crease, Mayank Agarwal offered a firm nod. The two tapped gloves. Aarav took his stance.

The first few overs saw cautious play. Aarav, focused and graceful, showed his class. Cover drives flowed from his bat—four of them in ten overs. Each one pierced the field like a scalpel, threading the gaps with surgeon-like precision. The Australians tried to cramp him with short deliveries, fuller ones, angles—he adjusted, blocked, nudged, and drove.

Border:

"He's playing with so much maturity. Those cover drives—chef's kiss. He's finding the gaps with precision, no signs of nerves."

But cricket, like life, has a cruel rhythm.

12th over. Hazlewood, from around the wicket to Mayank Agarwal.

Harsha Bhogle:

"12.1—and he strikes! Hazlewood! That's vintage Hazlewood—extra bounce from a length. It wasn't even threatening off stump at first, but it straightens, squares up Mayank, takes the edge, and straight into the hands at second slip!"

The roar of the Australian fielders was drowned by the collective gasp of the Indian fans. India now 33/2. Mayank gone. The oval's pitch, silent again for a moment, then rose into renewed buzz.

Out came Virat Kohli.

Kohli and Aarav met mid-pitch.

"Let's anchor this. No rush," Kohli murmured.

And so began a passage of play that would be remembered not for explosive shots, but for its quiet strength.

They started slow. Prodding. Defending. Testing the waters. The bowlers came hard—Pat Cummins hurled in bouncers, Lyon spun his web, Green probed the channel. But the two Indians held firm.

Aarav, in particular, looked like a man who'd spent years in these whites. His defense was stout, his judgment sharp. Every leave outside off stump was calculated. Every flick off his pads came with soft wrists. He didn't chase glory—he stitched substance.

Allan Border (Commentary):

"That kid defends like Pujara. I tell you, he might be the new wall in the making. It's uncanny how composed he is. And remember—he's only just started."

The dinner break came and went.

Post-break, Kohli began opening up. He picked off singles with precision, leaned into drives, and wore the look of a man returning to his peak. A wristy flick off Starc brought up his fifty. The bat raised, no theatrics. Just intent.

Aarav followed. Never rushed. He punished the loose ones, drove Lyon past extra cover, worked Hazlewood through third man. Every run came with weight. He reached his 70s, unbothered, unfazed.

Ricky Ponting:

"This isn't just a good debut. This is the kind of performance that would be remembered in next BGT series too. He's batting like a veteran out there."

The partnership grew. Every run they added was a stitch in India's growing lead. The Australians began to tire—visibly and mentally.

There was a moment in one of the Cummins over. Cummins bowled a short one. Aarav ducked, late but clean. The ball fizzed past his helmet.

Kohli walked over. "You good?"

Aarav smiled. "He's getting desperate."

They both grinned.

By the end of the day, the scoreboard read: India 258 runs ahead. Kohli on 53*, Aarav on 71*. The dressing room clapped as they walked in, heads held high.

Ravi Shastri, standing by the door, simply said, "That's how you write a chapter in Indian Test cricket."

Aarav looked up at the stadium one more time, soaked in the moment, and sat down beside Kohli.