

Cricket 174

Chapter 174

22nd December 2020

A soft drizzle laced the windows of the Melbourne hotel. Outside, the city's buzz continued into the twilight, but inside the Indian team's hotel conference room, there was a silence that felt almost sacred. All of us players had gathered after a long, satisfying day of practice. The hum of conversation slowly faded as the door creaked open.

In walked Ravi Shastri and Virat bhaiya.

The coach looked a little subdued, but there was a certain warmth in his expression. Virat bhaiya followed, calm and composed, yet the kind of stillness in him that made you sense something was coming.

"Boys," Shastri started, placing a hand on Virat's shoulder, "we've got an update."

Virat took a step forward, his hands tucked into his jacket pockets. "I won't be playing the rest of the series," he said, his voice measured.

The room froze.

For a moment, no one knew what to say. Rohit looked up sharply. Rahane raised his eyebrows. I turned to Hanuma beside me, whispering, "What? Why?!"

Virat continued, sensing our confusion, and then—he smiled. "I'm heading back home. Anushka's due date is close. I'm taking paternity leave."

The tension evaporated in an instant. Laughter and congratulations filled the room.

"Virat's going to be a dad!" shouted Rohit from the back.

Rishabh was the first to leap up and give him a hug, followed by the rest of us. Someone joked about gifting diapers instead of bats.

Virat chuckled. "Just make sure we win this series. Don't let that trophy go. We've worked too hard for it."

Coach Shastri patted Rahane's back. "Ajinkya will lead from here."

We nodded. A new energy was starting to swell up among us.

Soon after, the meeting was dismissed. But I couldn't let the night end like that.

I walked down the corridor, each step echoing slightly against the polished wooden floor. Room 1408. Kohli bhaiya's door.

Knock knock.

A second later, it opened. He was in a relaxed T-shirt and shorts, sipping something.

"It's me, Aarav," I said.

He smiled, opened the door wider. "Come in, champ."

"Bhaiya, just wanted to say... congratulations," I said.

"Thanks, yaar." He motioned me to sit. "Have a seat. You guys gave me quite a scare back there. I thought you'd all freeze."

I grinned. "We were just shocked. Didn't see it coming. But it's the happiest reason to take a break. How's bhabhi?"

"She's doing great. Bit nervous, as anyone would be. But strong as always. You want to talk to her? She'd love it."

I nodded eagerly.

He tapped on his phone, FaceTimed her. The screen lit up with Anushka Sharma's familiar smile.

"Aarav!" she said. "Good to see you."

"Bhabhi, just wanted to wish you all the love and strength. We're all super excited. You'll be amazing parents."

We spoke for a few minutes, mostly casual, lighthearted. Then she went to rest and we returned to our chat.

"Bhaiya," I said, handing him the box. "This is something I wanted to give you. It's not launched yet. Astra Glasses, Generation 2. Not in the market. But this prototype—it's real-time POV recording in HD quality with proper no-Limit cloud access."

He looked at me, puzzled.

"Put it on during the birth. It'll record the first moment you hold your child. Your first touch, your first words. Everything. Lifetime memory."

For a moment, Kohli didn't say anything. He opened the box carefully, lifting the glasses out as though they were some holy relic.

"You serious?"

"Completely."

He stood up and hugged me tightly. "Thank you. This means more than you know."

I laughed. "Oh, and by the way, start prepping to spoil a daughter."

He stared at me. "How do you know it's a girl?"

"Gut feeling," I smirked. "And I promise I'm going to spoil her rotten."

{Remember he is Reincarnated.}

He burst out laughing. "God help me then."

We chatted for a while more—about normal things in the life.

Before leaving, he looked at me.

"Lead from the front when you get the chance. Doesn't matter if you're twenty or thirty-five. Team will see your intent."

I nodded. "Always, bhaiya."

That night, I couldn't sleep. Not because of anxiety. But because of the weight of the moment. The series was far from over. And our leader was stepping away.

But that only meant one thing—

It was time for the rest of us to rise.

{This Match is going to be 36 all out! I know first match was 36 all out of the series, but I want Aarav to have a good first match and had some experience of test.}

The morning of December 25, 2020, dawned gently over Melbourne. The city, draped in festive lights and shimmering ornaments, glowed with the quiet joy of Christmas. The aroma of cinnamon, roasted nuts, and fresh coffee floated through the air. Street performers dressed as elves juggled and danced, while carolers sang familiar tunes in perfect harmony. In every direction, there was laughter, warmth, and celebration.

For Aarav and his close-knit group—Prithvi Shaw, Shubman Gill, Mohammed Siraj, and Rishabh Pant—it was a rare pause in the chaos of international cricket. A day to breathe, to forget strategies and match pressure, and simply revel in the holiday spirit.

"Merry Christmas, boys!" Pant grinned, throwing an arm around Aarav. "Today, we party Aussie-style. I heard Christmas here is something else!"

Aarav chuckled, adjusting his glasses. "As long as we don't run into hoard of fans, everything is fine."

Laughter erupted among the group. They wandered down Bourke Street, blending into the crowd. Children in Santa hats skipped along, couples snapped photos under giant Christmas trees, and shop windows gleamed with red and gold.

But it wasn't long before their cover slipped.

"Mate... that's Aarav Pathak, isn't it?" said a blond Aussie teen to his friend, an Indian boy clad in a Casual dress with Santa hat, holding a cricket ball and kit sliding behind him.

They hurried over, faces lit with excitement.

"Aarav bhaiya, I'm a huge fan!" the Indian boy blurted. "That fifer... you made my Christmas!"

"Bro, that ball to Travis Head was insane!" the Aussie added. "Can we get a selfie?"

Aarav grinned. "Of course!"

Prithvi offered to take the photo, joking, "This one's on the house."

"Thanks, Prithvi bhaiya!" they said in unison, before rushing back to their families.

Siraj nudged Aarav. "Looks like someone's becoming next cricket diva."

"Jealousy doesn't suit you, Miyan," Aarav shot back with a wink.

Pant clapped his hands. "Alright, stars, I'm hungry. Let's find a good Indian place. My treat."

"You? Treating?" Gill raised a brow.

"Don't get too excited," Pant warned. "One naan each. I'm still a cricketer, not an ATM."

They ended up at a cozy Indian restaurant near Federation Square, called "Swaad." Inside, it felt like home—twinkling lights, the scent of spices, walls decorated with cricket photos.

Plates of samosas, tikka, butter chicken, dal makhani, and rasgullas arrived, and so did the stories. They reminisced about junior cricket, cracked jokes, and plotted their next match strategy over gulab jamuns.

"Remember the guy in Adelaide who offered his dog for Aarav's jersey?" Shaw laughed.

"You should've taken it," Siraj said. "At least he wouldn't sledge like Paine."

Pant wiped his hands. "Aarav, keep this up and they'll put your statue outside Wankhede."

"I'll settle for free vada pav," Aarav replied.

When the bill came, Pant dramatically pulled out his wallet. "Santa Pant is here, boys."

"Santa with a wallet full of match fees," Gill quipped.

They stepped back into the golden evening light, walking slowly along the Yarra River. Fireworks burst in the distance. Jazz versions of Christmas carols played on a saxophone. It was perfect.

Later, in his hotel room, Aarav lay on his bed, scrolling through messages. One popped up from Indian Cricket Team Group:

"Merry Christmas to everyone. Enjoy the day. Boxing Day awaits. Lead us with fire."

Aarav smiled.

It was 10:00 PM in Melbourne. The city outside Aarav's hotel window still shimmered with leftover sparkle from the Christmas celebration. Fireworks occasionally lit up the skyline in brief, beautiful bursts. Inside his room, though, things had quieted down. The laughter of his friends had faded as everyone returned to their rooms, full and content.

Aarav, too, had slipped into the comfort of silence. But his heart stirred restlessly. There was someone he needed to see.

He picked up his phone and opened WhatsApp. The time in India read 5:30 PM. Perfect. She'd be home, probably buried in her books again.

Shradha.

He tapped the video call icon. It rang twice.

On the third ring, the screen lit up. Her face appeared, framed by loose strands of hair and the warm glow of a study lamp. She had her glasses on, a pencil tucked behind one ear, and a thick book lying open in front of her.

"Love," she smiled, brushing her hair back, "Aren't you supposed to be asleep?"

Aarav smiled softly. "How can I sleep without seeing your face?"

She rolled her eyes playfully. "Charmer. You do know I'm studying, right?"

"Exactly why I'm calling," he said, adjusting his pillow to lie on his side. "To disturb you."

She laughed, a light musical sound that made his heart ache. "Well, disturbance accepted. How was Christmas?"

"Magical," he said, his eyes shining. "The decorations, the food, the fans, even Pant paid the bill!"

"No way!" she said, pretending to gasp.

"I swear. I think the Christmas spirit possessed him," Aarav chuckled.

She smiled again, eyes softening. "I wish I could've been there with you."

He nodded slowly. "Me too. Everything was perfect... except, you weren't there."

A brief silence hung between them, tender and full.

"Anyway," Aarav said, sitting up slightly. "I got you something."

Her eyes lit up with curiosity. "Really?"

He reached into the drawer beside his bed and pulled out a small velvet box. He held it up to the camera.

"Aarav..."

He opened it slowly, revealing a delicate silver pendant. It shimmered under the light. The design was elegant—a graceful intertwining of the letters A and S. It was subtle, but unmistakably them.

"It's beautiful," she whispered. "Our initials?"

He nodded. "A for Aarav, S for Shradha. Entwined... just like us."

She placed a hand on her chest, touched. "You're going to make me cry, you idiot."

"Don't cry. You'll smudge your cute study notes," he teased.

She giggled through the tears that welled up in her eyes. "I miss you, Aarav. So much."

"I miss you too, Shradha. Every single day."

He watched her, memorizing every detail of her expression. The small dimple on her cheek. The way she blinked rapidly when she was overwhelmed. Her lips curved into a soft smile that was just for him.

"I keep imagining," he said quietly, "what it'll be like when I finally see you again. Hug you. Hold your hand. Whisper in your ear how much I love you."

She flushed, looking away for a second. "Don't make me blush while I'm in pajamas and my hair's a mess."

"You're perfect. Always," he said. "Even more in your messy bun and glasses. That's my favorite version."

She laughed again, a little shy this time. "I wish I could hug you right now."

"Soon," he said. "Until then..." He leaned closer to the screen. "Here's a virtual kiss 😊."

She mirrored him. "And here's mine 😊."

They both chuckled like teenagers in love. Because that's exactly what they were.

"I love you, Shradha," Aarav said, voice hushed.

"I love you more," she whispered.

"Not possible."

They stayed on the call, talking about silly things, their plans for the future, her upcoming exams, his next match. Hours felt like minutes. It was a world that belonged only to them.

And as the clock neared midnight in Melbourne, Aarav leaned back with a content smile. "Merry Christmas, my love."

"Merry Christmas, Aarav. Come back soon."

"I will. And when I do, I'll put this pendant around your neck myself."

"You better."

The call ended with hearts full and eyes glistening.

Aarav placed the pendant back in its box and tucked it away. He turned off the lights and lay in the dark, smiling.

Love had crossed oceans that night.

And it sparkled brighter than any Christmas light.

The morning sun rose with golden brilliance over the iconic Melbourne Cricket Ground. It was December 26, 2020—a day etched in the hearts of cricket lovers across the globe. The city, still basking in the festive afterglow of Christmas, buzzed with anticipation. The Boxing Day Test between Australia and India was about to begin.

The camera panned across a sea of eager spectators, most clad in gold and green, with splashes of blue here and there—Indian fans, spirited and hopeful. Banners waved high, chants echoed around the MCG, and the buzz was electric.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," the familiar voice of Adam Peacock echoed from the commentary box. "We're live from the majestic Melbourne Cricket Ground for what promises to be an enthralling Day 1 of the Boxing Day Test Match. India, however, have suffered a major setback. Their captain and talismanic batsman, Virat Kohli, has flown back to India on paternity leave. Taking over the reins today will be Ajinkya Rahane."

The camera shifted to the ground, where the coin toss was about to take place. The pitch, a strip of compact, dry grass, glistened under the early rays. Umpires and match referee David Boon held the coin. The two captains—Tim Paine for Australia and Ajinkya Rahane for India—stood face-to-face, smiles masking the intensity of the occasion.

Rahane flipped the coin high into the air.

"Tails," came Paine's reply.

It landed on the green and spun for a second before Boon crouched to inspect.

"Tails it is. Australia have won the toss."

Cheers erupted from the Australian side of the crowd.

"We'll bat first," Paine said confidently into the mic.

Adam Peacock moved in for a quick chat. "Tim, why the decision to bat?"

"Looks like a good surface, Adam. Traditional MCG wicket—should be good for batting for the first two days. We'd like to put up a solid total and let our bowlers do the rest."

"All the best, Tim."

Next came Rahane.

"Ajinkya, a big day for you—captaining India in a Boxing Day Test. What's the team looking like today?"

Rahane nodded. "Yeah, big responsibility. We've made a couple of changes. Prithvi Shaw is out due to injury. Shubman Gill is making his debut, and so is Mohammed Siraj. Rest of the team remains the same."

"Ohh and Saha is out of the team due to ankle injury and Rishabh Pant replaces him in the team."

"Confident in the new players?"

"Absolutely. They've worked hard. They're hungry, and I believe they'll step up."

The Indian players gathered in a huddle near the boundary line. There was an unusual silence in the circle. Kohli's absence was more than symbolic—it was a vacuum of fire, of energy, of aggression. But in its place stood Rahane's calm, almost zen-like leadership.

He looked around the circle. "We play as one. For each other. For the country. Play tough. Play fair. Let's show them what we're made of."

Aarav, pacing slowly with the new ball in hand, nodded.