

Cricket 181

Chapter 181

The early rays of the sun filtered through the glass panels of Aarav's hotel suite, painting golden streaks across his desk where a thick binder labeled "Business Studies" lay open. His laptop hummed quietly beside a half-empty coffee cup, the remnants of an all-nighter still evident in his sleepy eyes. Despite the mental fatigue from the drawn Test match just the day before, Aarav's mind was alert. Cricket may have paused for the moment, but his other responsibilities waited for no one.

By noon, he had completed the research segment and prepared slides for his college Project. But that was just the start of the day.

The next few hours flew by in a blur of video conferences. First was Astra's bi-monthly product sync, where the team discussed the upcoming release and investments and their leadership in the AI Industry in the world. Then came the big one—a board meeting with Pathak Entertainment.

Aarav leaned back in his chair as the final presentation ended. On-screen was the title slide: "Project RedX: ₹600 Crore Series"

The team buzzed with excitement. Though casting and filming were still distant realities, pre-production would soon begin—set design, location scouting, script polishing. It was ambitious, it was extravagant, and it had a long planning of the production house. A world-class series meant to rival anything Netflix or HBO could produce, deeply rooted in Indian heritage but globally packaged.

By the time dinner ended—a simple dal and vegetable with herb rice from the hotel kitchen—he finally exhaled. The day had been productive but exhausting. Yet, one thing was still missing.

With a smile tugging at his lips, Aarav picked up his phone and tapped the call icon beside the name he had saved as "My Shradhu ❤️👤".

The phone rang.

"Hey babe!" Aarav said warmly, his voice immediately softer.

"Hi love!" Shradha's voice, sweet and familiar, flooded his ear like a calming wave.

"What're you up to, jaan?" {Nickname suggested by my favorite companion ChatGPT}

"Nothing much," she said, a soft chuckle in her voice. "Just finished family chai time with everyone. It's peaceful today."

"Ahh, evening tea. Must be around 5:40 there, right?"

"Yep! You're getting good at these timezone guesses."

He laughed. "Well, I have to keep track. After all, how else would I know the perfect time to hear my girl's voice?"

Shradha giggled, and Aarav could practically see her blushing on the other side. He loved that about her—how genuine her reactions were, how simply her heart shone through in every interaction.

"Guess what," he said suddenly, leaning forward.

"What?"

"Virat bhaiya just became a dad! He had a baby girl!"

"Yeah! I saw that online just before! That's amazing!"

"Yeah! I called him right after the press conference. He was absolutely glowing. So full of joy."

"Of course he was! Becoming a father... and to a daughter. That's something else."

Aarav's voice softened. "Yeah. Daughters are something special, aren't they? I want one someday too."

"Aww, that's sweet," Shradha replied, her voice lowering into a warmer, more intimate tone.

Aarav chuckled playfully. "Maybe you'll be the one to give her to me, hmm?"

There was silence for a split second, then an audible gasp.

"Aarav! What are you saying?!" Shradha was flustered, tripping over her words. "I—I mean—you—we're—oh my god, you're so embarrassing!"

He laughed again, his heart swelling at the sound of her bashfulness. "You're adorable when you get all flustered, you know that?"

"Ugh, moohhh! You always tease me like this."

"Only because you look so cute when you blush, my love."

She sighed, trying to hide her smile through the phone. "You're impossible."

"So, tell me about your day, sweetheart."

"Nothing much. College assignments mostly. Then dinner prep. Mom made me help, and now this is my free time."

"You need more free time," Aarav said gently. "You deserve to chill more. Maybe a spa day? I'll plan one next time we meet."

"What about you? How was your day, Mr. Star Cricketer slash CEO slash entertainment mogul?"

He laughed. "Hectic! I finished my project this morning, then had two long meetings. One of them was about a ₹600 crore high-def series under Pathak Entertainment. Huge stuff."

"Wow! That's crazy! Your day was way more hectic than mine."

"True. But hearing your voice now makes it all feel worth it."

Shradha yawned on the other end. "I'm getting sleepy and hungry now."

"Go eat, jaan. Didn't your mom cook?"

"She's fasting today. Told me to either cook myself or order something."

"Hmm," Aarav said thoughtfully. "Then let me order something for you."

"Nooo, I'll do it myself!"

"Babe, c'mon. Let me. One coffee and a brownie... maybe some snack packs too?"

There was a pause.

"Wait. How did you know exactly what I wanted?!"

"Because I know everything about my Shradhu. I know what makes her smile, what she craves when she's tired, and the exact moment she starts yawning."

She blushed. "You're becoming cheesier every day."

"And you're still falling for me every day."

She sighed dreamily. "Yeah. I think I am."

He laughed softly. "Okay, order placed. ETA fifteen minutes."

"You're crazy, you know that?"

"Crazy for you, yeah. You're the best thing that ever happened to me, love."

From the background, a faint voice called out. Her sister.

"Oh no, I have to go now! She's calling me."

"Alright, my love. Eat well. Sleep well. Dream of me."

"Always do. Bye muah!"

"Bye jaan. Take care."

The call ended.

Fifteen minutes later, Aarav's phone buzzed. It was a photo—Shradha with her coffee, a warm brownie, and a couple of snack packets arranged neatly. Her face glowed with a tired but happy smile, and her eyes carried the quiet warmth of being loved.

The message below it read:

"You're the best. Thank you, my love ❤️👉"

Aarav stared at the photo, his heart warm. The madness of his day faded into the background. Cricket, meetings, million-rupee investments—they were important, yes. But this? This was happiness. A quiet moment of love shared across time zones. A heartbeat in the chaos. A pause filled with warmth.

He turned off his lamp, settled into bed, and smiled to himself.

As he drifted off to sleep, one thought stayed with him:

Someday, someday soon, I want to come home to her smile every night.

The sun rose lazily over the Brisbane skyline on January 13, casting a golden hue over the Indian cricket team's hotel. After the hard-fought draw in Sydney and a brief respite to recharge minds and muscles, Team India arrived in Brisbane with a calm sense of purpose. The energy was quieter now—not nervous, but resolute. They had already secured the series, leading 2-0. But the dream of a historic clean sweep on Australian soil lingered like a silent challenge. No Asian team had ever done it. England is the only team to do it in Australia. Others had come close. But India stood one match away from doing the impossible.

The day before the final Test match, most of the team kept things light. After a short, relaxed training session, players drifted between team strategy chats and individual rest. Aarav found himself staring out of his balcony window, overlooking the Brisbane River, headphones in, head lost in a mental rehearsal of his bowling lines. He had played at the Gabba in age-group cricket, but this—this was the fortress. Australia hadn't lost a match at the Gabba in 32 years. The weight of history wasn't lost on him.

In the afternoon, a meeting was called. Coach Ravi Shastri stood near the projector screen, his energy calm yet commanding. Beside him sat Ajinkya Rahane, ever composed, and Rohit Sharma, the man with experience. Aarav, along with the rest of the team, filtered into the room.

"Right, boys," Shastri began, his gravelly voice cutting through the hum of the air conditioner. "Tomorrow's the final Test. And yes, we've got a few setbacks."

He gestured to a slide listing injuries: Ravichandran Ashwin (back), Ravindra Jadeja (thumb fracture), Jasprit Bumrah (muscle strain).

There was a beat of silence. Even though everyone had suspected it, seeing the list laid bare like that sobered the mood.

"But we don't crumble. That's not who we are," Shastri said, his eyes sweeping across the room. "This is an opportunity."

Rahane took over. "We trust in every one of you. And we're going in with a young, hungry attack. Our pace battery? Aarav, Siraj, Navdeep. Shardul and Washington will back you."

Aarav looked up, nodded.

Rahane smiled. "Aarav you would be leading our pace attack. You've earned it."

Aarav nodded.

Shastri added, "History's watching. This is our chance to become the first Asian team to clean sweep Australia in their backyard. Forget the crowd. Forget their fortress. We write our story tomorrow."

A tactical discussion followed—field placements, batting orders, how to handle Smith and Labuschagne.

That night, Aarav lay in bed, unable to sleep. He stared at the ceiling, replaying possible scenarios. His phone buzzed—a message from Shradha.

"Don't overthink, champ. Just play your heart out. I believe in you ❤️👉"

He smiled, typing back a simple: "Thanks love."

The next morning, Gabba was bathed in sunlight. The pitch, hard and tinged with a grass sheen, promised bounce and pace. Perfect for fast bowlers. The Indian team bus pulled up to the stadium amid scattered cheers from fans. Inside the dressing room, the boys strapped on their gear while the atmosphere remained calm but alert.

Rahane, padded up in his jersey, walked out for the toss. Aarav watched from the tunnel. Moments later, Rahane returned with a neutral expression.

"They've chosen to bat," he announced. "Get ready, lads."

The final playing XI:

Rohit Sharma

Shubman Gill

Aarav Pathak

Ajinkya Rahane (C)

Mayank Aggarwal

Rishabh Pant

Wriddhiman Prasanta Saha (WK)

Washington Sundar

Shardul Thakur

Navdeep Saini

Md. Siraj

In the corner, a small meeting was held. Rohit, Rahane, and Shastri laid out the bowling plan for the day. Short bursts, aggressive lines, no freebies. The new ball would be critical.

Captain Rahne led the team onto the field as the national anthem played. The moment was overwhelming. Gabba, once an impenetrable fortress for visitors, now felt like a battlefield waiting for heroes.

The sun bore down as he took the new ball, kissed it lightly, and marked his run-up.

Rahane clapped from slip. "Come on, Aarav. Let's start the match!"