

Cricket 188

Chapter 188

The night was calm, the kind of quiet that only follows a storm of glory. The Gabba win had sent shockwaves across the cricketing world, and yet, in the dimly lit hotel room in Brisbane, Aarav Pathak finally felt the weight of silence settle over him. The laughter, the chants, the flashes of camera lights—all of it had faded into a tranquil hum. The adrenaline that had carried him through victory now mellowed into a deep, satisfied exhaustion.

He sat on the edge of his bed, phone in one hand, trophies placed neatly on the small wooden table by the window. The Border-Gavaskar Trophy gleamed faintly under the bedside lamp, its surface reflecting his own faint smile. His other medals—Player of the Match, Player of the Series—lay beside it, like quiet witnesses to history. Aarav opened his Reels and uploaded a photo: him holding the trophy aloft, the tricolor waving behind, captioned simply—"For the dreams that never slept."

Notifications flooded in instantly—millions of likes, thousands of comments, messages from teammates, fans, even old friends who had vanished over the years. But as his eyes drifted across the screen, only one name made his heart race: Shradha.

He stared at her profile picture for a moment—the same mischievous smile, the same sparkle in her eyes. His fingers hovered over the call button, hesitating for just a heartbeat, before he pressed it.

The ringtone felt longer than usual.

And then—her voice, full of warmth and surprise.

"Hey love! Congratulations on your win!" she practically shouted into the phone, her laughter following like a melody.

Aarav couldn't help but chuckle, his fatigue melting away. "Thank you, Shradha. You saw it?"

"Saw it?" she said, mock gasping. "I screamed at the TV like a maniac when you hit that last boundary!"

He smiled, his heart softening at the sound of her excitement. For a second, the entire world narrowed to the rhythm of her voice.

"Shradha," he said quietly, his tone suddenly different—gentle, almost trembling. "I love you."

There was silence. A heartbeat stretched into two.

He could almost hear her breathing on the other end, surprised, still.

"Aarav..." she whispered.

Then, after a pause that felt infinite, she replied softly, "I love you too, Aarav."

The world seemed to pause around him. The dim light, the quiet hum of the AC, even the faint traffic outside—everything froze in that moment of shared truth. Two voices, two hearts, separated by miles but bound by something real, something fragile and electric.

Neither spoke for a minute. They just stayed there, lost in silence, listening to each other breathe, as if afraid words might break the magic.

Finally, Aarav broke it, his voice low, almost a whisper.

"I'm coming home in two days."

"Home?" she asked, her voice curious but hopeful.

"Yeah," he said with a grin. "Straight to Mumbai from here. First, I have to go home for a day—family, media, all that—but after that, I want to see you. Hug you. Kiss you. And just... enjoy time with you. Where can I take you? Are you even allowed to go out right now?"

Shradha laughed, the sound soft and teasing. "Well, lockdown is still there in parts of Mumbai, but some areas have opened up. I'm in Navi Mumbai, remember? My parents are in another Mumbai house right now, and I came here for my project work. So, technically... I'm alone."

He raised his eyebrows. "Alone, huh? That's risky information to give me, Miss Shradha Tendulkar."

She laughed again, playful this time. "What are you going to do, sneak into my apartment?"

"Maybe," he teased, leaning back on the bed.

Shradha snorted, trying to stifle a laugh. "You still haven't changed. National hero, but still the same dork."

"Guilty as charged," he replied, grinning. "So, it's decided then. I'm coming to Navi Mumbai after two days. I don't care if I have to quarantine in your living room."

"You wouldn't last a day," she said, smiling.

"Wanna bet?" he challenged.

"Oh, I would love to see you try," she said, mock-serious. "I'll make you do dishes and watch anime with me until you beg to leave."

He laughed loudly, his heart feeling light. "Fine. But only if you promise to cook with me."

"Deal," she said.

Aarav chuckled, and for a moment, he forgot about everything—the pressure, the fame, the world outside. He was just Aarav, talking to Shradha, the girl who knew him and loved him.

The conversation drifted from jokes to memories. She talked about her college work.

Hours slipped by unnoticed.

Outside, the city lights of Brisbane flickered, reflecting faintly off the windowpane. Aarav stood up and walked toward the glass, looking out at the quiet skyline.

"You know, Shradha," he said softly. "When I hit that last boundary today, I didn't think of the crowd or the trophy or the cameras. I thought of you. Of us. Of all those times you told me not to give up."

She went quiet for a second.

"You remembered that?" she asked, her voice low.

"Every word," he said. "When I was batting today, there was a moment when I almost lost focus—the pressure, the noise—but then I remembered what you said once: 'You don't play to prove them wrong, Aarav. You play to prove yourself right.' That stayed with me."

Her voice softened, emotion threading through her tone. "I'm glad it did. You were incredible out there, Aarav. The whole country's proud of you. But more than that... I'm proud of you."

He smiled faintly. "That means more than any award, you know."

"You're being cheesy again," she said, but her voice wavered slightly.

"Only for you," he teased.

There was a pause, long and soft.

"Get some sleep, champ," she finally said. "Big celebrations tomorrow."

"Only if you promise to dream about me," he replied.

"Cocky much?"

"Confident," he said.

"Goodnight, Aarav," she whispered.

"Goodnight, Shradha."

The call ended, and silence filled the room once again. But this time, it wasn't empty. It was full—of warmth, of love, of unspoken promises.

Aarav placed his phone beside the trophies, leaned back on the bed, and stared at the ceiling. The memory of her voice lingered, echoing softly in his mind.

Outside, the Brisbane night stretched endlessly, but in Aarav's heart, something new had begun—a different kind of victory.

The doors of the Air India jet opened to a wash of sunlight and sound. Mumbai's winter morning was bright and restless, the air buzzing with the low hum of engines and the high-pitched excitement of the crowd gathered beyond the barriers. Even from the top of the staircase, Aarav could hear it—the wave of cheering that rolled across the tarmac the moment the players began to appear.

Cameras flashed like sudden lightning. Reporters shouted questions that tangled in the air—"Aarav! One word about the Gabba innings!" "Prince Pathak, what's next for you?" He smiled, lifted a hand in acknowledgment, but said nothing.

It had been a long tour, longer than he had imagined. Victory at Gabba still felt unreal, like something happening to someone else. Yet as he moved down the stairs, he could feel the eyes of thousands—millions—watching through screens and newsfeeds, waiting for his next gesture, his next word.

At the bottom of the steps, Gill nudged him with a grin. "Home sweet home, champ." Aarav smiled back. "Can't believe it's over." "Over? It's just starting," Pant called from behind, laughter cutting through the noise.

Security formed a narrow corridor from the aircraft to the terminal. Fans leaned against the barriers, waving flags, holding banners with his face printed across them. He caught a glimpse of a small boy hoisted onto his father's shoulders, holding a cardboard sign: 'The Prince of India!' For a heartbeat, Aarav's throat tightened. He raised his hand and waved; the boy's grin widened.

Inside the terminal, the chaos softened into a blur of camera lenses and official greetings. The BCCI representatives led the team to a private exit. A few journalists managed to sneak questions through the human wall. Aarav's polite smile never faded, but his eyes already searched for quiet.

Outside, his Range Rover waited, a familiar black under the mild glare. His driver, Ramesh, stood near the door, bowing slightly as Aarav approached.

"Welcome back, sir." "Thank you, Ramesh," Aarav said, sliding into the back seat.

The door closed, and suddenly the world hushed. The car moved out of the airport gates, and the shouting became a distant echo. Aarav leaned his head against the seat and exhaled.

For the first time in weeks, there was silence.

Through the tinted glass, he watched Mumbai drift by—the rhythm of the city unchanged by his triumph. Vendors setting up their stalls, buses rumbling past, the smell of roasted peanuts mixing with the sea breeze. A city that had seen legends rise and fall, and now, for a fleeting moment, it looked at him as its newest son.

His phone buzzed constantly—messages from teammates, journalists, old school friends, and hundreds of notifications he didn't have the energy to read. He muted it and looked out again. The morning sun glinted off the high-rises, and the thought of home—his real home, not hotels or stadiums—softened the exhaustion clinging to his body.

He remembered his mother's voice on the phone two nights ago: "Come home straight, beta. Don't go anywhere first. I made your favourite parathas waiting." A smile crept across his lips.

The Range Rover turned into quieter lanes, moving past trees heavy with dust and blooming bougainvillea. Ahead, the Pathak estate stood behind high walls—modern glass framed by old mango trees. The gates opened automatically, and as the car rolled in, Aarav felt a warmth rise in his chest.

His father stood on the porch, tall and composed, wearing a crisp white kurta. His mother was beside him, hands pressed together, eyes shining. The moment Aarav stepped out, his mother ran forward.

"Aaru!"

He laughed, arms open as she hugged him tight. "Maa... careful, still sore from batting!"

"Let me see my son!" she said, cupping his face as if checking whether he was real. "Look at you—so thin! You call that eating?"

Behind her, his father's smile was quieter but deeper. "Welcome home, champ." Aarav hugged him too, the scent of sandalwood and familiarity grounding him instantly.

"Good to be home, Papa," he said softly.

His mother pulled him inside, chattering all the way. "You must be starving. I made everything you like—paneer makhani, dal tadka, parathas, even that halwa you loved as a child."

"Maa, slow down," he said, laughing. "Let me wash up first."

She swatted his arm lightly. "You and your cricket! Go, wash. Food's ready."

The living room was cool and sunlit, trophies glinting along one wall, family photos on another. There was a framed picture of him at age ten, holding his first local-match medal. He paused for a moment before heading upstairs.

In the mirror of his room, he barely recognized himself—tan lines across his forehead, tired eyes, but also something new, something steady. He splashed water on his face, letting the cold run down his neck, and when he looked up again, he smiled faintly.

Downstairs, the table was already set. His father poured water into glasses, his mother bringing in dishes that filled the air with warmth. Aarav sat, feeling the familiar rhythm return—the small clinks of plates, the smell of ghee, the laughter that filled spaces words didn't need to reach.

"You played beautifully," his father said, serving him dal. "I watched every ball."

"You always say that," Aarav teased.

"This time I mean it," his father replied with mock sternness."

Aarav looked up, surprised. His father rarely spoke like that. "Thank you, Papa."

His mother interrupted, smiling. "And what about his mother's genes, haan? You think all that concentration comes from business meetings?"

They all laughed, the sound soft and unforced.

As they ate, the conversation drifted—from cricket to family friends, to how quiet the house had been, to what he wanted to do in the next few days. Aarav listened more than he spoke, content just to be there, the hum of normal life soaking into him like sunlight after a long rain.

When the plates were finally cleared, his mother insisted he eat one more spoon of halwa. He obeyed, pretending to protest, the sweetness filling him with a comfort no stadium cheer could match.

Later, he moved to the balcony with his father. The city skyline shimmered in the distance, the sun now low and orange.

"Proud of you, beta," his father said after a long pause. "But prouder that you still know how to come home."

Aarav looked at him, words caught somewhere in his chest. "I missed this place... missed you both."

His father placed a hand on his shoulder, firm and steady. "Glory is loud. Home should be quiet. Don't forget that."

Aarav nodded. "I won't."

From inside, his mother called, "Enough serious talk! Come, both of you. Let him rest."

They laughed and went in.

The morning sun filtered softly through the pale curtains, spilling a honeyed glow across Aarav Pathak's room. The quiet hum of Mumbai outside felt like a distant lullaby—familiar, comforting. For the first time in months, he wasn't waking up to the sound of teammates rustling through hotel corridors, or the faint buzz of press chatter outside team buses. Today, it was peace. Home. And yet, his heart raced for an entirely different reason.

He was going to see her.

Shradha.

The thought of her name brought a small, involuntary smile to his face. It had been months since they'd last met, only stolen calls and cryptic late-night texts in between. In a world where every flash of a camera could alter a career, their relationship existed in a secret rhythm—one hidden under layers of code words and unspoken promises. The media didn't know. Their families didn't know. But that secrecy somehow made it even more sacred.

He pushed aside the duvet and swung his legs over the edge of the bed, feeling the soft chill of the marble floor. His body was still sore from the Gabba Test—his wrists ached faintly, his shoulders heavy from overs bowled—but it was a familiar, satisfying ache. The kind an athlete carries like a medal. He stretched, letting his muscles unfurl, before heading to the gym that occupied the far corner of his villa.

The gym was his temple—floor-to-ceiling mirrors, matte black weights, a treadmill facing the wide French windows that opened to a private garden. The scent of sandalwood still lingered faintly from last night's candles. Aarav slipped on his wireless earphones, queued up his workout playlist, and began his morning grind. There was something hypnotic about the rhythm of movement—rep after rep, breath after breath. It grounded him.

Sweat rolled down his temples as the familiar burn returned to his arms. It wasn't about pushing limits anymore. It was about control—of body, of mind, of image. Every match, every headline, every word spoken about him—he knew the world watched him like a hawk. And yet, beyond the numbers, beyond the titles of 'Prince' or 'Next King', there was just him. Aarav. The boy who still got nervous before meeting the girl he loved.

After his session, he stood before the mirror, towel slung across his neck, eyes tracing the faint bruises of training on his arms. He smirked faintly, running a hand through his slightly damp hair. "Still presentable," he muttered under his breath.

He showered, dressed in casual comfort—black joggers, a crisp white tee, and a denim jacket. Simple, but sharp. From his bedside drawer, he took out the sleek case that held his RayGlasses.

He made his way downstairs. The aroma of parathas and filter coffee greeted him before he even reached the dining room. His mother was at the table, setting down bowls of chutney, her face lighting up when she saw him. His father sat across, reading the paper but with a grin that gave away his pride.

"Look who decided to bless us with his presence," his father teased, folding the paper. "The hero of Gabba."

Aarav laughed softly and bent to touch his parents' feet. "Good morning, Dad. Morning, Ma."

"Good morning, beta," his mother said, pulling him into a quick hug before fussing over his hair. "You look thinner! Didn't you eat in Australia?"

"Ma, please," he chuckled, taking his seat. "They fed us fine. You know how it is on tour."

"Fine, he says," she muttered, piling more parathas on his plate. "You've been running around scoring hundreds, bowling your arms off. At least eat properly when you're home."

His father smiled, watching them. "You've made us proud, Aarav. Not just with runs and wickets—but the way you carry yourself."

Aarav looked up, meeting his father's eyes. There was a quiet warmth there, an unspoken understanding. "Thanks, Dad," he said simply. "Means a lot."

The breakfast stretched into laughter and light conversation—stories from the tour, a few jokes about his teammates, his mother complaining that he looked too tanned for her liking. For a brief while, the world outside didn't exist. No cameras, no noise, no expectations. Just family.

After breakfast, he reached into his drawer and pulled out a set of keys—the sleek metallic glint of his Lamborghini Urus catching the light. His pulse quickened slightly. He grabbed his phone, typed a quick message:

Aarav: On my way.

Three dots appeared, then vanished. Then came her reply.

Shradha: Drive safe, idiot.

He grinned, sliding his phone into his pocket.

Downstairs, his parents were in the living room. His father was on a business call, his mother arranging fresh flowers in a vase. Aarav walked over to her, adjusting his jacket.

"Ma, I'm heading out," he said casually.

"Where to?" she asked without looking up.

"Meeting Abhishek. Haven't seen him in months," he replied smoothly.

"Good," she said, smiling faintly. "You boys behave. No late-night parties."

He chuckled. "Promise."

His father waved at him mid-call, mouthing a quick, Drive safe. Aarav nodded, picked up his sunglasses, and stepped outside.

The Mumbai sun hit him instantly—a golden blaze across the sky. The world outside his villa was alive with honking cars and the rhythmic chaos of city life. His driver, usually the one behind the wheel, stepped forward with a polite nod, but Aarav shook his head. "I'll drive today."

"As you wish, sir," the driver said, stepping back.

The Lamborghini Urus gleamed in matte graphite, parked neatly by the gate. Its curves caught the sunlight, elegant yet powerful—much like the man who owned it. Aarav opened the driver's door, sank into the leather seat, and pressed the ignition. The engine purred to life, low and deep.

As the Lamborghini glided through the sea of cars, his reflection flashed faintly in the tinted window. The world saw him as a star, a prodigy, the face of a new generation. But under those titles, he was just a twenty-year-old man driving across Mumbai to meet the girl who made him feel special and loved.

He slowed down at a signal. A group of kids nearby pointed at the car, shouting his name. Aarav smiled, rolled down the window just a bit, and gave them a wave. Their laughter echoed behind him as the light turned green.

He drove on, the city giving way to quieter lanes lined with trees and old houses. The air changed—softer, less crowded. The music mellowed. And though his heart beat faster, his expression was calm, almost meditative.

He knew she'd be waiting. He knew that one look into her eyes would make the world blur again.

Aarav's fingers tightened slightly on the steering wheel. The anticipation wasn't just about love—it was about belonging. In Shradha's presence, he wasn't the cricketer, the entrepreneur, the face on magazine covers. He was just Aarav.

And for once, that was enough.

The city faded behind him as he neared his destination. He took a deep breath, leaned back in the seat, and smiled faintly to himself.

It was about her.

And for the first time in weeks, that was all he needed.