

## Cricket 191

### Chapter 191

The days following the PATRA City revelation unfolded like a gentle breeze in Mumbai's January haze—light, unhurried, a rare pause in Aarav's whirlwind life. At twenty, he savored the rhythm of normalcy, even if it was laced with the undercurrent of anticipation. The England tour loomed on the horizon, a Test series that promised spin battles and high stakes, but for now, the calendar granted him breath. Mornings began with the soft glow of dawn filtering through his bedroom curtains, the distant call of crows mingling with the hum of the city awakening. He stretched in bed, muscles aching faintly from yesterday's nets, feeling the weight of his dual worlds settle comfortably rather than crush.

First came business—Astra, his company.

Then simple training in the gym, and evenings belonged to the Pathak Group, the family juggernaut. Back at the mansion, the boardroom downstairs transformed from living space to strategy hub. Dad presided, papers rustling, the scent of ink and polished wood filling the air.

And then, the stolen moments with Shradha—sneak-hide time, as he called it in his mind, heart racing like a sprint between wickets. They met in hidden spots: a quiet café in Colaba, her hand in his under the table, the clink of spoons in chai glasses masking their whispers. Or her apartment, curtains drawn, the world outside fading. Her touch was electric, fingers tracing his arm, lips meeting in soft urgency. "Missed you," she'd murmur, her breath warm against his neck. Aarav held her close, the scent of her perfume—jasmine and something uniquely her—enveloping him. These hours were his escape, love blooming in secrecy, balancing the hero's glare. Emotional depth surged here: vulnerability in her eyes, his fears of media intrusion confessed in hushed tones. She understood, daughter of a legend, her own life shadowed by Sachin's shadow.

Amid this lull, a meeting with MRF interrupted the flow, injecting a spark of excitement. It was mid-week, the sponsor's office in Chennai a quick flight away, but they arranged a video call instead. Aarav sat in his home study, screen glowing, the hum of the computer fan steady. MRF execs appeared, faces

enthusiastic. "Aarav, your Australia tour? Legendary. We're thinking big for you." They unveiled plans: a custom bat line, branded like Kohli's Genius series. "Elegance Edition—for Aarav Pathak. Sleek design, balanced weight, your input on grip and sweet spot." Aarav leaned forward. The bat symbolized his rise—Player to Prince. They discussed specs: willow grade, edge thickness, the logo etched in silver. "Ready by May 2021, after all the brandings and marketing" they assured. He nodded, envisioning it in his hands, the crack echoing in stadiums. After, time felt even laxer, the days blending in contented haze.

Then came January 25, Republic Day flags fluttering across Mumbai, parades blaring from TVs. Aarav woke to the national anthem drifting from neighbors, a patriotic stir in his chest. The online meeting was scheduled for noon, BCCI selectors dialing. He logged on from his room, laptop on desk, the screen filling with familiar faces: Kohli's intense gaze, Rohit's calm smile, coaches in the background. The air in his room felt charged, the faint scent of his morning coffee lingering. Selectors announced the squad for the England series—first two Tests in Chennai, spin-friendly pitches awaiting.

"Virat Kohli, captain," the voice intoned. Aarav's name came midway: "Aarav Pathak." His heart leaped, a mix of relief and thrill. The full list rolled: Ajinkya Rahane, Mayank Agarwal, Rishabh Pant, Cheteshwar Pujara, KL Rahul, Wriddhiman Saha, Rohit Sharma, Shubman Gill, Ravichandran Ashwin, Hardik Pandya, Axar Patel, Washington Sundar, Jasprit Bumrah, Kuldeep Yadav, Mohammed Siraj, Ishant Sharma. Eighteen strong, a blend of experience and youth. For the non-selected, gentle explanations: form dips, injury recoveries, strategic fits. Aarav listened, empathy stirring—cricket's cruelty, one series' hero the next's sidelined.

Post-announcement, the call opened to chatter. Kohli spoke first, voice commanding yet warm. "Lads, this is our fortress. England will come hard after Australia—let's make it count." Rohit joked, Laughter rippled, digital but genuine. Instructions followed: report to Chennai before February 1, bio-bubble protocols strict post-COVID. "Come alone if you wish—no families yet, keep it tight."

The call ended, screen blanking to black. Aarav sat back, emotions flooding: excitement for the Tests, the pressure of legacy intensifying. England—Root, Anderson, Stokes—a formidable foe. His stats flashed: all-round prowess to prove. But first, sharing the news.

Downstairs, parents waited in the living room, the TV on parade reruns. Mom looked up from her book, Dad from his newspaper, the rustle pausing. "Going chennai?" Dad asked.

Aarav grinned, sinking into the couch. "Yes. Chennai by Feb 1."

Mom said, "But be safe—bubbles, masks." Worry etched her words, the mother's eternal fear.

Dad clapped his shoulder. "Knew it. England won't know what hit them. Pack light—focus on the game."

Later, he slipped out to meet Shradha, a park bench their spot, trees shading from prying eyes. She arrived in a scarf, eyes sparkling. "Tell me," she said, hand in his.

"Selected. Chennai soon." He detailed the squad, the call's banter. Her fingers tightened. "Thrilled for you. But... alone?"

He nodded, pulling her close. The bench creaked, leaves whispering overhead. "Miss you already." Emotion deepened: love's ache, fame's cost. She kissed him softly. "Score big."

As dusk fell, Aarav returned home, the chapter turning. Light days ended; the pitch called. Growth beckoned—from athlete to enduring force. The impact lingered: readiness, balanced on love, loyalty, legacy.

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The hum of Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport enveloped Aarav like a familiar embrace on the morning of January 31, 2021. The air was thick with the scent of jet fuel and hurried footsteps, announcements echoing in a multilingual chorus overhead. At twenty, with the weight of national expectations on his shoulders, Aarav stood at the check-in counter, his cricket kit bag slung over one shoulder, passport in hand. The Gabba victory still lingered in his mind—a triumphant echo from Australia—but now, the England series beckoned, a new chapter in his ascent as India's all-rounder prince. Shubman Gill, his close friend and fellow opener, joined him moments later, his easy smile cutting through the pre-travel jitters.

"Ready for Chennai's heat, bro?" Shubman asked, clapping Aarav on the back. His voice carried that Punjab lilt, warm and teasing, a reminder of their shared under-19 days and unbreakable loyalty.

Aarav grinned, though inside, a mix of excitement and nerves churned. "As ready as I'll ever be. Spinners waiting, but we've got this." They moved through security, the beeps of scanners punctuating their banter. The airport bustled—families with luggage carts creaking, vendors hawking chai in steaming cups, the aroma of masala blending with perfume from duty-free shops. Aarav's thoughts drifted to Shradha, their last stolen kiss two nights ago, her whisper of "Score big" still warming him. Keeping their love secret added a layer of emotional depth, a private sanctuary amid the public glare.

Boarding the flight, they settled into business class, courtesy of BCCI perks. The plane's engines roared to life, vibrating through the seats as it taxied down the runway. Liftoff brought a momentary weightlessness, Mumbai shrinking below into a tapestry of high-rises and sea. In the air, Aarav and Shubman chatted lightly—about IPL prospects, Abhishek's training with Yuvraj, Yashasvi's recent form. "You're the prince now," Shubman teased, "but don't forget us commoners." Aarav laughed, but the label stirred introspection. Fame isolated; media hounded his every move post-Gabba. Yet, friendship like this grounded him, a theme constant in his life—loyalty on and off the field.

The flight was smooth, clouds parting to reveal Tamil Nadu's coastline as they descended. Chennai's airport welcomed them with humid air rushing in as the doors opened, the scent of rain-soaked earth mingling with exhaust. Baggage claim was swift, their kits emerging on the carousel with a thud. Outside, a BCCI-arranged car waited—a sleek black SUV, driver in uniform holding a sign. "Welcome, sirs," he said, his Tamil accent warm. They piled in, the AC blasting cool relief, leather seats creaking under their weight.

The drive to The Leela Palace wove through Chennai's vibrant streets, traffic a chaotic symphony of auto-rickshaws honking, cyclists weaving, and street sellers calling out with trays of idlis and coconuts. Palm trees swayed against a blue sky, the Bay of Bengal glinting in the distance. Aarav watched it all, his mind balancing the thrill of the series with personal reflections. The bio-bubble loomed—strict COVID protocols meaning isolation, no families, just the team. It mirrored his dual life: hero in the spotlight, human craving normalcy. Shubman pointed out landmarks, "Look, Marina Beach".

Arriving at the hotel, the grandeur struck them. The Leela Palace rose like a modern fortress, its facade a blend of traditional South Indian architecture and luxury—intricate carvings on pillars, fountains bubbling in the courtyard. The BCCI had booked the entire property, transforming it into a secure bubble. Security nodded them through, the lobby opening vast and opulent: marble floors gleaming under chandeliers, the air scented with jasmine incense and fresh flowers. Low murmurs filled the space, and there, at a corner table laden with snacks, sat Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, and Ajinkya Rahane, munching on sandwiches and sipping lassi.

"Look who made it," Rohit called, his Mumbai drawl welcoming. He stood, hugging them both. The aroma of fresh bread and yogurt wafted over.

Kohli looked up, his intense eyes softening into a smile. "Aarav, Gill—good flight? Gabba heroes in the house." His voice carried that captain's authority, laced with camaraderie.

Rahane, ever the calm presence, nodded. "Sit, eat. Long day ahead."

Aarav and Shubman joined, the table a microcosm of team spirit. Sensory details enveloped: the cool glass of lassi sliding down Aarav's throat, tangy and sweet; the crunch of cucumber in the sandwich; laughter echoing softly in the vast lobby. They talked shop—England's squad, Root's form, the spin-friendly Chepauk pitch. "Your all-round skills will be key," Kohli said to Aarav, clapping his shoulder. Emotional depth surfaced: respect from legends like these fueled Aarav's growth, from raw talent to maturing star. But pressure lurked—the legacy of being the next big thing, stats like 829 Test runs demanding more.

As they chatted, movement caught Aarav's eye. Rishabh Pant danced in the corner, earphones in, grooving to a Bollywood beat, his infectious energy drawing smiles. Nearby, Cheteshwar Pujara and Wriddhiman Saha huddled, discussing techniques, their voices low and focused. The hotel pulsed with team life—players milling, staff in masks ensuring protocols. It was a bubble, safe yet confining, amplifying bonds.

After the chat, Aarav and Shubman headed to their allocated rooms, elevators dinging softly. "See you in a bit," Shubman said, fist-bumping. Aarav's room was luxurious: king bed with crisp white sheets, balcony overlooking gardens, the AC humming gently. He unpacked his bag, cricket gear spilling out—bats polished, gloves worn from practice. The hot bath called; steam filled the bathroom, water cascading over him, easing travel's fatigue. Soap's lather smelled of sandalwood, a soothing ritual. Freshened in team tracks, he felt renewed, ready for the grind.

Downstairs, the team gathered in a lounge area, chairs arranged in a circle, snacks replenished. Light talks flowed: Hardik Pandya joking about his bowling, Axar Patel sharing spin tips, Jasprit Bumrah demonstrating yorkers with an imaginary ball. Aarav joined seamlessly, his laughter genuine. Fun ensued—an impromptu mimicry session, Pant imitating Kohli's celebrations, the room erupting. Friendship shone, loyalty a silent vow. Yet, Aarav's mind wandered to themes—media's isolation post-Australia, love's secret with Shradha. Tomorrow's practice at Chepauk loomed.

As evening fell, lights dimming in the lobby, Aarav slipped away to call home. Parents answered on video, Mom's face lighting up. "Reached safe?" she asked, voice laced with concern.

"Yes, Ma. Hotel's amazing. Team's here—Kohli bhai, everyone." He detailed the day, Dad nodding proudly. "Focus, son. England's tough." Emotional warmth flooded; family anchored his identity.

Then Shradha, her voice a whisper on the line. "Miss you already." Aarav shared the arrivals, the laughs. "Wish you were here." Her encouragement stirred depth—the balance of fame and heart.

Night settled, Chennai's sounds faint outside. Aarav lay in bed, the chapter closing on arrival, opening to battles ahead. Growth beckoned, impact profound.

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The first rays of February sunlight pierced the haze over Chennai, casting long shadows across the empty expanse of the MA Chidambaram Stadium—Chepauk, as the locals called it with affectionate reverence. Aarav Pathak stepped onto the turf on February 1, 2021, the grass still dewy under his spikes, crunching softly with each stride. The stadium, a historic colossus built in 1916, loomed around him like a silent guardian: tiered stands rising in waves of concrete, capable of holding 38,000 roaring fans, but today echoing only with the distant calls of crows and the faint whisper of the sea breeze from nearby Marina Beach. The air carried a salty tang, mixed with the earthy scent of the red-soil pitch, known for its devilish turn as matches wore on. Aarav felt the weight of legacy here—India's spiritual cricket home, where legends like Sachin had scripted epics.

As an all-rounder, Aarav's training demanded duality: the grace of batting, the ferocity of left-arm fast bowling. He started with nets, the team's practice sessions structured but light, building rhythm without exhaustion before the England Test on February 5. The empty stadium amplified every sound—the thud of balls on the practice pitches, the swish of nets fluttering in the wind. Coaches set up markers, and Aarav faced throw-downs first, his bat an extension of his will. The willow met leather with a satisfying crack, drives piercing the outfield like arrows. Sweat beaded on his forehead, trickling down his neck, soaking his practice jersey. Inside, emotions swirled: the pressure of being the "Prince," stats like 829

Test runs at 135 average fueling expectations, but also the human doubt—could he balance bat and ball against England's stars?

By midday, he switched to bowling. As a left-arm fast bowler, his action was a coiled spring: run-up smooth, gathering speed like a gathering storm, release high and whipping across right-handers. Balls seamed off the pitch, coaches nodding approvingly as they nipped back or swung away. The red soil gripped his spikes, dust kicking up in puffs, the heat building to a humid embrace. Teammates like Shubman Gill joined for slips practice, gloves snapping shut on edges. "Sharp, bro," Shubman called, his voice echoing in the vast emptiness. Aarav's mind wandered to friendships—Abhishek, Yashasvi, Arshdeep—loyal anchors amid isolation. Media buzz post-Australia had been relentless, headlines dissecting his every move, amplifying the dual life: hero on field, seeker of identity off it.

Day two dawned hotter, the sun baking the pitch to a rusty hue. Aarav arrived early, the stadium's gates creaking open, a faint echo of past crowds lingering in the air. He focused on batting endurance, facing spinners like Ashwin and Washington Sundar in the center wicket. The ball turned viciously, dust exploding on impact, forcing defensive prods and calculated sweeps. His left-handed stance—wait, no, earlier no mention, but as all-rounder, assume right-hand bat, left-arm bowl, common. Sensory overload: the sting of ball on gloves, the scent of linseed oil on his bat, the distant hum of city traffic beyond the walls. Emotionally, it deepened his growth—from impulsive youth to mature tactician, balancing fame's glare with love's quiet pull. Thoughts of Shradha surfaced during breaks, her secret texts a lifeline: "Train hard, my prince." The isolation of the bubble gnawed, but team camaraderie soothed—lunch under shaded stands, sharing stories, laughter bubbling like the fizzy drinks they sipped.

Bowling drills followed, Aarav honing variations: yorkers digging into the turf, bouncers rearing up with menace. His arm swung in a fluid arc, pace touching 140 km/h, the seam upright for swing. Coaches filmed, analyzing release points, the camera's beep punctuating efforts. Fatigue set in, muscles burning, but Aarav pushed, drawing from inner reserves. The empty stands watched like ghosts, reminding him of legacy: Chepauk's history of India's first Test win over England in 1952, a pressure to uphold. By evening, as the sun dipped, painting the sky orange, he felt a quiet satisfaction—growth in every stride, from athlete to resilient human.

February 3 brought a shift: combined drills, simulating match scenarios. The stadium felt alive, though still fanless—nets buzzing with activity, balls flying, shouts of "Well bowled!" echoing. Aarav batted against pace, dodging short balls, his helmet grill casting shadows on his focused eyes. The leather

smelled fresh, stitches biting into his palms through gloves. Emotional layers peeled: doubt crept in during a mistimed shot, clattering stumps, but he reset, channeling Kohli's intensity. "Again," he muttered, resilience forged in Australia's cauldron.

Bowling sessions intensified, Aarav targeting cones for accuracy, the thud of ball on pads rewarding. Teammates like Pant teased, "Left-arm thunder!" fostering loyalty. The sea breeze cooled sweat-slicked skin, carrying hints of salt and distant waves crashing on Marina Beach. As day ended, Aarav reflected in the dressing room, mirrors fogged from showers, steam carrying eucalyptus from balms. Identity tugged: cricketer or more? Business heir, lover, son. The bubble amplified introspection, media's distant roar a reminder of isolation.

The fourth day, February 4, changed the dynamic. Chepauk's vast layout allowed dual practices—India on one side, England adjacent, nets separated by barriers but close enough for glimpses. The stadium hummed with double energy: England's laughter mingling with India's calls, the air thicker with anticipation. Aarav warmed up, jogging laps, the red soil soft underfoot, dust clinging to his whites. He spotted Joe Root, England's captain, practicing drives—composed, technical, a prolific scorer who'd dominated 2021 with centuries.

During a break, paths crossed at the boundary. Root, wiping sweat with a towel, nodded. "Aarav, right? Gabba was something. That knock—pure class."

Aarav smiled, heart racing slightly. "Thanks, Joe. Means a lot coming from you. Your double ton in Galle? Masterful." Cricket talk flowed briefly, respectful nods to mutual challenges—spinning pitches, pressure of captaincy for Root.

But conversation shifted random, light. "Heard Chennai's food is legendary. Any recommendations?" Root asked, eyes twinkling.

Aarav chuckled. "Filter coffee and idli-sambar. Beats English tea any day." They laughed, sharing tales of travel woes—jet lag, spicy mishaps. Friendship sparked across rival lines, humanizing the game.

Later, Ben Stokes approached during bowling nets. The all-rounder, fiery on field, exuded energy, his tattoos peeking from sleeves. "Left-armer, eh? Tough angle for us righties."

Aarav grinned, wiping his brow. "Keeps you guessing. Your bouncers in Ashes—nightmare stuff." A quick cricket exchange, then veered off: "Ever tried surfing? Chennai's beaches are decent."

Stokes laughed. "Love it. Australia's my spot. You?"

"More gym than waves, but maybe post-series." Random banter eased tension, Stokes sharing dad jokes, Aarav recounting Mumbai chaos. Loyalty to teams remained, but respect bridged.

Jos Buttler wandered over last, glove in hand, laid-back charm evident. "Wicketkeeper's nightmare, your swing." Brief cricket nod, then: "What's the deal with Bollywood? Any favorites?"

Aarav's eyes lit. "SRK all the way. You?"

"Action flicks—Bond style." They swapped movie quips, Buttler mimicking accents, laughter echoing. Random, yet connecting—beyond rivals, just blokes loving life.

As practice wrapped, sun setting over Chepauk's stands, Aarav felt the emotional surge: growth in unity, even with foes. The empty stadium, soon to roar, symbolized his journey—from isolated star to connected soul. Anticipation built, a turning point looming. The pitch whispered promises; Aarav was ready to answer.