

Cricket 196

Chapter 196

The ODI series loomed, but Aarav Pathak's name was absent from the squad list. The media buzzed with speculation — injury, rest, or personal reasons? The truth was known only to a select few in the BCCI office, who had quietly approved his request for leave. Officially, it was for "personal matters." Unofficially — only Aarav knew.

Inside the team hotel, laughter echoed through the corridor as Rohit, Gill, Siraj, and Pant caught up with Aarav in the lounge. Rohit, leaning against the counter, smirked, "Hey Pathak, what's the deal? Taking a break right after winning the series? Someone special waiting, huh?"

Gill chimed in, pretending to whisper to Pant, "Bro, straight from Ahmedabad to Goa. Valentine's extended edition!"

Pant burst out laughing. "Dude, this is confirmed—there's definitely someone! He's saying it's a family problem, but he's going on a date for sure!"

Aarav threw his hands up in mock exasperation. "You guys need serious help. It's nothing like that, okay? It's... personal. That's all." His tone softened slightly, enough to make them stop teasing — but only for a second.

Rohit grinned knowingly. "Hmm, 'personal'... the most suspicious word in the dictionary."

Siraj leaned forward. "Just send a selfie, bro. For proof."

Aarav shook his head, smiling helplessly as he slung his duffel bag over his shoulder. "You guys are impossible."

As he left, Pant called after him, "Hey! If you secretly get married, don't forget to invite us!"

That evening, a sleek BCCI vehicle drove out of the team hotel and took the side route toward Ahmedabad Airport. Aarav, wearing a simple hoodie and mask, sat quietly in the back seat. The driver, used to ferrying players under the radar, didn't speak much — which suited Aarav perfectly.

When they reached the airport, he didn't head toward the main terminal. Instead, security personnel guided him toward a discreet side gate — a "private exit" used occasionally by dignitaries or top cricketers. No cameras, no fans, no noise.

A small private jet awaited him — not BCCI's, but his family's. The Pathak family owned properties and businesses across Gujarat.

A short flight later, the plane descended into Surat under the evening sky. The city lights shimmered like scattered diamonds below. As Aarav stepped out onto the tarmac, the familiar humid air filled his lungs — home.

Near the hangar stood an old, familiar face — Jignesh Bhai, their loyal family driver for decades. He wore his usual white kurta and a mask, eyes lighting up as he saw Aarav.

"Arre, Aarav beta! Kem cho?"

"Maja ma, Jignesh Bhai," Aarav replied warmly, handing over his small luggage.

As they settled into the black Toyota Vellfire, the silence of the drive was comfortable. Outside, Surat's streets glowed softly with lamplight — the smell of night flowers mixing with the breeze.

Halfway home, Aarav asked, his tone careful, almost hesitant, "Is she at home?"

Jignesh Bhai nodded with a faint smile. "Yes, son. She's been at home for the past four days. She goes to the garden sometimes, checks the flower bed, sometimes sits by the pool. Looks like she was waiting for you."

Aarav's chest tightened slightly. "Hmm," he murmured, eyes turning toward the window — but the reflection on the glass showed a smile he couldn't hide.

The Pathak Mansion stood at the end of a long palm-lined driveway, glowing golden under the lights. Its wide arches and glass walls made it look like something out of a dream — a perfect blend of modern elegance and old Gujarati warmth.

The Vellfire rolled to a stop at the front gate. The guards, recognizing Aarav, saluted sharply. The moment the car halted, the front door of the house opened.

And there she was.

Dressed in a soft peach kurti, her hair tied loosely, she stood under the golden lights of the porch, hands clasped nervously. When Aarav stepped out, she took a few small steps forward — eyes shimmering with something between joy and disbelief.

Before he could say a word, she reached out and took his hand gently. "Welcome home, Aarav," Shradha whispered.

For a moment, the world stood still. The noise of the city, the rustle of leaves, even the hum of the car — all faded.

Aarav smiled, his voice low and teasing. "This feels like a scene from a movie — wife welcoming her husband back from work."

Her cheeks flushed instantly, and she hid her face against his chest. "Shut up..." she mumbled, her voice muffled but sweet.

He laughed softly, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "You know, you actually make this place feel like home."

Together they walked inside, hand in hand.

As soon as Aarav stepped into the marble-floored living hall, a dozen familiar faces greeted him — housekeepers, gardeners, the chef, all beaming.

"Namaste, Aarav bhaiya!"

"Welcome home, beta!"

He waved back warmly, calling out, "Kem cho, majha ma?" and laughing as they nodded enthusiastically.

Shradha followed behind quietly, smiling at how effortlessly he connected with everyone around him. Even after all the fame and the spotlight, he was still the same Aarav — humble, kind, warm.

As they reached the living area, Aarav turned toward her. "So," he said, grinning. "Do you like it here?"

She nodded. "It's beautiful. Peaceful. I can see why you love it so much."

He looked around the house — the tall glass windows, the flower-filled balcony, the faint smell of sandalwood. "It's always been special to me. But this time..." he looked back at her, eyes soft, "...it feels different."

Her heart fluttered, but before she could reply, one of the maids appeared with two glasses of fresh lime juice. "For you both, beta," she said, smiling knowingly.

Shradha thanked her quietly. As they sat together on the sofa, the sound of wind chimes filled the silence.

Later that night, after dinner, they walked through the garden — the moonlight shimmering off the pond. The air was heavy with the scent of night jasmine.

Aarav stopped by the flower bed, where dozens of white lilies bloomed — her favorite. "I had them planted last week," he said. "For you."

She looked up at him, eyes wide. "You called me here just to show me this?"

He smiled. "Among other things."

Her brows furrowed. "Aarav..."

He took her hand again, fingers intertwining. "I wanted you here. Away from everything. Away from the cameras, from the noise, from being 'Sachin Tendulkar's daughter.' Just you. Just us."

Her breath caught. "You mean...?"

He nodded. "I wanted to give us time. To just be real."

The soft wind brushed against them as they stood there, the world quiet around them. For all the fame, all the noise, this — this quiet moment under the moon — was all they needed.

The next morning arrived softly over the sprawling gardens of Aarav's Surat mansion. The golden sun slid through the embroidered curtains, painting delicate shadows across the white marble floor. Aarav stirred awake, blinking against the sunlight filtering through the windowpanes. For a moment, he lay still, his mind heavy with the pleasant exhaustion. The silence of the mansion felt different now—gentler, alive with warmth.

When he finally rose, his eyes drifted to the clock—it was almost nine. A late morning indeed. He stretched lazily, the faint soreness of post-series rest still lingering in his arms and shoulders. The air was fragrant—something floral, something peaceful. He frowned, curious. Then, faintly, he heard it.

Aarti.

A soft, melodic voice echoed down the corridor, wrapped in devotion and serenity. Aarav paused for a heartbeat before stepping toward the sound, drawn like a moth to a flame. As he descended the marble staircase, he saw her.

Shradha.

She stood in front of the mandir near the inner courtyard, dressed in a pale pink salwar suit, her dupatta gently covering her head. The soft light from the brass diya danced over her face, making her glow with a divine calm. Her eyes were closed, lips moving with the rhythm of the prayer. Aarav leaned against the railing, unable to look away. Something about that sight—the grace, the peace—made his chest tighten. It wasn't just beauty; it was something deeper, quieter, something that felt like home.

When the aarti ended, Shradha turned and caught his gaze. Her expression softened instantly, a smile blooming like sunlight breaking through clouds.

"Good morning," she said, voice laced with warmth. "You're finally awake. Come, take a bath first—I'll serve breakfast after that."

Aarav smiled sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. "You sound like my wife now," he teased.

She raised an eyebrow playfully. "Well, someone has to make sure our cricket star eats properly."

He chuckled and nodded. "Alright, alright. I'll be down soon."

After a refreshing shower, Aarav joined Shradha and Kinjal aunty in the open dining area overlooking the lawn. The air smelled of masala chai, fresh parathas, and the faint sweetness of mango pickle. Kinjal aunty moved about with her usual cheer, fussing over both of them, while Shradha sat across Aarav, pouring him tea with a soft smile.

"This is perfect," Aarav said between bites. "You've both spoiled me completely."

Shradha laughed lightly. "You deserve it after the series. And besides,"—she looked up, her tone teasing—"you're going to need all this energy for whatever surprise you're planning."

Aarav smirked. "Ah, so you're curious."

"Of course! You said day after tomorrow we're going somewhere, and now you expect me to just sit quietly?"

He leaned forward, lowering his voice playfully. "That's exactly what I expect."

She gasped dramatically. "Unbelievable!"

Aarav grinned, sipping his tea as if he'd just won a match. "Patience, Miss Tendulkar. Good things come to those who wait."

Shradha pouted, folding her arms, but there was laughter in her eyes. "You're impossible."

"Only for you," he said softly.

Her blush deepened, and she looked away, pretending to focus on her plate. Aarav smiled quietly to himself, savoring the moment—the kind of peace he rarely got amidst the noise of his career.

The rest of the day flowed easily, like a lazy Sunday. They moved from the breakfast table to the living room, where the morning sunlight streamed through tall French windows. Shradha picked a movie, and soon both of them were lounging on the couch, half watching, half talking.

At some point, Aarav reached for the remote, switching off the TV mid-scene.

"Hey! I was watching that," Shradha protested.

He grinned. "I know. But I like this scene better."

"What scene?" she frowned.

"This one," he said softly, looking right at her.

For a moment, silence filled the air. Shradha blinked, caught off guard. The warmth of his gaze was disarming. Then, breaking the tension with a laugh, she threw a cushion at him.

"Stop being cheesy, Aarav!"

He caught the cushion effortlessly. "Cheesy? I was being romantic!"

"Well, your definition of romance needs work," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Then you teach me," he replied, eyes twinkling.

She smiled, shaking her head, but her cheeks flushed a delicate pink. "Let's just watch another movie before you start quoting poetry."

He laughed. "Deal."

Evening came quietly, with the scent of jasmine drifting through the courtyard. The house glowed in warm amber lights as Kinjal aunty prepared dinner. Aarav and Shradha sat by the balcony outside his room, watching the city lights shimmer in the distance. The air was cool, carrying with it the faint hum of life beyond the mansion walls.

"You know," Shradha said softly, resting her chin on her hand, "I've never stayed in a place like this. It feels... unreal. Like a dream."

Aarav smiled, his voice gentle. "You just have to change your surname from Tendulkar to Pathak. Then this dream becomes your home too."

She turned to him sharply, half smiling, half stunned. "You say things so casually, Aarav."

He shrugged. "Maybe because I mean them."

Shradha looked away, hiding the smile tugging at her lips. Her heart fluttered, but she said nothing. For a long while, they simply sat in silence, letting the evening breeze carry unspoken emotions between them.

Later that night, after dinner, Aarav lay on the bed while Shradha sat beside him, oiling his hair. The gentle rhythm of her fingers against his scalp melted away the weariness of weeks. He closed his eyes, feeling the calm settle in.

"You'll fall asleep like this," she whispered.

"Maybe that's the plan," he murmured.

She chuckled softly, dipping her fingers again into the oil. "Turn around, my turn now."

Aarav opened one eye, pretending to be surprised. "Oh, really?"

"Yes, Mr. Pathak. Equal rights."

He laughed and shifted behind her, gently massaging oil into her hair. The soft scent of oil mixed with her perfume, filling the room with warmth. They talked in hushed tones—about her favorite songs, about little things that didn't matter but somehow felt everything.

At one point, Shradha leaned back slightly, her head brushing against his body. "You know," she said softly, "this feels nice. Like the world stopped for a bit."

Aarav smiled, his voice low. "Then let's not let it move yet."

She turned slightly, meeting his eyes. And for a fleeting second, neither of them said anything. The air between them was alive, charged with quiet affection.

Outside, the moon hung low over the Surat sky, bathing the mansion in silver light. Inside, two souls sat close, laughter and whispers blending into the night—simple, soft, and real.

Tomorrow was another day, another secret, another surprise waiting to unfold. But for now, it was enough to just be there—in that moment, together.

The morning sun rose softly over Surat, painting the sky in hues of gold and blush as Aarav and Shradha stepped out of the mansion. The air carried the faint scent of blooming mogra from the garden, mingling with the earthy freshness that followed dawn. Aarav unlocked the white Range Rover parked in the

driveway, the metallic sheen reflecting the early light. Shradha, dressed in a simple lavender kurta with her hair tied in a loose ponytail, looked radiant—like a blend of calm and curiosity.

"Ready?" Aarav asked, opening the passenger door for her.

She tilted her head slightly, eyes gleaming with mischief. "Still not telling me where we're going?"

He chuckled, slipping into the driver's seat. "Nope. It's a surprise. You'll know when it's time."

The car purred to life, and soon they were cruising through the peaceful outskirts of Surat. The hum of the engine mixed with soft retro tunes playing from the stereo—Lata Mangeshkar's voice floating like nostalgia in the air. The breeze fluttered through Shradha's hair as she gazed outside, occasionally stealing glances at Aarav, whose focus remained on the road but whose lips curved into a knowing smile every time their eyes met.

As they drove further, the landscape began to change. The roadside shops gave way to broad lanes lined with neat rows of trees. The air seemed cleaner, the atmosphere almost futuristic. Shradha leaned closer to the window, eyes wide with wonder.

"Hey... have you noticed something?" she said suddenly.

"What?" Aarav glanced sideways, amused.

"The trees... and the roads! Everything suddenly looks so clean and organized! Like—like we just crossed into another country." She turned back to him with a puzzled smile. "Did Surat suddenly get an upgrade overnight?"

Aarav laughed under his breath. "Do you know what this road is called?"

She frowned. "Hmm... no idea. What is it?"

"This," he said, tapping the steering wheel lightly as though savoring the moment, "is the PATRA Terminal Zero—the entry road to Patra City."

"Patra City?" she repeated, curiosity spilling into her voice. "Never heard of it. What's that?"

He smiled, his tone now carrying a mix of pride and affection. "It's not surprising you haven't. It's still under development. But once it's complete... it'll be India's first fully planned smart city. Four hundred acres of pure innovation and design."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Four hundred acres?"

Aarav nodded, keeping his eyes on the road. "Yeah. A ₹4,500-crore project, led by Torrent Group's in-house Torrent Urja. The same Torrent Group that's under the Pathak-Torrent umbrella—my family's company."

Shradha blinked, processing. "Wait, your family's company?"

"Mm-hmm." He smiled faintly, as if it were no big deal. "We've built everything here—from the 60,000-seat stadium to five five-star hotels, two practice stadiums, an urban infrastructure system that runs on renewable energy, and an entire network of malls, theaters, and street food plazas."

Her jaw dropped slightly as she turned back to the window. The clean roads stretched endlessly, bordered by tall glass buildings reflecting the bright morning sun. Even from afar, the sleek symmetry of architecture spoke of precision and power. It was like watching a vision of the future unfold before her eyes.

"Aarav..." she whispered, barely audible, "this doesn't look like India. This looks like Tokyo... or maybe Shanghai. I've never seen something like this before."

He glanced at her—her face glowing with amazement, eyes darting from one futuristic structure to another. "It's home-grown," he said softly. "And it's all ours."

The Range Rover slowed as they approached a towering gate of chrome and glass. The name Patra City shimmered in bold steel letters. Security guards stepped forward immediately, recognizing both the car and the man inside. Aarav rolled down the window, exchanging a polite nod. One of the guards saluted him with a warm smile. "Good morning, sir. Welcome back."

The gates swung open silently.

As the vehicle rolled in, Shradha's expression shifted from surprise to disbelief. Her gaze traveled across wide boulevards, artistic fountains that reflected sunlight in sparkling arcs, and manicured lawns that

seemed straight out of a European dream. The hum of quiet automation filled the air—drones hovering to monitor greenery, smart lampposts adjusting brightness as the light shifted.

"Aarav... this is unreal." Her voice was breathless, filled with innocent awe. "You mean to say your family owns all of this?"

He shrugged playfully. "Technically, yes. But someday, you'll have to get used to calling it yours too."

She turned sharply, cheeks flushing crimson. "Wh-what?"

He smirked. "Well, you said yesterday that this kind of place only exists in films or flower valleys. Guess what? You're the heroine now."

Shradha couldn't help but laugh, hitting his shoulder lightly. "You're impossible, Aarav Pathak."

They drove deeper into the heart of Patra City, where the skyline curved into a magnificent vision—a blend of luxury and modernity. Towering skyscrapers rose like glass sculptures, their mirrored surfaces painting the world in shimmering hues. Every street seemed thoughtfully crafted—clean lines, blooming bougainvillea, and the gentle hum of automated systems maintaining perfection.

As they passed a particularly massive structure, Shradha leaned forward, squinting. "Is that... a stadium?"

Aarav nodded with quiet pride. "The heart of the city. Sixty thousand seats. The biggest stadium ever constructed by a private group. Fully solar-powered, eco-friendly cooling system, and retractable roof. It's almost ready for inauguration."

Her mouth formed a small 'o' of wonder. "It looks... surreal."

He slowed the car, letting her take it all in. "Want to step out and see?"

"Can we?" Her eyes sparkled with childlike excitement.

"Of course. No one's working this week. Construction's paused for maintenance and regulation updates. It's just guards around—and they all know not to disturb us."

They parked near the perimeter, the city spread out like a dream under the warm sun. Shradha stepped out, her sandals crunching lightly on the marble pathway. The gentle breeze lifted her hair as she stared at the colossal structure in front of her—the future shimmering in its glass panels.

She turned toward Aarav, eyes wide, voice soft but trembling with awe. "You... made this?"

He smiled, standing beside her. "We did. My father started it. I took it forward with Torrent Urja's team. Every building here runs on self-sustaining green tech—solar grids, smart waste recycling, renewable water systems. This isn't just a city. It's a promise for what India can be."

Shradha looked back at the cityscape, her heart swelling with admiration—not for the wealth, but for the vision behind it. "It's beautiful," she whispered.

He turned to her, eyes tender. "Not as much as you."

She met his gaze, a shy smile curling on her lips. "You know, you should stop saying things like that. One day I'll actually start believing you."

"Good," he said simply. "Because I mean every word."

For a moment, neither spoke. The silence between them wasn't empty—it was full of unspoken emotion, of dreams colliding in the golden light of morning. Then, in a sudden burst of joy, Shradha twirled once, arms wide open, the wind catching her dupatta and swirling it around like a halo.

"This place," she said, breathless, "feels like magic. Like a world you've created just for me."

Aarav watched her, smiling softly. "Maybe I did."

Her laughter rang out—clear, bright, echoing through the quiet cityscape. It was a sound that seemed to belong here, in this futuristic paradise—a sound of love, of life, of new beginnings.

Shradha stood silently, gazing up. The air smelled faintly of cement and grass. She could see sunlight bouncing off unfinished beams, the echo of distant construction faint in the distance. "It's... unreal," she whispered.

Aarav walked up beside her, hands in his pockets. "Still about a month away from finishing. But it's safe to walk around—construction's paused for the next week."

They strolled along the paved walkway that led toward the open lawn surrounding the stadium. Shradha noticed rows of small stalls being set up around the edges, each with a nameplate holder and electrical connections ready under a super design terrace cover.

"What are these for?" she asked.

"Street food plaza," Aarav said. "Each stall will be rented to small vendors—the ones who can't afford the food court inside the stadium."

Her face lit up instantly. "That's... actually beautiful. Inclusive."

Aarav smiled. "That was the idea. Not just a rich man's city, but a balanced one."

Her eyes lingered on him for a second longer than she intended. She could see how much this project meant to him—not as an heir, but as someone who wanted to create something that truly mattered.

Their next stop was the hospital—a pristine white structure with sleek architecture and glass corridors. As soon as she stepped inside the half-finished lobby, her excitement surged. "Oh my god, Aarav!" she exclaimed, her voice echoing lightly. "They've got full guideline displays for trauma centers, neonatal care, and even robotic surgery wings."

He grinned. "You sound like a kid in Disneyland."

She elbowed him playfully. "I am future doctor, so this is Disneyland for me."

There was a quiet pause. He looked at her—really looked at her.

Later, they drove through the residential zone. Huge mansions lined the artificial lake, each villa grander than the last. The water shimmered in the sunlight, gentle ripples catching their reflection. As they reached one of the biggest villas—a sprawling structure surrounded by the lake on three sides—Aarav slowed the car.

"That one," he said, pointing toward it, "is Villa Number 1."

Shradha's eyes widened again. "Who stays there?"

He smiled softly. "No one yet. It's the family villa. For us."

She turned to him, speechless for a moment. The wind brushed her hair across her face, and Aarav instinctively reached out to tuck it behind her ear. His fingers brushed against her cheek, and for a second—just a heartbeat—the world outside seemed to slow down.

Her cheeks flushed lightly. "You really know how to surprise someone," she murmured.

He looked at her, a playful glint in his eye. "Then I'm doing my job right."

They both laughed softly, the sound carried away by the quiet breeze over the lake.

As the day went on, they explored every corner of Patra City—the shopping arcades, the tech towers, the botanical gardens filled with blooming flowers. Shradha took pictures of everything, her excitement almost childlike. Aarav, on the other hand, found himself watching her more than the city—the way her eyes sparkled at every new sight, the way she gasped softly at every marvel, the way she smiled like the whole world had just opened up in front of her.

When the sun finally began to set, painting the skyline in hues of amber and rose, they stood on a balcony overlooking the central plaza. The city lights flickered to life one by one, reflections dancing in the lake below.

Shradha rested her hands on the railing, the wind brushing through her hair. "It's like watching the future being born," she said quietly.

Aarav stood beside her, his gaze fixed on the horizon. "You're part of that future," he said softly.

She turned to him, caught off guard. "Me?"

He nodded. "You keep me grounded, Shradha. Remind me what it all means."

For a moment, neither spoke. The silence wasn't empty—it was full, heavy with understanding, comfort, and something deeper neither dared to name just yet.

Then, almost shyly, she leaned her head on his shoulder. "You know," she whispered, "this is the best Valentine's surprise I could ever imagine."

Aarav smiled, wrapping his arm gently around her. "It's only part one," he whispered back.

The city shimmered below them, alive with promise—a quiet reflection of the two souls who, beneath the golden sky of Gujarat, found something stronger than ambition, something softer than dreams.

Something real.