

Cricket 198

Chapter 198

The air in Bangalore carried that familiar mix of warmth and electricity—the kind that only arrived when cricket fever gripped the city. Aarav stepped out of the airport with his cap pulled low, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips. The chaos outside barely touched him; his focus was already on what lay ahead—the new IPL season.

After a twenty-day pause since the England series, the calm had been welcome. Days of rest, quiet mornings, and evenings spent with family had soothed the fatigue that travel and competition often left behind. But somewhere amidst those days, there had been something far more personal—a quiet, secret meeting with Shradha. The memory still lingered like an echo of warmth. Her smile, that last hug before he left, the faint scent of her hair that stayed with him through the flight—it all lingered in his heart. Their goodbye had been simple but heavy with meaning, both of them knowing the distance that came with his career. He had promised to return soon, and she had simply nodded, eyes soft but shining.

Now, as his car wound its way through Bangalore traffic toward the Shangri-La, Aarav rolled down the window. The city was alive—people on bikes, the smell of rain-soaked earth mingling with that unmistakable whiff of roasted peanuts. It felt like home in a strange, vibrant way.

When he reached the hotel, he was greeted by familiar faces. The RCB team—his second family.

Kohli bhaiya was the first to notice him, his grin wide and eyes sharp with energy. "Look who finally decided to show up," Virat teased, pulling Aarav into a hug.

"Had to take a small break, bhaiya," Aarav replied, laughing. "You know, recharge the batteries before the storm."

From the corner, Maxwell waved with that easy Aussie grin. "Good to have you back, champ. You ready to make us look bad guys again?"

"sure shot!" Aarav shot back.

AB de Villiers, calm and ever-graceful, gave him a firm handshake. "Good to see you, mate. You've grown sharper. The England series was quite something."

"Thanks, AB. Learned from the best," Aarav said.

The camaraderie was effortless. Siraj joined in, cracking jokes about Aarav's quarantine beard, while Washington Sundar laughed from the other side of the room. For a moment, it felt like college friends reuniting after months apart—the easy teasing, the unspoken bond of shared victories and losses.

Evening settled in soft gold through the tall glass windows of the lounge. The team gathered in the conference room—an air of focus replacing the earlier laughter. The RCB logo gleamed proudly on the projector screen. Coach Simon Katich and Mike Hesson, Batting Consultant Sanjay Bangar and others stood at the front, with Kohli beside them, his arms folded in quiet command.

"Alright, boys," Kohli began, his voice steady, strong. "We know what's at stake. We aren't just defending champions—we're defending pride, discipline, and belief. Every team will come at us hard, but we play as we always have—as a family as a discipline army."

He looked around the room, his gaze sharp yet reassuring.

"Roles this season are clear. I'll anchor the start with Devdutt. Aarav," he turned toward him, "you're our pivot at number three. Play with your instinct—if we lose early wickets, stabilize. If we have a platform, destroy."

Aarav nodded. "Got it, bhaiya."

Maxwell leaned back in his chair, twirling a pen. "And we finish strong, eh?" he grinned.

"Exactly. Maxi and AB take it home. Washi and Dan to strengthen the lower order. Bowling—Aarav, kyle, harshal, Chahal, Siraj—keep it tight. We hunt in packs."

The team murmured in agreement. The energy was palpable—focused yet fiery.

The meeting lasted another hour—strategies, match-ups, field positions. By the time it ended, night had fallen over Bangalore, the city glittering like a million little dreams outside the window.

Later, Aarav stood alone on the balcony of his hotel room, looking out at the city lights.

His phone buzzed softly—a message from Shradha.

Take care of yourself. I saw the practice videos. You look happy. Just... don't forget to smile like that on the field too.

He smiled faintly, typing back.

Always do when I know you're watching.

The night deepened, quiet and steady, as he stood there—a boy who had become a man on the cricket field, a dreamer who had turned his fire into purpose. Tomorrow would bring nets, media, and noise. But tonight, it was just him, the stars, and a heartbeat that beat in sync with a stadium yet to roar.

The air inside the empty Chepauk Stadium was thick with humidity and history. No crowd, no roaring chants, no painted faces — just the echo of footsteps and the sound of the ball striking the practice nets. The year was 2021, and cricket had returned, but differently. The IPL, the grandest league of them all, was back in its bubble. And tonight, the defending champions — Royal Challengers Bangalore — were set to begin their title defense against Mumbai Indians.

Jatin Sapru: "Good evening, everyone! What a night we have here in Chennai — IPL 2021 is finally here! And what a blockbuster to start with — the defending champions, Royal Challengers Bangalore, up against the four-time title winners, Mumbai Indians!"

Aakash Chopra: "Oh, it doesn't get better than this, Jatin. And you know what makes this special? The man of the moment — Aarav Pathak — is back! Last year's Orange Cap and Purple Cap winner. Over 990 runs, 30-plus wickets. He's redefining what it means to be an all-rounder in modern cricket."

Virender Sehwag: "Bilkul! (Absolutely!) The kind of form he's shown internationally — I mean, what he did against Australia and England recently — he's become a one-man army for RCB. And today, he starts the season again, with a new ball in hand."

The camera panned to the center, where Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma stood — two captains, two icons of Indian cricket. The coin flipped high, glinting under the floodlights.

Jatin Sapru: "Tails it is... and Kohli wins the toss! RCB have decided to field first. Brave move, considering the Chennai surface, which can grip a little later."

Aakash Chopra: "But that's Kohli for you. He trusts his bowlers — and when you've got Aarav Pathak, Siraj, Harshal, and Chahal, you can afford to chase."

As the line-ups were displayed, excitement buzzed through the commentary box:

RCB XI: Kohli (C), Padikkal, Aarav Pathak, Patidar, Maxwell, AB de Villiers, Tim David, Washington Sundar, Harshal Patel, Siraj, Chahal.

MI XI: Rohit Sharma (C), Chris Lynn, Suryakumar Yadav, Ishan Kishan, Hardik Pandya, Krunal Pandya, Pollard, Marco Jansen, Rahul Chahar, Bumrah, Boult.

The players walked out. The stadium, though silent, felt alive — every sound amplified, every voice distinct. Aarav Pathak stood at the top of his run-up with the new ball in hand, his hair ruffling slightly in the warm breeze.

Aakash Chopra: "Here we go then — Aarav Pathak with the new ball! Remember, he was the highest wicket-taker last season, and this surface might just suit his skiddy pace."

Virender Sehwag: "And he's got that ability to swing it both ways. Rohit Sharma better watch out early."

Rohit took guard. Aarav ran in, smooth and rhythmical. The first ball 148kmph — pitched just short of a length — seamed away sharply. Rohit missed it completely.

Jatin Sapru: "And that's beaten him all ends up! What a start by Aarav!"

Second ball — fuller, straighter — thudded into Rohit's pads. A loud appeal followed, but umpire stayed calm.

Fourth delivery — short, bouncer — Rohit went for the pull, mistimed it. The ball looped up high — and Siraj at fine leg took it cleanly.

Aakash Chopra: "Gone! Rohit Sharma goes! Aarav Pathak strikes in his very first over! RCB are up and running!"

Virender Sehwag: "Aarav Pathak, kya baat hai yaar! (What a player, man!) He just doesn't stop delivering. Every time he has the ball, he creates magic."

The pressure was on Mumbai. Suryakumar Yadav and Chris Lynn tried to rebuild, but Aarav was unrelenting. The seam movement, the sharp yorkers, the precision — it was all too much.

Aakash Chopra: "He's not bowling deliveries; he's bowling stories tonight."

By the 11th over, Suryakumar fell for 31 off 23 — a well-disguised slower ball from Aarav got him caught at mid-wicket.

Virender Sehwag: "That's the beauty of Pathak. You think you've figured him out, and then — bang! — he changes the pace."

Lynn followed soon after, edging a rising delivery to AB de Villiers.

Jatin Sapru: "Mumbai losing wickets in clusters here, and guess who again — Aarav Pathak!"

By the time Hardik Pandya came in, Mumbai were reeling at 3 for 105. He tried to fight fire with fire but mistimed a slog sweep off Aarav — straight into Kohli's safe hands at deep mid-wicket.

Aakash Chopra: "It's raining wickets! Hardik departs, and Aarav now has his fourth wicket of the evening!"

Every RCB player surrounded him, tapping his back, the energy electric even in a silent stadium.

Virender Sehwag: "He's bowling like a dream. And the crazy part? He's smiling through it. Calm, confident, lethal."

Aarav returned for his final over in the 19th. Krunal Pandya tried to clear long-on, but mistimed it — taken easily by Tim David.

Jatin Sapru: "And that's five! Five wickets for Aarav Pathak in the first match of IPL 2021!"

Mumbai eventually crumbled to 159 all out.

Aakash Chopra: "What a spell — 4 overs, 5 wickets, 19 runs. Aarav Pathak continues where he left off last year. Simply sensational."

Virat Kohli and Devdutt Padikkal walked out to open. The partnership began cautiously. Padikkal struggled early, finding it tough to time the ball.

Jatin Sapru: "This pitch is not easy. The ball's gripping, it's slow. RCB have to bat smart."

Kohli looked steady but lost Padikkal for 10 off 16 balls. Aarav Pathak now walked in at number 3.

Aakash Chopra: "Here he comes — the man of the moment. The all-round superstar. 5 wickets already tonight — can he now finish it with the bat?"

Virender Sehwag: "He can do anything. If he stays even 10 balls, he'll change this game."

Aarav began carefully, rotating strike with Kohli. His first boundary came off Bumrah — a flick off the pads that raced to fine leg. The next one — a cover drive that split two fielders perfectly.

Aakash Chopra: "Textbook stuff! The timing, the balance — he's a treat to watch."

As Kohli departed for 33 off 29, the equation tightened. 70 needed from 42.

Then, Aarav shifted gears.

Marco Jansen bowled short — Aarav pulled it flat over mid-wicket for six. Next ball — a slower one — went for a straight boundary. The RCB dugout erupted.

Virender Sehwag: "Bhai saab, yeh toh practice match lag raha hai iske liye! (Brother, this looks like a practice match for him!)"

In came Boult — yorker length — but Aarav got under it and scooped it behind the keeper for four.

Aakash Chopra: "Unbelievable shot! He's rewriting cricket's geometry!"

AB de Villiers joined him and the two began to pick apart the bowling. De Villiers, with his calm precision, and Aarav, with his firepower — the perfect balance.

Aarav brought up his 40 in just 20 balls. The equation was now 12 needed off 9.

Boult bowled again — Aarav calmly nudged one to long-off for a single. AB finished the match with a boundary.

RCB WON BY 5 WICKETS.

The RCB dressing room clapped, their voices echoing through the empty stands.

Jatin Sapru: "What a start for the defending champions! Aarav Pathak — 5 wickets and unbeaten 48 off 22 balls. It's his world, and we're just watching!"

Aakash Chopra: "He's not just a player — he's a phenomenon. The perfect all-rounder, leading RCB's charge once again."

Virender Sehwag: "If this is the beginning, then imagine what's coming this season. Aarav Pathak — take a bow."

The second match of the IPL 2021 campaign arrived with the same electric anticipation as the first. The air in Chennai was heavy with humidity, the floodlights casting a silvery glow over the Chepauk pitch as the players from both camps went through their warm-ups. The stands were empty again due to COVID restrictions, but millions were watching from their screens, hearts pounding as the defending champions—Royal Challengers Bangalore—prepared to face Sunrisers Hyderabad.

David Warner flipped the coin; Virat Kohli called tails—it landed heads. Sunrisers Hyderabad elected to field first. Warner grinned, confident in his bowling unit. Kohli simply nodded, knowing the Chepauk pitch could be tricky to bat on in the first innings.

The playing XIs flashed across the screen, and social media buzzed. The same RCB core—Kohli, Padikkal, Aarav Pathak, Maxwell, and AB de Villiers. The same dangerous balance.

Aakash Chopra's voice cut through the pre-match chatter: "Aarav Pathak—the man who redefined all-round brilliance last season—is in sensational form. Few matches in 2021, and he's already showing why he's called the Game Changer."

The innings began with Kohli and Padikkal walking out, bats tucked under their arms, focused expressions masking the quiet pressure of defending champions. The first few overs were tense. The ball gripped, spun, and occasionally held up. Padikkal tried to break free but mistimed a pull straight to mid-wicket in the third over. The score was 19/1.

Aarav Pathak walked in at number three, helmet slightly tilted, bat twirling in rhythm. The commentators' tone lifted.

"Here comes Aarav Pathak," said Jatin Sapru, excitement threading his voice.

The field shifted as Pathak took his guard. Rashid Khan was warming up. Pathak nudged his first delivery for a single—just settling in—but the pitch wasn't forgiving. Boundaries came rarely. Every shot had to be earned.

Kohli steadied the ship for a while, guiding singles, finding gaps, but Bhuvneshwar Kumar was relentless with his lines. The next blow came early—Kohli was caught behind while trying to glide one down to third man. 47/2.

Glenn Maxwell, at the other end, was in a mood. He began unleashing those characteristic switch-hits, finding the gaps, striking hard through cover and square leg. Pathak, meanwhile, rotated strike, picking ones and twos, ensuring the tempo didn't collapse.

Then came the 13th over—Rashid Khan floated one up, leg-break drifting wide. Aarav reached for it, tried to loft it over extra cover, but mistimed. The ball took the edge, flying high—David Warner at long-off settled under it. Gone. 91/3. Pathak out for 17 (15 balls). The camera cut to him walking off—calm, frustration.

RCB struggled thereafter. Maxwell fought on valiantly, hammering 59 off 41 with his signature audacity. His reverse sweeps and lofted drives drew cheers even in the echoing emptiness of the stadium. But wickets kept tumbling around him—Patidar, ABD, Tim David—all fell cheaply.

RCB crawled to 149/8 by the end of 20 overs. Respectable, but not intimidating.

As the players took the field, Virat Kohli threw the new ball to Aarav Pathak. "Start strong," Kohli said simply. Aarav nodded, taking a deep breath, eyes narrowing as he ran in.

The first over was quiet—tight lines, no loose deliveries. The over began, and on the second ball, Wriddhiman Saha tried to flick one across the line. Aarav's seam position was perfect; the ball skidded and crashed into the stumps. Timber! First wicket. 0/1.

The dugout erupted in applause. Chahal pumped his fist. Kohli clapped hard, shouting, "Come on Pathak!"

The next few overs saw Warner and Manish Pandey steady SRH's innings. The pair began rotating strike efficiently. Warner, ever the aggressor, cracked a few boundaries, his bat echoing across the silent stadium. But the pitch was slowing down.

Aarav came back for his third over in the 14th, and it was time for magic again. The ball was old now, but Aarav's rhythm was immaculate. He delivered a back-of-length cutter, Warner went for the pull, but it stayed low—an under-edge onto the stumps. Warner gone for 54. The breakthrough RCB needed.

Aakash Chopra on commentary: "Every time this man bowls, something happens! Aarav Pathak's control is unreal tonight—two wickets, two maidens already!"

Momentum shifted. From that point, it was chaos for SRH. Bairstow tried to hit big but fell to Chahal, caught in the deep. The leg-spinner then dismissed Manish Pandey on the very next ball with a googly. The collapse had begun.

From 96/2, SRH crumbled to 115/5 within three overs. The pressure of the Chepauk pitch and RCB's disciplined bowling crushed their resistance. Harshal Patel and Siraj joined the party, each picking crucial wickets. Vijay Shankar's mistimed slog landed straight in Washington Sundar's hands at long-on. Jason Holder was caught behind by ABD, who let out a roar that pierced the humid Chennai night.

By the 18th over, SRH were 123/7, and it felt like a matter of time.

"Outstanding from RCB," said Virender Sehwag, laughter in his tone. "They've defended 149 like it's 190. Aarav's spell—two wickets for thirteen runs and two maidens—phenomenal!"

The last two overs sealed the fate. Chahal wrapped things up with his third wicket, Rashid Khan holing out to long-off. SRH 142 all out. RCB won by seven runs.