

KING OF CRICKET

Chapter 9: The Moment of Truth

The sun was bright and warm as Aarav stood at the gate of Shivaji Park Academy, the place where dreams were made and legends were born. The excitement coursed through his veins, but so did the nervousness. This was the moment he had worked for, the culmination of hours spent practicing, honing his skills, and pushing his limits. But now, as he stood there, staring at the vast grounds and the swarm of unfamiliar faces, doubts crept in. What if he did something wrong? What if he fell short?

Taking a deep breath, Aarav's mental training kicked in. His mind cleared, and he focused on the task ahead. This was it. He was ready.

As he stepped onto the ground, the roar of chatter and shuffling feet met his ears. Cricketers from all over were gathered, their faces set with determination and anticipation. Just as Aarav was taking it all in, a middle-aged, sturdy man walked onto the ground. His presence was commanding, and when he spoke, his voice carried authority.

"I'm Coach Ashwin," he said, his voice loud enough to cut through the noise. "You'll be evaluated to see if you have what it takes to be selected for this prestigious academy."

Aarav's heart pounded, but he stood tall, his gaze steady. Coach Ashwin's piercing eyes scanned the crowd, then turned to the group of all-rounders. "All-rounders are the core of the team," he continued. "We manage the game, set the tone, and keep the team together. Let's see if you have the skill and the mindset to make it here."

He started with a batting test. One by one, players faced senior bowlers, who bowled at them with practiced precision. Aarav stepped up, his grip firm on the bat, his stance ready. The first delivery came at him, and with a practiced swing, he sent it soaring for six. The second, he pulled cleanly for four, the third was a perfectly executed cut shot, and then he hit another four and two more sixes before the bowler's over ended. The crowd murmured with surprise and approval, and Aarav felt a surge of confidence. He had done well, and he knew it.

The batting evaluation was followed by a bowling test, where Aarav was tasked with bowling to senior batsmen. The first ball was a perfect yorker, then a bouncer that forced the batsman to duck. He bowled a maiden over, impressing the coach, who noted something in his register.

Next up was fielding. The senior players threw the ball to him from various angles. Aarav dived, caught, and threw with precision, though he missed one catch out of 14. Despite that slip, the coach marked something in his register, his expression unreadable. Then came the fitness test—endurance, strength, speed, and agility. Aarav pushed himself, finishing as the fastest in the group. The last part of the evaluation was the game scenarios, where the coach posed questions about match strategies and how players would handle pressure. Aarav's responses were confident and well thought out.

When the tests were done, the group was given a two-hour break. Aarav sat on the edge of the ground, the weight of the day starting to sink in. Finally, the players were called back, and Coach Ashwin stood at the front, his gaze sharp as ever.

"I've graded you all based on several parameters," he announced. His voice, though calm, was filled with authority. "Batting, bowling, fielding, fitness, and game awareness. Here's the list of players who have been selected."

The silence was deafening as Coach Ashwin read the names.

"Aarav Pathak... Abhishek Sharma... and the rest of the players..."

The names rolled off his tongue, and Aarav's heart leaped when he heard his own name. He was one of the eight chosen. The tension that had gripped him all day melted away, replaced by an overwhelming sense of joy. The atmosphere shifted; the tension turned into celebration as players clapped, cheered, and hugged each other. Aarav beamed, his eyes searching for his parents in his mind, knowing they'd be waiting to hear the news.

The coach's voice cut through the excitement, bringing them all back to attention. "You've all shown potential, but remember, this is just the beginning," he said, his eyes moving over the group. "What got you here won't keep you here. Hard work, discipline, and the will to improve—that's what will set you apart."

He paused, his gaze hardening. "You've earned your place. Now, prove you belong."

The players stood in silence, each one absorbing the weight of the words. Then, the coach continued. "I need you here tomorrow, sharp at 3:30 PM to 7:00 PM. No excuses."

The group nodded, and as the players dispersed, a sense of excitement and relief spread among them. Aarav felt a rush of happiness as he left the ground, eager to share the news with his family.

That evening, when Aarav walked through the door, his parents were waiting. The moment they saw him, they rushed to him with wide smiles and hopeful eyes.

"Did you make it?" his mother asked, her voice quivering with anticipation.

Aarav grinned, his eyes sparkling. "I did, Mom! I made it!"

His father, who had been holding his breath, let out a joyous laugh and hugged Aarav tightly. "I knew you could do it, son. This is just the beginning!"

His mother, eyes glistening with tears, took his hands in hers. "We're so proud of you, Aarav. All the hard work, all those early mornings—it's paying off."

They spent the next hour celebrating, the house filled with laughter and cheers. Aarav's father brought out a cake they had kept for special occasions, and they cut it together, sharing stories and planning for the future. His mother

said, "This is a new chapter, Aarav. We'll be by your side, every step of the way."

Aarav looked at his parents, feeling the love and support that had always been his foundation. "Thank you, Mom. Thank you, Dad. This is just the start, and I promise I'll make you proud."

They raised their glasses in a toast, the room echoing with the promise of new beginnings and endless possibilities.