



The Greatest Prize

By Ian Pugh

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Taherah slammed the volleyball over the net with such force that no one on the other side could even get a hand to it. Her teammates cheered and the coach blew his whistle.

‘Good work, girls!’ said the coach. ‘That’s all for today. See you at the next practice.’

Shabana, one of Taherah’s teammates, came up and patted her on the back. ‘You’ll be as good as your brother soon!’ she said with a smile.

‘I wish!’ Taherah laughed.

Now Shabana noticed someone waiting at the entrance to the gym. ‘Oh look,’ she said. ‘Just the person we were talking about.’

Taherah looked towards the entrance where her brother, Hussain, stood waiting, and gave him a wave.



As usual on the walk home, Taherah and Hussain spoke mainly about volleyball.

‘That was a good spike you did at the end there,’ said Hussain.

‘Oh, you saw that?’ Taherah said. She was pleased with the compliment but was trying not to show it.

Hussain nodded. ‘You’re getting good height,’ he said.

‘Thanks... Shabana said I’ll be as good as you one day,’ Taherah said with a laugh. ‘What a joke! One day you’re going to play professionally. I wish I could.’

‘Why can’t you?’ Hussain said. ‘You’ve got natural talent. You just need to work hard on your fitness and technique.’

Taherah glanced at her brother to check if he was being serious. ‘Wait,’ she said. ‘Are you really saying you think I have enough talent to become a professional player one day?’

‘Why not?’ Hussain said with a shrug of the shoulders. ‘It’s a lot of work but I can help you with a few things.’

Taherah was suddenly so excited she could hardly stand still. ‘That would be amazing!’ she said. ‘Imagine, one day we could both end up playing for the country!’

Hussain couldn’t help laughing. ‘Hey, hold on!’ he said. ‘Let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves!’





Back at home that evening, Taherah was speaking excitedly to her mother while helping with the cooking. 'Hussain thinks I may have enough talent to play professionally one day,' she said.

From where Hussain and his father were sitting, they could hear what Taherah was saying. The father looked at Hussain. 'Why are you filling your sister's head with these things?' he said.

'She's a good player, Father,' said Hussain. 'I think if she keeps working hard...'

'Please, no!' his father said, shaking his head. 'Having one person in the family that is obsessed with volleyball is enough, thank you!'

Hussain smiled. 'You should go and watch her play sometime.'

But the look on his father's face indicated that this was not likely to happen anytime soon.





A few days later, Taherah came out of school and saw Hussain waiting. She was excited because Hussain had said he would practice with her today. But, as she approached her brother, she could tell that something was wrong.

‘Are we going to practice?’ she asked.

‘Not today,’ Hussain replied with a shake of the head.

Taherah couldn’t hide her frustration. ‘But you promised!’ she cried.

‘I know but... something’s happened,’ he said unhappily. ‘You need to get home now.’

‘What?’ Taherah was now looking concerned. ‘Is something wrong with Mother or Father?’

Hussain shook his head but was reluctant to say more. ‘Just go home now,’ he said. ‘That’s all I can say.’

Taherah set off for home. Her mind was racing. What had happened? Why was Hussain looking so upset? Why couldn’t he tell her what was wrong?

When Taherah arrived home, the first thing she noticed was her mother's red eyes. She had been crying.

'What's wrong, Mama?' Taherah asked. She was now starting to get really worried.

Her mother looked as though she was going to start crying again. 'Your father is waiting to speak to you,' she said, tearfully. 'And we have a guest.'

Taherah wanted to know who the guest was, but her mother just escorted her through to the living room. There she found her father sitting with a man who looked almost the same age as her father. He was well-dressed and appeared very interested to see Taherah.

'Taherah,' her father said, waving at her to sit. 'This is Abdul Wali. He is an important member of our community and someone I have had the pleasure of doing business with over the years. I am also very pleased to say that our family and his will soon be joined.'

Taherah looked confused. 'I'm sorry, Father,' she said. 'I don't understand.'

'Taherah,' her father said with a beaming smile. 'I am honoured to say that Abdul Wali has agreed to take you as his bride.'

It took a few moments for these words to sink in. When they did, Taherah felt like her whole world was crashing down around her. Her father and Abdul Wali were now speaking to her, but she heard nothing, understood nothing. She wanted to get up and run away! She wanted to keep running until she had left this nightmare far behind!



Hussain had been sitting with Taherah for over an hour and the tears were still rolling down her cheeks.

'I'll have to leave school,' she said. 'I'll never be able to play volleyball again. The one thing I really love! The one thing that makes me happy! My whole life will have to change. I'll be expected to stay home and look after the house. And to look after my husband. And to have babies!'

Hussain wished more than anything that he could tell her these things weren't true. But, unfortunately, he knew, deep down, that all of it was true – so all he could do was repeat the same thing he had already said a hundred times. 'I'm so sorry, Taherah. If I could change any of this, I promise I would.'

'Can't you speak to Father?' she pleaded.

'I've tried!' Hussain replied. 'He says he has no choice. He has to do this because of the money. He says his business is in debt – about to close down – and this is the only way he can save it.'

Now Hussain suddenly looked at his watch and gasped. 'Oh no, I have to go!' he said. 'Sorry, Taherah, I'm late for my volleyball practice. It's our last practice before the big final.'

Taherah nodded like she understood.

'I'll see you at home later, OK?' Hussain said, as he ran off.

The practice had already started when Hussain arrived at the gym, and the coach didn't look happy that he was late. He joined the game, but he was having difficulty concentrating. He couldn't stop thinking about Taherah and this was causing him to miss balls that he would normally have got easily.

'Hussain!' the coach shouted from the sideline. 'Where is your head today? We've got a final this weekend, remember?'

After the practice, the captain of the team, Anwar (who was also a friend of Hussain's), came up to him and asked if everything was alright. At first, Hussain assured him that everything was fine but Anwar could tell that something was bothering him. Eventually, Hussain ended up telling him the story about Taherah and, as he spoke, quite a few of his other teammates gathered around to listen. When he was finished, Anwar and the other players (who all knew Taherah) looked like they were genuinely sorry.

'That is a real shame,' said Anwar, shaking his head. 'She has the potential to be a really good player. Do you think your father will change his mind?'

Hussain looked doubtful. 'It's about the money,' he explained. 'The man she is marrying can pay a large bride price and my father badly needs the money.'

When the other players had drifted off, Anwar spoke seriously to Hussain. 'Listen, I really am sorry to hear about your sister. But this is the final – our big chance – and I needed you to be 100% focused, understood?'

Hussain nodded. 'I know,' he said. 'I won't let you down. I promise.'



The day of the final arrived and there was great excitement in the house. Taherah's father and Hussain's older brother had gone to the stadium to watch, while the rest of family (including many aunts, uncles, cousins and Taherah's younger brother and sister) all gathered around the TV to watch the big game.

It was such a big occasion that even Taherah was able to forget about her worries for a while. She knew how hard Hussain and his team had worked to make it this far. Now they had only one more step to go and they would be the provincial champions!

It turned out to be a very close game. At the start, Hussain's team was doing well. They won the first set and Hussain was winning a lot of points for his team. Every time he touched the ball there would be loud cheers around the TV. Taherah was starting to believe they could do it.

But then the tide turned, and the second set went to the other team. It was now down to the final set. The players on both sides played like their lives depended on it. They dived for everything, made impossible saves – it was anyone's game! It came down to the final play of the game. Anwar somehow managed to retrieve a difficult ball and sent it skyward. Hussain jumped higher than Taherah had ever seen him jump before. He slammed the ball home. Victory! The house erupted – and so did the stadium!



It was the proudest moment of Hussain's life as he stepped up onto the podium with the rest of the team to accept the championship trophy. Anwar held the trophy above his head and the crowd in the stadium cheered. Hussain's father and his brother were both on their feet, cheering loudly as well. Along with the trophy, the team was also presented with a cheque for a large amount of money.

After the prize-giving ceremony, Hussain's father and brother came over to congratulate him. While they chatted happily about the game, Hussain noticed that Anwar and the team were huddled together, having what appeared to be a serious discussion. The next thing he knew, the whole team was making its way over to where they stood. Hussain had no idea what was going on, but he could see plenty of smiles amongst his teammates.

It was Anwar who stepped forward and addressed Hussain's father. 'Sir,' he said. 'We wanted to do something useful with this prize money – something to help the game of volleyball in our region. We think Taherah has a great future in the sport and we would therefore like to present you with this money. Of course, it is your decision, but we are hoping you may reconsider Taherah's marriage proposal so that she can continue playing.'

Hussain's father was speechless. He looked at the cheque and then at Anwar, and eventually uttered the words, 'I can't accept this.'

Anwar smiled and looked at his team. 'It's what the whole team wants, Sir,' he said. 'Isn't it, boys?'

When the whole team cheered, Hussain's father knew he could never refuse this gift.





Everyone was waiting when Hussain entered the home later that evening with his father and brother. A huge cheer went up and all the family gathered around to congratulate him and take a look at his winner's medal. Hussain's mother and aunts had prepared a special meal to celebrate and soon everyone was being offered food and drink.

Taherah waited until she could get Hussain on his own. 'Good game,' she said with smile. 'Why did you leave it till the end? You gave us all heart attacks!'

Hussain smiled and then looked over at his father. 'Why don't you go and talk to Father?' he suggested. 'I think there's something he wants to say to you.'

Looking confused, Taherah went over to where her father was waiting. 'Father?' she said. 'Did you want to speak to me?'

'I want you to stay in school,' her father said. 'I've also been told you have some talent on the volleyball court – so I suppose you had better carry on playing that as well.'

For a moment, Taherah didn't quite understand what she was hearing. 'Father, are you saying...?'

'Yes,' her father said, nodding. 'I've changed my mind about the marriage.'

Taherah could feel the tears welling up in her eyes. She felt like her heart might burst with joy. 'Thank you, Father!' she said, wiping her eyes and looking across at Hussain.

'Don't thank me,' her father replied. 'There are some other people outside who I think you should thank.'

Now Taherah's father and Hussain escorted her to the front door. When they opened the door, she was amazed to find the whole of Hussain's team standing outside. They all cheered when they saw her.

It was the biggest game Taherah had played in so far. The crowd was bigger than they had ever experienced but that wasn't what was worrying her. The nervousness she was feeling was because of one particular person in the crowd. As she prepared to receive the ball, she glanced over and saw her father sitting beside Hussain.

The ball came over the net so fast and hard that Taherah had to dive to her left to scoop it up. Then, in a flash, she was back on her feet and waiting for the pass. Once again, her teammate, Shabana set the ball up nice and high for her. Taherah leapt high and hammered it home before any of the players in the other team could react. The crowd leapt to their feet, cheering.

With everyone cheering around them, Hussain looked over at his father and smiled when he saw his surprised expression. 'I told you she was quite good,' said Hussain.

His father was still wide-eyed, like he was in shock. 'What do you mean "quite good"?' he said. 'I think she's going to be better than you!'



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