

Part 10 – The Penny Drops in Pakistan

“Well, what does he say?” asked Benny.

As we waited in the arrival lounge of Islamabad Airport, I read the latest e-mail from Mr. Smucker out loud to Violet and Benny. “He says, ‘The memo you mentioned does sound very suspicious and will no doubt have something to do with why you haven’t been able to meet with a single volunteer athlete. They’re hiding something—I know it. Keep digging, TICKS, and you’ll find the clues to blow their cover. All the better for The International Caring Kids Society, too!’ ”



I wondered why it would be better for TICKS. Just then a young woman in a long dress, and a white scarf draped over her head and shoulders came up to us. “Excuse me, I am looking for three TICKS named Benny, Violet, and Maddie who have come to Pakistan to visit the Right To Play programs here in Islamabad,” said the girl.

“I’m Maddie, and this here is Benny and Violet.”

“I am Tahmina Khan, the volunteer coach for the Afghani refugee children here in Quetta. I am very sorry to keep you waiting. Several of us volunteer coaches were celebrating with our Right To Play ambassador athlete, Hassan Akmal, before his departure.”

“Hassan Akmal the tennis player! here at the airport?” blurted Benny. “Let’s go see him right now. We need to talk to him!”

“But I’m afraid that’s impossible. His airplane is already on the departure runway. You can see there,” said Tahmina, pointing out the window.

We had to practically sit on Violet whose plan was to run out onto the runway and stop the plane. When I got her and Benny calmed down, I could see a look of bewilderment on Tahmina’s face. “Ah, you see we’ve been travelling around the world for a month, hoping to meet some of the volunteer athletes for Right To Play. It was supposed to be part of our mission to interview them and get their take on Right To Play, you know, to see if they think it’s really helping. And so far we haven’t met a single one.”

“Except two guys in Tanzania who were impersonating Right To Play athletes. And the other two we nearly met until someone cancelled the sports festival in Makeni. And then there were the two football players in Mali—their coaches knew something, but couldn’t tell us,” added Violet. “So maybe you can drop the deer-in-headlights routine and tell us what’s going on. Why are you Right To Play people keeping us from meeting the athletes?”

Tahmina's looked even more baffled than before. "Violet," I jumped in. "You're acting like a pit bull on his way to a dog fight. We're not going to get any answers that way."

"From what you have said I understand you have had a lot of difficulty fulfilling your mission. You are disappointed," then Tahmina looked at Violet, "and, it would seem, very angry."

"Well, don't get us wrong," said Benny. "We're not angry at you. It's just everywhere we go, the athletes are either missing, or have just left the country. And we want to know why. Is there something going on that Right To Play doesn't want us to know about?"

We spent all day with Tahmina and still didn't get an answer to that question. She told us everything she knew about the work Right To Play was doing in Pakistan for thousands of Afghani refugees like herself, and thousands of Pakistani children. We learned that she had fled from Afghanistan with millions of others after years of problems like the Russian invasion, the Taliban regime, and finally the recent increase in terrorist activity. But Pakistan was a poor country with more than 160 million people of its own, and could hardly offer the refugees more than a place to put their tents.

"Right To Play volunteers taught us, especially the girls, that we are important and that we can make changes. Before that we were just humiliated aliens in a foreign land," explained Tahmina.

Tahmina told us that when she was younger she was very shy and afraid. In her culture, girls and women were not treated equally to men. "People believed that girls were less than boys. But they are not different and they have hearts to spend their lives freely. Girls too have a right to play so that they can develop themselves and their families."

After everything we learned from Tahmina, we still didn't know why all the athletes were missing. "So what you're telling us is that Right To Play is helping children here in Pakistan, and you have no idea why we're not getting a chance to speak to the volunteer athletes," I said.

"Yes, Maddie. It is a mystery why the athletes seem to be eluding you. All I can tell you is sports and games really do help children build healthy and happy lives. In the past, the girls didn't know they had rights here in Pakistan or in Afghani refugee camps. But after taking part in Right To Play, they have more confidence. You see, Maddie, I work with 280 children, six days a week. I can see that the girls are not afraid to answer questions, to be active anymore. They know they are smart and have rights. And even the boys accept this."

Then Tahmina beamed the biggest smile I've ever seen. "If it were not for all that I have learned through this program, I would not be sitting here today talking to you."

I was completely stumped. Right To Play programs really were helping thousands of people all over the world. Every volunteer coach we've met, the Bungalow Boys, Christopher, Makan, John, and the kindergarten teachers in Israel have been genuine and the children they're helping are happy. And why not—I know that sports and play works. I've seen it myself.

"Tahmina, is there any chance that you know why Hassan Akmal left Pakistan today?" I asked.

"No, it was not something he told us," she said. "But I know where he was going—would that be of help?"

"Ya, where's he going?" Violet urged.

"He is very lucky—he is flying to New York city. That's in America!"