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A New Beginning

“What can I do now? Everything is lost. Mom is gone and so is Dad. The house is no more. Tony is hungry and so is Mimi. What am I going to do with them? What am I going to do with my life?”

Ammeena was confused. She was cold and hungry. She looked again at her younger brother and sister. Their faces were pale and tired. Their cheeks, once rosy were now parched and covered with dust. Their eyes were dry at present but she knew how easy it was for them to well up. They were looking up at her. They had sopped asking her for food. They had stopped telling her how cold they were. They had stopped mentioning their parents, who only four days back were alive.

Suddenly there was a commotion around her. Everyone got up and ran to a corner of the ground. Ammeena could see they were gathered around someone. They were all jostling to get near to him and were speaking at the same time. The man in the center began to say something. Everyone was quiet for some time, but started speaking again, all at once.

“Who is he?” asked Ammeena.

“He is the Doctor sahib,” a young boy sitting nearby replied.

“Why is everyone standing around him? Are they all sick?”

“No, no. He is not only running the camp hospital, he is also distributing food and clothes. Everyone is crowding around him because he has brought tents today.”

“I need a tent. I need food.” Ammeena said as if talking to herself.

“Go and try your luck. Better still send your younger brother and sister. I hear he does not refuse anything to women and children.”

Ammeena pulled herself up. She was tired and wanted to lie down. But she knew she had to take care of her brother and sister. She urgently needed to find them shelter and food. She knew they could not last long the way they were. When her parents were alive, she did not need even to go to the market to buy anything. Today she had to join that rowdy crowd of impatient men and women to get something for her family. She could see that the doctor was a middle-aged man. He wore gold-rimmed glasses and was listening to everyone around him. He had a small notebook in his hand and once in a while he would write something in it. Whenever he did so, a number of people would start speaking their names. Ammeena thought she had seen him somewhere but could not remember.

A man broke from the crowd and ran past Ammeena. He was clutching a piece of paper in his hand. Face flushed, he was followed by a couple of men. They seemed to be in a hurry but stopped when Ammeena asked them where they were going.

“We are lucky. We got a chit for a tent from doctor sahib and we are going to get one right away,” one of them said.

“How did you manage to get this chit? There are so many people around him.”

“He came to visit us last night and saw for himself how we were sleeping under a plastic sheet. He wrote down our names and today we have got our tent.”

Suddenly Ammeena remembered where she had seen the doctor. Last night she was sitting under a tree, as she had no shelter. Tony and Mimi were huddled close to her. She had wrapped her shawl around them but they were still cold. Winter was setting in and the early October nights in Muzaffarabad were not only chilly but damp as well. They had nothing to eat that day except for a box of biscuits that Tony was able to get from a relief truck. Although a couple of relief trucks were coming to the camp everyday, it were the strong ones who got hold of everything. It was midnight when she saw someone coming towards them. At first she was afraid but when the person came nearer she could see he was alone. When he was about twenty feet away he called out and asked if he could talk to her. Ammeena got up. It was the same doctor who was now distributing tents to people. He had a kind face with searching sad eyes. He had a flashlight in one hand. He had asked her if she had any male family member. Ammeena held back her tears as she narrated how her home was wrecked in the earthquake, trapping and then killing her parents. The doctor turned and walked away. A few moments later she saw him coming back. He was carrying something in his arms. When he came closer she could see he was holding two new blankets. Without saying anything he handed her the blankets and put his hand on her head. She heard him, telling her to wait till the morning when he would send some food when the supplies came. Ammeena broke down. She had not felt so safe for the last four days.

Ammeena’s thoughts were interrupted by the noise around her. She looked up to find the doctor standing in front of her. He had walked up to where she was standing and was busy writing on his notebook. After he had finished, he tore off the page and handed it over to her.

“This is for a tent. Go and get it for yourself and your family from the truck parked on the road.” He pointed to the edge of the campsite. Then he pointed to three men in the crowd. “You men will pitch the tent for her before I give you tents for your families.”

Ammeena could not believe her ears but there was more to come. The doctor handed her another piece of paper. “Take this to the relief center and get a carton of food for your family. It will be sufficient for a week. After that you will get one carton every week. If you need anything else, let me know.”

Before she could open her mouth the doctor was gone, walking towards another family pitched nearby. Ammeena knew the family consisted of a father who was blind and who had lost his wife and two children in the earthquake. He had four young children with him. She knew they too would be sleeping in a tent tonight. They need not fight with others to get one – it was coming to them where they were.

Ammeena was speechless. Just a few moments ago she was desperate. Now she had something to look forward to. She suddenly found herself to have hope. “We will pull

through this. I will take care of Tony and Mimi. I will be their mum and dad. We can do it. We will survive.”

With a determined look on her face and a confidence she never thought she had, she took Tony and Mimi by their hands and started walking towards the truck.