



CHAPTER 1

Family Troubles

“Nine times eight is seventy-two; nine times nine is eighty-one ...”

Ten-year-old Raju sat cross-legged on a low bed. His school notebook lay open on the pillow in front of him. Raju rocked back and forth as he muttered the times table out loud, over and over again.

Seven-year-old Sristi sat on the dirt floor, mimicking her brother. She was supposed to be memorizing the Nepali alphabet, but it was nearly impossible to concentrate on the squiggly lines on her paper. She shook her head so the ribbons in her braided hair whacked against each other.

“Nine times two is fifty! Nine times three is nothing!” she shouted in a burst of frustration.

“Stop it, little sister! I can’t think with you shouting.” Raju glared at her. “Ama, make her stop!” he called to their mother. She wasn’t far away—within arm’s reach, really, sitting beside the cooking fireplace, blowing on the glowing embers through a hollow bamboo pipe.

Chandra ignored her children as she tried to rekindle the fire in order to cook supper. A pile of sticks in the

corner was the result of hours of searching through the refugee camp for firewood. She was too tired to worry about her bickering children.

On a bed near Raju, Chandra's husband rolled over, waking up from his late afternoon nap. Srستی quickly stopped teasing Raju. Her father had been at his friend Dorje's hut in the afternoon, drinking. She didn't know what kind of mood he might be in.

"Baba," said Raju, "I can't study with Srستی mocking me."

Srستی watched as Baba sat up slowly and ran his hand over the back of his head. He had fallen a few weeks ago and still had headaches. Suddenly, the door of the little hut opened. Srستی scooted away from the doorway for her uncle to come in. He ducked through the low doorway, carrying two plastic jugs full of water. After setting them down beside the fireplace, he sat beside Raju.

He let his eyes adjust to the low light for a few minutes before speaking to Srستی's father. "Brother, you've done it again, haven't you? You've wasted the money I gave you! How will your family survive if you keep throwing away your money—and mine—to get drunk? How many times do you have to lose everything before you come to your senses? How many times do you have to get hurt before you start helping your family? If our parents were alive today, they would be ashamed of you."

Ram answered as he always did. "So what am I supposed to do? We can't go back to our own country. All the jobs here in the camp are taken. It's illegal for us refugees to work outside the camp. What am I supposed to *do*? I want to start a store, but you're holding the money back from me. I can't get another job if I try. It's easy for you to talk—you don't have a wife and children to worry about!"

Uncle Kiran had a solution. "I've made up my mind. I'm going to Kathmandu to work. They're building houses all over the city, and we can work there on a building team. The government won't know if we're working or not; don't worry about that."

Ram shook his head. "It's a risk. If it turns out that there isn't work, then it's just a big trip for nothing. If there is work, then it's a risk that we'll be caught. I won't go."

"Then stay here if you want," said Kiran. "But I'm going to find work. Don't think I'll help you with money though. I've learned I can't help you. Everything I've given you so far has been wasted. You're just going to have to help yourself."

Ram winced. "I'll be fine. Don't worry about me."

Just then Sristi's baby brother started crying. Sristi jumped up and rushed over to the little bundle lying on the bed. Baba picked up little Himal. "Did someone say something that bothered you, little son? Don't cry. Everything's all right." He stood up and walked to the center of the hut, soothing his baby. "Everything's going to be all right."

Sristi's mother finally spoke from her place by the cooking fire, where she was stirring cauliflower in a pan. "You ought to go, Ram. We hardly have enough to live on. All the other men are trying to find jobs. You should go."

"I won't go. I'll do something here. I want to open a store. We know that people will buy tea and cookies and noodles. I want to open a store."

Kiran shook his head, but Ram kept talking. "I know you have a few thousand rupees* you've kept from me. You have no right to do that. We're brothers, and we have to help each other. Give me the money. I'll open a little store, and when you need help, I'll help you."

*Rupee: Nepalese coin or paper money, worth a few cents in U.S. or Canadian currency.

Everyone looked at Kiran. Sristi's mother spoke. "I think it might work. If you can give us the money to buy supplies, we can start a store."

"But... I don't know if Ram can—"

"Don't worry about me, brother. I won't let you down this time. Just this one last time. You go on to the city



and leave us with enough money to start a store. Won't you be glad to see me working for my family? With your income in the city, and my income here, things will really go well for us."

"Well, I suppose . . ."

Sristi ran outside the hut and jumped up and down in excitement. A store! They would

have their very own store!

She looked at the huts clustered all around her in Sector C of the Goldhap refugee camp. Oh, it would be so much fun to have all her neighbors come and buy cookies at her store!

She ran to the big pipal tree and touched it. She was praying to it. "Please help us make a lot of money." She ran back to her hut, hungry for supper. The scent of spices filled the air. All the ladies had supper ready for their families at the same time.

