

And some goodies for you—a free chapter that introduces *The Peacock Stone*:

The Peacock Stone

Chapter 1

The beggar tapped with his stick, feeling his way through the crowd, toward his usual squat. As he did, the madness of India waking to a new day assailed him. It was the sound of ordered chaos; of fifteen million people fighting to survive.

Delhi was not an easy city to live in, particularly if you were blind, but occasionally, kindness came between the curses. Rough hands would sometimes reach out and steer him safely past the stalls of the market traders. Their carts were set up in the open area opposite the entrance to Delhi's main railway station on the west side of Chelmsford Road. They sold everything: bananas, pomegranates, pineapples, paratha bread, curries, and, of course, hot chai. If your taste was for something cooler, you could buy the sweet liquid that came from men turning the wheels of sugar-cane crushers.

He paused to listen. The noise of the Delhi traffic was at its normal level of drama, just a smidge shy of mayhem. Horns beeped continuously. The asthmatic squawk of rubber balloon-operated horns on auto-rickshaws competed with the indignant blare of the buses and the hooting of cars.

The noise was comforting.

The beggar stank. He knew he did. A dog had urinated on him during the night as he slept in his usual laneway. The pungent warm stream had woken him. He'd cursed the dog, causing it to skip a few paces sideways, and then he'd gone back to sleep. It was not an uncommon experience.

His smell did, however, make the prospect of being given breakfast by a stall owner less likely.

An impatient hand reached out and jerked him sideways. He could hear the hiss of a gas cooker and the bubble of boiling oil nearby. He was probably being pulled away from someone cooking puri. The Indian puff bread would be ballooning spectacularly into the size of a football in a pan of boiling oil before it burst and collapsed into a crisp bubbly pancake.

That was the trouble with going blind late in life—you remembered.

"Pah. You stink, old man."

He lowered his head, held out his hand and dared to ask, "Food?"

"Piss off."

He moved on again, tapping left and right with his stick—seeking kindness elsewhere. Unless someone gave him breakfast before he arrived at his squat, he would not eat until he tried his luck again when he walked back to the food carts at lunchtime. He would dearly love someone to hand him a samosa wrapped in newspaper. Surely the gods would smile at such an act of charity.

The prospects did not look good for he was now nearly at his squat. The gods were not smiling.

He'd chosen the squat carefully. It was among the stalls operated primarily by the barbers. There was a spot where he could sit on a slab of broken masonry that had once covered the sewer underneath. The hole it had left in the pavement had been treacherous. He'd discovered it painfully two years ago, and it had taken months for the wound in his leg to heal. In fact, he would probably have died if the nuns had not found him.

They were from the Missionaries of Charity, the order founded by Mother Teresa, and they'd been keeping an eye out for him over many years. In a city of two hundred thousand beggars, he knew he was fortunate to have their attention. Sister Rosalind normally found him some time during the week in order to tend his sores and give him food.

Aah. He was at his squat now. Bending down, he swept the area in front of him with his left hand to check it was free of feces. It was wise to do so. Cows, dogs, donkeys, and goats wandered freely amid the traffic and the street stalls.

Around him, he could pick out the murmur of conversation between the barbers and their clients. The morning commuters would be sitting in chairs on the barber's platforms having a shave before they got to work. Some of them were having their faces slapped enthusiastically to cause their skin to glow.

It was a good spot for a squat. Shaving put customers in a positive mood, and they had to open their wallets to pay for their shave or haircut. However, there was one particular reason why he came here. It was the place she could always find him.

He squatted down, pushed his begging bowl in front of him, and waited.

Being a beggar required you to have well-practiced plaintiff cries and routines designed to attract attention. It needed a delicate balance to be bold enough to attract attention, but not so bold as to offend the sensibilities of potential benefactors. It was important to lower your head humbly and not look people in the face when they spoke to you. Let them know you are less than they are.

He squared his shoulders. He had not always been less. Once he'd been a gifted craftsman, honored for his skills—before he had needed to hide, and before he'd gone blind. His shoulders slumped down again.

He could hear raised voices from the women who had gathered with their plastic containers at the public tap. They were arguing. It was little wonder. The women of the district only had a short while to collect water before it stopped flowing. They had to fight.

Water was a constant source of irritation in Delhi. Although eighty percent of houses had access to piped water, it was only available for two hours a day, usually in the morning. To make matters worse, the quality of the water had fallen over the years so that it was even beyond the abilities of carbon filters to make safe. A quarter of Delhi's population now had to rely on water tankers. The beggar scowled. The growing water crisis in Delhi had been orchestrated by the notoriously inept Delhi Jal Board. They'd promised every year that things would be improved. It was now 2009, and things were as bad as ever. Word was that the Jal Board was clogged up by non-performing, unsackable bureaucrats. He spat on the ground.

Light feet walking quickly. He thought he recognized them. Was it the sound of her feet?

He waited.

The footsteps stopped in front of him.

He was almost sure.

"Rohit, Uncle...oh dear, dear. You smell really bad."

The beggar smiled. Her fourteen-year-old voice was full of concern.

"Aah, Jayanti, my dear; the dogs have taken a liking to me even if the gods have not."

"I've brought you your water." She tapped his arm with a plastic bottle.

Wordlessly, he exchanged it for an empty one he pulled from the bag hidden under his chadar, his shawl.

He could hear her sniffing him, working out where the offensive smell came from.

"Uncle, give me your chadar. I'll wash it and bring it back this afternoon."

He sighed and unwrapped it reluctantly from his thin shoulders. Rohit hated parting with it. He lived in his shawl. It was the only security he had.

He felt water being poured over his shoulders and small hands sluicing him clean. He bowed over and surrendered to Jayanti's ministrations. His only protest was to say, "You're wasting your water, you know. You will have to queue again to get some, and it will probably have run out by the time you reach the tap."

"Never mind. Auntie will just scold me, and I will be told to go to a neighbor and beg some water from her roof-top tank. I will probably have to pay for it by doing her washing, but that is no matter. You can't stink like this. No one will come near you."

He blew the water away from his mouth. “May you be blessed by the gods.”

“There,” she said. “That’s better.” She rested a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll see you this afternoon.”

“Accha.”¹

Jayanti pattered away on her bare feet, leaving him feeling vulnerable, dressed only in his lungi.

He was just deciding to surrender to self-pity when he heard coarse laughter coming from a group of young men behind him.

“I wouldn’t mind her hands over me washing me clean.”

Laughter.

“I think we’d both get nicely wet.”

Another voice: “Yes, I’ve been noticing her. Her fruit will be worth plucking any day now.”

The initial man: “I saw her first. You can have her after me.”

Ribald laughter.

“She’s a pretty thing, right enough. You know, I think I’ll come back here this afternoon—so I can get to know her.”

“Know her! So you can slide between her petals, more like.”

More laughter.

It was chilling, dirty, and demeaning talk which might have been dismissed as bravado had this not been Kaseru Walan—a none too salubrious area of Delhi. In this context, their words presaged real danger. Jayanti was frighteningly vulnerable as she had not grown up locally. She was a ‘blow in’, a southerner who did not have the protection of any significant person locally.

The beggar wanted to scream; to flail at the men and damn them to hell. He wanted to cut them into pieces—very small pieces; pieces that were so small, they were worthless.

Instead he bowed his head and said nothing, allowing his long hair to hide his face.

But he thought. Oh yes, he thought hard.

Around him, Delhi tooted and bustled impatiently, careless of his angst.

He rocked backward and forward. Life was cruel, and he was weak. What could he do? Jayanti was the most precious person in the world to him. What could he do to protect her?

He thought back to the time when he’d first met her. She’d come with Sister Rosalind. The nun had explained that Jayanti was from Kerala. Her parents had died so she’d been sent to Delhi to live with her great aunt. The young girl had asked to accompany the nun and the new sister who was with her as they walked the streets and lanes of Kaseru Walan.

Ever since that time, Jayanti walked with the sisters on a good many mornings, helping them by carrying their food sacks. It became apparent to Rohit over the months that Jayanti idolized Sister Rosalind, so when the nun asked her to keep an eye on him, she’d accepted the responsibility immediately.

She’d cared for him faithfully for years, bringing water, sometimes food—and a friendship, even love, had grown between them. Jayanti had come to call him ‘Rohit Uncle’... a term that delighted him—even though it was not his real name. It was wonderful to be of significance to someone.

He put his hands together and offered a perfunctory puja, a prayer to Ganesh for Rosalind. The elephant-headed god was thought to be particularly kindhearted. However, Rohit had never experienced much kindness, so he didn’t place much faith in his prayer. Maybe in another life, when he was a better person, Ganesh might take more notice of him. As it was... *Ach shpput*. He spat again. Life was a bitch.

For on top of his weight of concerns for Jayanti, was the knowledge that he himself was being hunted. A man very much wanted him dead.

¹ Okay