



CHAPTER ONE

“I can’t do it,” said Ash. He’d beaten a demon king. He’d faced down an immortal sorcerer. He’d saved the world. He shouldn’t be scared of *anything*. But now fear grabbed at his chest with icy fingers. “It’s suicide.”

“C’mon, Ash,” said Akbar. “It’s now or never.”

Josh murmured in agreement.

“Fine. I’ll do it.” That’s if he didn’t die of heart failure first. “How do I look?”

Akbar grimaced. “Honestly? A bit sick.”

“Yeah,” added Josh. “Sweaty.”

“That’s so helpful,” Ash snapped back. His friends should be backing him up, not digging his grave. He swallowed and waited for his legs to stop shaking. “I’m going to do it. Now.”

Akbar swept his long, straggly black hair away from his face and peered past Ash. “Whenever you’re ready,” he said.

Josh did his tongue-wagging grin. Along with Sean, who was somewhere in the science block earning extra credit, the four of them were the Nerd Herd. The smartest, hardest working, most socially inept and physically clumsy students to grace the hallowed halls of West Dulwich High.

Josh slapped Ash’s shoulder. “Just go.”

“Right. Now,” said Ash. “I’m off.”

He looked across the vast space of the crowded school cafeteria.

What's the longest distance in the world?

That between you and your heart's desire.

Gemma sat with her friends. She was laughing at something Anne was saying, and Ash watched as she brushed her golden hair from her face. Was it his imagination, or was it especially shiny today?

"Stop that, Ash," said Josh. "You're sighing again."

"I'm not actually asking her out. You know that, don't you?" Ash took another sip of water. How could his throat be so dry? "I'm just asking if she's got plans for tonight."

"Nope. Not asking her out *at all*," said Josh.

"Though I hear she and Jack are no longer together. Jamie's best friend, Debbie, heard it from her sister's boyfriend," added Akbar.

"Then it must be true. The golden couple have split." Josh leaned closer, eyes darting across the cafeteria. "So, if you were asking her out, which you are not, now would be the time. Or wouldn't, if you weren't."

"Whatever." Ash stood up. The chair's metal legs screeched as they scraped across the floor. It was strange how something as automatic as, like, walking, could suddenly become so difficult. Left, right, don't trip over anything or crash into a table. Why were there so many tables in here? And chairs? And people? He'd never make it over there!

Oh, God, she's seen me.

Be cool. Remember who you are.

Ash Mistry. Eternal Warrior. The demons of hell wet their pants when they hear your name.

Gemma was still talking to Anne, but her head was half-turned and her eyes were on him. She gave a little laugh. Why was she laughing? Was it something Anne had said, or because of him? Even from here Ash saw the light sparkle in her hazel eyes. She had amazing eyes, sometimes gray, sometimes green, sometimes brown. Amazing eyes.

But why is she looking at me like that?

Oh, no. Have I got snot hanging from my nostril? Is my fly open?

He should have checked. Surely one of his friends would have told him?

No, the scumbags. He bet they were laughing their heads off, watching him stroll over with a booger dangling down his face. Or worse: with his *Doctor Who* boxers on full exposure. Maybe he could detour to the corridor and do a full body check.

“Hi, Ash,” said Gemma.

“Er, hi, Gemma.”

The table fell totally silent. All ten of Gemma’s friends stopped eating, chatting, and texting, and turned their attention to him.

Why oh why hadn’t he waited till after school? Caught her on the way home or something? Or in math? She sat next to him in math. Math would have been perfect.

“You okay?” she asked. “You’re looking a bit pale.”

Ash stared at her mouth. Her teeth were a row of perfect little pearls and her lips red and glossy. Two dimples appeared as her smile grew. He smelled the soft, flowery scent of her perfume, making him think of springtime and bright sunlight. *Jeez, she smelled of springtime and sunlight?* He needed to slap himself hard before he felt the overwhelming desire to write poetry. Again.