



THE CITY OF DEATH

SARWAT CHADDA



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chadda, Sarwat.

The city of death / Sarwat Chadda. — First edition.

pages cm

Summary: British schoolboy Ash Mistry, the reincarnation of the great Indian hero Ashoka and an agent of the goddess of death, faces the evil Lord Savage again after the villain sends his minions to capture Gemma, Ash's unrequited crush.

ISBN 978-0-545-38518-3 (hardcover : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-545-38519-0 (pbk.) — ISBN 978-0-545-57640-6 (ebook) [1. Demonology — Fiction. 2. Supernatural — Fiction. 3. East Indians — Great Britain — Fiction. 4. London (England) — Fiction. 5. England — Fiction. 6. India — Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.C343Cit 2013

[Fic] — dc23

2013006974

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 13 14 15 16 17

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First U.S. edition, November 2013



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.

"I'm fine. Totally fine," he said. "How are you? Fine?"

Did I just say that? Beyond lame.

Gemma arched her eyebrows, waiting. "Was there something you wanted?"

Ask her out. Just ask her out.

"I was wondering," he began, pausing to lick his oh-so-dry lips. "Wondering about Bonfire Night. Y'know, it's Bonfire Night. Tonight."

Aaargh. So totally smooth.

"Yes?" She shifted around on her chair, her blonde curls bouncing as she looked up at him.

Oh, my God. Was that a hair flick? It was some sort of code. Hair flicks meant something; he'd read about it in one of his sister's magazines. But what? He was deep in unknown territory: the world of girls.

"If you're going?" he said. "To the big bonfire in Dulwich Park. Tonight."

Like she couldn't work that out herself.

"Why? Are you going?"

She's asking me? What does that mean?

"I was thinking —"

"Clear the way, loser."

Jack Owen dropped his bag on the floor and himself on an empty chair. He leaned the chair back on its rear legs and flipped his cell — the latest iPhone — from his Prada leather jacket. He glanced over his shoulder as he texted. "You still here?"

Jack Owen. Ash's archenemy. The archenemy of the entire Nerd Herd. Tanned, ridiculously handsome in that obvious "big muscles, perfect features, straight nose, and floppy hair" sort of way. Oh, yeah, and captain of the soccer, rugby, and

cricket teams too. A company-director dad with all the toys money could buy.

I am Ash Mistry. I've done things that would melt Jack's brain. I've fought Ravana, the greatest evil the world has ever known. I've defeated the demon nations.

Then why do I want to puke?

Ash moved half a step back. That was the old Ash, who would back down and hide. Then the new Ash rose like a black snake up through his belly, driving a sharp, flint-hard anger into his throat. "I was talking to Gemma."

"And now you're not." Slowly, Jack got to his feet and faced Ash.

Gemma put her hand on Jack's wrist. "C'mon, Jack, this is stupid."

Jack looked Ash up and down.

"I see you've lost some weight. Turned some of that lard into muscle." Jack leaned so close that he was whispering in Ash's ear. "Think you can take me? Is that it? You a tough guy now?"

Jack had no idea.

So many ways to kill you.

Two bright golden lights settled on Jack's neck — one just below his bulging Adam's apple, the other near the jaw.

Easy ways.

Ash closed his eyes. But he could see the bright points shining through his eyelids. He covered his face with his hands, but it did no good.

Jack laughed. "Look at him. He's going to cry." He prodded Ash in the chest. "Boohoo."

"Leave him alone, Jack. It's not nice."

"Jesus, Gemma, I'm just trying to toughen the boy up." There was a laugh from one of the others around the table.

“Everyone knows he’s madly in *luurve* with you. Isn’t that true, Ash?”

“Jack, I’m warning you,” said Gemma.

Jack ignored her. “C’m on, Ash. We all know you fancy her. Be a man, just say it.” He put his fingers on either side of Ash’s chin, wiggling it up and down. “Say it. ‘Gemma, I love you so much.’” He squeezed harder, burying his nails into Ash’s skin. “Say it.”

Ash opened his eyes and gazed at the brilliant lights that lay like a galaxy of stars over Jack. They glistened along his arteries. They shone upon his heart, his lungs. Joints sparkled. His eyes were golden bright.

The Chinese called it Dim Mak, the Death Touch. But to Ash it was *marma-adi*, the 108 kill points. He knew them all — the points of weakness all living things possessed — and he could exploit these points to injure, disable, or kill. They moved and varied in intensity depending on the person. The old, infirm, and very young had many more than the 108. Jack had fewer — he was young and strong and fit — but he had enough.

There was a spot glowing on the side of Jack’s head. Ash just needed to touch it, not very hard. Enough to create a blood clot in the brain. Death would come in five seconds, maybe six.

It would look like an accident.

“I’d let go, Jack,” said Ash. A warning. That was fair.

“Or what?”

Ash shivered. It wasn’t fear that made his heart quicken; it was excitement. He slowly raised his right hand. He could just tap the spot with his finger. . . .

“That’s it.” Gemma got up and grabbed her bag. “C’m on, Anne.”

“Whatever,” said Jack, letting go of Ash. He grinned at the audience and got a smattering of embarrassed giggles for his performance.

Gemma gave Jack a withering look as she slung her backpack over her shoulder and strode off, almost knocking down some small kid. Jack turned to Ash and winked.

“Way out of your league.” He picked up his own bag, making sure he tensed his biceps as he did so. “Leave the hot ones to guys like me. You stick to the farmyard animals.” Then he left. The others around the table, the entertainment over, quickly gathered their own gear and began to break up. Anne gave Ash a half-shrug before scurrying off after Gemma.

Ash stood by the now-empty table. What was he thinking? He stared at his hand like it wasn’t his. He’d almost killed Jack. Over what?

Josh joined Ash. “Well, that went down like the *Titanic*.”

Ash looked at him. Lungs, heart . . . There were nodes of energy shining on Josh’s throat, and on either side of his eyes too. So many . . . Ash retreated a step, afraid an accidental touch might kill his best friend.

“You all right?” Josh asked.

Ash braced himself against a table. “Just . . . catching my breath.” The sensation passed. It felt like a cloud fading from his soul. The marma-adi visions were happening more and more often. He needed to be careful.

“That was banging,” said Josh.

“Banging?”

“Where were you over the summer, Ash? I remember, out in India, bored out of your brain. Everyone’s using it. *Banging*. Impressive. Of an epic nature.”

“What? Really? That was impressive?” Ash blinked, more than a little surprised by the assessment. “I thought I looked like a moron.”

“You did,” said Josh. “I was talking about Jack. That was a great line, don’t you think? The one about the farmyard animals. Couldn’t have thought it up himself, but he’s got the delivery.”

“I just wish I’d had something smart and devastating to say back,” said Ash.

Josh nodded. “Like ‘In your fat face, Jack’? That’s pretty cool.”

“If you’re seven.” Ash gazed toward the cafeteria doors, half-hoping Gemma might turn around and come back. No such luck. “Why is it so hard to talk to girls?”

Josh slapped Ash’s head. “Because we’re nerds. Acting awkwardly around girls is our superpower. Anyway, forget about Gemma. You coming around next Tuesday?”

“Tuesday?” asked Ash.

“*Dungeons and Dragons*, old-school style. We’re on the last level of the ‘The Catacombs of Doom’ and we need you, Ash.”

Oh, yeah, *Dungeons and Dragons*. Josh’s dad had banned him from any sort of computer gaming — any sort of computer access at all. Josh hadn’t explained why, but Akbar reckoned he’d been caught visiting a few sites *way* inappropriate for his age. So they’d dusted off their old role-playing games and miniature figures, and Tuesday nights were *D&D*.

Josh put his arm over Ash’s shoulder. “It will bang to the utmost. You’ll be fighting the demon lord of hell.”

“Done that already.”

“What?”

“Never mind.” Ash wriggled out from under Josh’s heavy arm. “Remind me again why I hang out with you?”

Josh gave a mocking sob. “What? After all I’ve done for you? If it hadn’t been for me, remember, Gemma wouldn’t know you even exist. That poem you wrote her was banging.”

“Uploading it onto the school blog wasn’t what I had in mind.”

“Then you should have a better password than *TARDIS*, shouldn’t you?”