

ASMI AND ASMODEUS

A Novel

CHAPTER ONE

Ways To Kill Myself (A List, With Notes)

The page said, at the top, in Asmi's neatest handwriting: Ways To Kill Myself.

She'd underlined it twice. That seemed fair. It did deserve underlining.

Asmi was twenty-eight. Gangly. Tall in the way that'd been useful for like five minutes during school throwball tournaments and pretty useless ever since. She wore glasses she was always pushing up with the side of her hand because she'd never learned to stop touching them. Right now she was in her underwear. Because who was putting on clothes at home. Duh. She'd painted her nails a colour called Dragon's Blood, deep,

arterial red. She'd put on her best lipstick. MAC Ruby Woo. She'd done her makeup properly, the full thing.

She was pretty. Not the kind of pretty that made men fight wars. Just pretty. Which was fine. The kind where people said oh you know she's actually quite nice-looking, on days she made the effort. She was making the effort today, for once. It felt right, weirdly.

It was midnight. Her apartment was small. Her landlord had called the kitchen area an open kitchen. Which was one of the great creative writing achievements of the Gurgaon real estate market. The fridge had in it: one half-litre packet of Mother Dairy milk, one carrot that had given up, and a container of nimbu achaar Rama Didi had left on Wednesday.

She looked at her list. Okay. Great.

1. Pills

Next to this she'd written: (they never work. established fact. the less said about college the less horrifying option).

Crossed off. Cool.

2. Hanging

Rama Didi came Monday, Wednesday, Friday. Rama Didi was fifty-four with a bad knee and she'd once sat on Asmi's kitchen floor and cried for ten solid minutes because Asmi's money plant died. She brought nimbu achaar without being asked. She'd never once asked Asmi why she looked tired. Which was, honestly, the most sophisticated emotional intelligence Asmi had encountered in Gurgaon. Asmi rather liked Rama

Didi.

Rama Didi did not need that. Crossed off. Cool.

3. Stepping in front of traffic

Absolutely not. There were always children on that road. Small ones. Not their problem either.

4. Jumping from balcony

Two issues, actually. One, she lived on the third floor, probably not enough. Two, she was afraid of heights. Had been since she was seven and climbed a water tank on a dare and spent forty-five minutes crying until the colony watchman retrieved her. She still thought about that watchman sometimes. Weirdly, she hoped he was okay.

Also: Makhdoom Bhaiya handled building maintenance and always called her Madam Ji with this warmth that made her feel like a functional adult.

He'd have to deal with the aftermath. She liked Makhdoom Bhaiya. Not his problem.

Crossed off. Cool.

5. Walk into a river (the Virginia Woolf method)

She'd always liked Virginia Woolf. This felt correct aesthetically. The problem was she lived in Gurgaon. The nearest significant body of water was the Yamuna, forty minutes by metro, and the Yamuna was not doing great. There was the nalla behind her colony but walking into the nalla behind her colony did not have the same energy as walking into the Ouse. Virginia Woolf would have agreed.

Crossed off. Cool.

She put the pen down. A psychologist would've said she was deflecting, intellectualising, using dark humour as a defence mechanism. A psychologist would've been right. She didn't have money for a psychologist. That was sort of the whole point. She'd lost her job.

Or more accurately: her job had been taken from her.

Three years at Fulcrum Creative. Three years of writing copy that won pitches, that made clients cry in the good way, that her creative director Vivaan presented in meetings like the ideas had appeared in his brain fully formed. Three years of being told she had potential.

Potential being the word they used when they meant we're not going to promote you or give you a raise but we really need you to keep working at this pace, okay?

Then the Zephyr Beverages pitch. Which she'd written. Every word. The insight, the territories, the tagline, the scripts, the social extensions, all of it, across six weeks of working till eleven PM and then coming home to her open kitchen and her sad carrot. The pitch Vivaan presented. The pitch that didn't win. The pitch for which she'd been, very quietly, in an HR cabin meeting that lasted nine minutes, blamed.

Seventeen days of notice period left. After that her savings would last maybe six weeks. After that there was the third cousin twice removed in Noida, Priya Didi, who answered the phone at Diwali if you caught her before the second drink, who Asmi hadn't physically seen in four years, who'd probably let her sleep on a couch with the particular cocktail of

generosity and resentment that was Priya Didi's whole thing.

Her parents had died five years ago. NH-8. A Tuesday. Instantaneous, the FIR said. She'd gotten very efficient at being alone after that. She'd optimised for it.

She looked at her list. Okay. Great.

She yawned.

It arrived and opened up her whole face and she sat there jaw wide, eyes watering. Then it was done.

Tea. She needed tea.

(She wanted that on her headstone, actually. Asmi Sharma. She/Her. Loved Tea. Accurate. Dignified. Good epitaph.)

* * *

To understand what happened next you need to understand probability. Not in detail, don't worry about it. Just the general idea. Sometimes things happen because all the small things lined up at once. An asteroid hits a planet and the dinosaurs are done. A man nobody took seriously becomes president of the most powerful country on earth and everything just. Goes. Sideways. A butterfly in Taipei flaps its wings.

In Asmi's case: she spilled some milk.

She was making tea, milk packet in one hand, pan on the flame, thinking about nothing or possibly everything, and the packet slipped. A thin white stream hit the counter. It spread. It settled into a shape.

The shape was the sigil of Asmodeus.

Quick detour. The sigil of Asmodeus, the real one, not the ones in the

grimoires you find online or in those occult bookshops in Hauz Khas that smell of agarbatti and mild desperation, was so secret that across all of human history only five people had ever known it. Four were dead. The fifth was in a sanatorium in Bavaria and was, by all accounts, no longer available for comment.

The probability of someone producing this sigil accidentally in spilled milk was not a number that meaningfully existed. It was smaller than that.

Asmi didn't know any of this. She looked at the milk on the counter.

Thought: should wipe that. Didn't. Because she was tired and going back to her list anyway, so what was the point.

She picked up her tea and went back to the sofa.

There was a sound. Not loud. Like the air in the room rearranged itself very quickly to make space for something that hadn't been there a second ago.

She looked up.

Standing in her living room, twelve feet by fourteen, not a lot of margin for unexpected guests, was a figure. Tall. Red, the deep red of old brick, the red of something that'd spent a very long time somewhere very hot. Long dark hair past his shoulders, curling slightly at the ends. Horns, two of them, curving back from his forehead with this elegance that was genuinely not what she'd have expected. Goat legs from the knee down, inside what appeared to be very well-fitted trousers. Which raised several questions about demonic tailoring she was in no position to address at midnight. He was holding a pitchfork that

was, not metaphorically, on fire.

He looked around the apartment. The single bulb. The Sarojini curtains.

The copy of Convenience Store Woman on the floor next to the sofa, facedown and splayed, because she was that person with books.

Then he looked at her nails.

His whole expression changed. What arrived on his face was not what you'd expect from the Prince of Hell materialising in a Gurgaon living room at midnight.

"Oh," he said. "I love that colour. What is that, burgundy? No.

Something darker."

She looked at her nails. She looked at him. She looked at her nails again.

"Dragon's Blood," she said. "It's from Nykaa."

"Dragon's Blood." He considered this with genuine pleasure. "That's accurate actually. I know dragons. The colour is accurate."

A pause.

"Okay," Asmi said. "No."

He blinked. Gold eyes. Not metaphorically, actually the colour of old coins.

"I haven't said anything yet."

"I know. I'm pre-empting." She set her tea down. "I've seen enough films. You offer me a deal. I want something, you give it, I sign something in blood, later there are consequences. That's the structure."

He opened his mouth.

“No,” she said. “Thanks for coming. You can go back the way you arrived.”

He closed his mouth. He looked genuinely thrown. Like across however many centuries of doing this, nobody had said no before he’d finished the intro.

“I am Asmodeus,” he said, drawing himself up. “Prince of Hell. King of the Nine Kingdoms of the Infernal Realm. Commander of,”

“Yeah, no,” she said. “Still no.”

He stared at her.

She drank her tea.

He looked at the page on the table. The list, faceup, two underlines, all the crossed-off items.

Something moved across his face that was harder to read.

“You summoned me,” he said. Quieter now. The formality had mostly stepped out of the room. “The sigil on your kitchen counter.”

“I spilled milk.”

“Yes. I know. Doesn’t matter how. It happened. Which means technically you have a claim on my attention whether you want it or not.” He looked at the list. “And I can see why I’m here.”

“Nobody sent you. I was making tea.”

“Nevertheless.” Gently. “Here I am.”

She looked at him standing very still in her small living room, pitchfork dimmed like he’d turned it down. He looked less frightening than she’d have expected the King of the Nine Kingdoms to look, standing in a twelve-by-fourteen in Sector 49 at midnight.

He looked almost uncertain.

“What do you want,” she said.

“A week,” he said.

She waited.

“Give me a week. Seven days. You go about your life, I’m here. At the end of seven days, if you still want to,” he glanced at the list “,we talk again. I have certain capabilities. I can make it clean. No Rama Didi finding anything Monday morning. No Makhdoom Bhaiya dealing with the aftermath. Fast. Efficient.”

She stared at him.

“You’re offering to kill me,” she said. “As the incentive. For me to spend a week not killing myself.”

“It’s a guarantee. You’re not giving anything up. You’re deferring.”

“That’s a terrible pitch.”

“I know.” He looked pained. “I’m better at other things. This is genuinely not my area.”

“What is your area.”

“I am the Chief Technology Officer of Hell,” he said, in the tone of a man who’d said this many times and still hadn’t found a way to make it land correctly. “Among other things. The Nine Kingdoms run on very old infrastructure. I’ve been requesting a budget upgrade for approximately four hundred years. Hell’s bureaucracy moves slowly.”

She thought about this.

“Hell has a CTO.”

“Hell has everything,” he said. “Just all of it chronically underfunded.”

She looked at her list. Okay. Great. She looked at him. She looked at the milk sigil on the counter, which from this angle looked, she admitted, like nothing she could’ve produced on purpose.

“One week,” she said.

“One week.”

“And then.”

“And then we talk.”

The clock on the wall, the one with the cats on it, bought on impulse, regretted immediately, said 12:23.

“Fine,” she said. “One week. But I have seventeen days of notice period and I’m going to work and you are not going to make that weird.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” said Asmodeus, Prince of Hell.

She looked at his horns.

“I can do something about the presentation,” he said. “Mostly.”

“Mostly.”

“The hooves are non-negotiable.”

She closed her eyes briefly. She opened them.

“Extra bedsheets in the cupboard. You get the sofa. Don’t touch the nimbu achar, it’s Rama Didi’s. Pitchfork off before you sleep. The curtains are old.”

He looked at the sofa. He looked at her. Something moved in his gold eyes she couldn’t name.

“Okay,” he said. Quietly.

She went to bed. She lay in the dark listening to the unfamiliar sound of someone else existing in her apartment and fell asleep thinking that this was probably the strangest Monday that’d ever happened to anyone in Sector 49, Gurgaon.

It was, it turned out, only the beginning.