

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF ABSOLUTE SUNSET



CALLING

KATA MLEK

My name is Eva and I suffer from depression. It's not the cool, Hollywood-style depression that you can put on film and make millions of dollars. It's the real kind. Explaining the difference is a waste of words—depression is a psycho killer who'll torture you every day until you decide to finish things yourself. Period.

I've tried before to put an end to my agony, but it's not that easy. I've discovered that we're not nearly as fragile as I thought—you have to be really desperate in order to die. It's not enough to just gulp down a smoothie with a bottle of pills mixed into it, or string yourself up with rope—oh no. Meddling friends, equipped with a sixth sense, will push the panic button. The paramedics move fast and the doctors are diligent, and they'll bring you back from the other side despite your *do not resuscitate* bracelet.

So, the only way to get by is to minimize the pain. That's what I'm trying to do, but the psychiatrists aren't much help. I think I've tried the entire catalogue of psychoactive medicines, and I've mixed and matched two or three at a time, too, but nothing works. I'm a zombie. Well, I'm more than that, given that I breathe and my heart beats, but I'm definitely not of this world. I don't belong here—my place is six feet under.

Today I'm meeting the last reputable psychiatrist in the city that I haven't tried yet. Barbara, who invited me for an afternoon tea, is an elderly specialist, and people say she's good. I really hope so, because otherwise I'm really going to have to come up with an alternative to pills and rope, and I'm way too exhausted to figure that out. Climbing a high-rise and jumping off is out of question—it's far too much effort for someone who barely eats anymore.

Barbara's office is in a small townhouse. As I ring the bell, a dog starts to bark, and I wonder whether I'll have to kick it or run away—depends how big it is. I hear steps, and then a voice telling the mutt to back off. Finally, the door flies open and there she is—Barbara, my last resort, in a blue dress, with her greyish hair bundled up into a knot. There are spots of flour on the front of her outfit.

"Hi, I'm Eva," I say, and she beckons me into her study. We each take a seat in a pair of threadbare armchairs—what a shrink stereotype—and I go into my story. Yet again. How many times have I been through this? The history of my condition and which hospitals I've been in. The tale of what my life was like when I was six, and eleven, and seventeen, and so on. I've repeated it so often—far *too* often. I don't even have to think about it by now, because I know it all by heart, when what I'd really like is to forget it all—maybe then I wouldn't hurt so much. I don't *want* to remember that I'm a fucking failure, a reject, something that God messed up and should have put back in the vat, melted down, and remade. But he didn't, and here I am.

“But you can go back to Him,” Barbara says, and I stop and sit up. *What the hell?* They never, ever say that. They try to find something to anchor you, to keep you here. They never actually admit that you’re free to walk away and visit the meadows of the Lord.

“Sorry?” Maybe I misunderstood. Maybe she’s just a Jesus freak and she’s going to give me the schedule of the holy masses at the local church. I smile at that thought—I can still smile, but it’s a bitter kind of grin.

“Listen, Eva,” Barbara sighs. She rubs her forehead and jots down some notes on a piece of paper she keeps on a small side table. “Sometimes God realizes he’s made a mistake. You know? That something went wrong. Do you understand?” She pauses and I don’t breathe for a moment. This discussion is turning weird and scary—what if she stabs me with that pen? *So what if she does, you freak? You’ll be dead, which is exactly what you want.*

“Okay.” I nod. It’s the only thing to say when you have no idea how to respond to something.

“God is calling all the rejects,” Barbara goes on, and I freeze. *Is she reading my mind? No, don’t be stupid—she’s just a very good psychiatrist, the best in the city, and she’s got some new method for treating depression.* The fact that she’s even more fucked up than I am makes me feel a little better already.

“Calling,” I sigh.

“Yes, He’s calling you. And I’m here to help you join Him so He can repair you—fix what went wrong. Didn’t you know that He could do that?”

If I’d known, I would have tried harder with the pills. “No, I didn’t.”

“With God, nothing is impossible,” Barbara says.

“That’s Adidas, not God,” I say, referring to a slogan developed by the brand’s copywriters. I used to be a copywriter before I got sick, so I know all about it. Now I’m nobody.

“Whatever.” Barbara waves my remark away, and I feel a bit hurt. It was important to me, but I don’t say anything. *Why bother? Nobody cares anyway,* I think. “I care,” Barbara says, and I gasp, eyes wide. I’m pretty sure that expression stays on my face through the rest of the consultation. In the end, she hands me two pills.

I bring them home and put them on the kitchen counter. One of them is pink, the other black. Barbara says the first one will send me back to God, to heaven, while the other will keep me here—maybe in better shape, but no promises. *Great.* The choice is mine: pink or black. If I take the black one, she won’t be able to help me any further. Her task is just to offer me the choice, not to keep helping me if I make the wrong decision and stay in this vale of tears. *Thank you very fucking*

much. And there's no way to change my mind—when I take one, the other one will disappear. And Barbara can offer me this pink-and-black crossroads only once.

"You have to think it through carefully," she tells me.

I thought the decision would be easy. I have the opportunity to join God and be happy forever after—but I'm having doubts. As usual, just like the moment before I drank the narcotic smoothie, and the moment before using the rope, I have doubts. I've got nothing left here except my son, and he never visits. I was such a burden to him that I did everything I could to detach from him, to push him away, so he wouldn't have to drag me along behind him, feel my weight pulling him deeper and deeper down. So he wouldn't eventually sink down to my level, taking on my shape and becoming like me. I want him to be everything I'm not, which meant he had to stay away from me, like my ex does, so that I don't infect him. Still, I dream that one day he might be able to come back, just for a minute or two, to tell me that I'm not alone. *Hope is the last thing to go*. And if I pick the pink one, I'll never see him again. He lives downtown, and as things are now I could go there in the morning and sneak around—watch him walk past, hurrying to work, feel a mother's pride and longing. But if I take the pink pill, that opportunity's gone.

But all the scary, nasty, repulsive things will be gone too. Like drinking—I don't drink anymore, but I used to and I'm still ashamed of it. Or crying, lying on the sofa for *days*, crying without stopping. Or praying for death. Or . . . or . . . or a hundred other things that happen when you're depressed—no need to list them all. Depression loves silence. And my son wouldn't have to worry anymore, on the off chance that he still worries about me. He's a good kid, or he was when I knew him—full of compassion. And maybe, just maybe, if I ask God very sincerely, if I fall to my knees and beg, he'll let me come back here just for one day, so I can make it all up to my baby.

"He will! I know He will!" I grab the pink pill and swallow it, not bothering to get water.

I wake up on my sofa, in my flat. I'm sitting, and I must have been here a while, but surprisingly my back doesn't hurt. I blink and snort—everything's exactly the same. Barbara cheated me. Wanted to teach me some kind of lesson, I guess. *Well, whatever it is, I don't get it*. I slide down until I'm prone, lying with my head on a cushion. And then I notice. The cushion smells of detergent—it's clean, which it wasn't before.

I sit up, my fingers gripping the edge of the sofa tightly. I look around. The changes I can see are small, but they're real. Fresh flowers on the table. Bright, shining mirrors and French doors. Spotless white curtains. In the kitchen there's a bowl of ripe fruit, with a note tucked under the it. The paper flaps in a breeze that's coming through the open window. It's spring, and the air is warm.

I get up, carefully walk toward the counter, and reach for it.

“This is your reward for trusting in the Lord,” I read aloud. “This? A clean flat?” I scoff, and I’m about to complain a little, when I hear the door of the room creak open. And there are footsteps—quick ones, small ones. And a voice.

“Mommy, mommy, let’s make pancakes!”

I crumple the note and toss it in with the fruit. *God listens to sinners*, I laugh, as Owen comes into the kitchen. I put my arms around him and for once I’m absolutely sure I can do it right—all of it. I can do it. I can do it. *Oh, damn—nothing is impossible!*