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Opening extract from

A Million Angels

Written by

Kate Maryon

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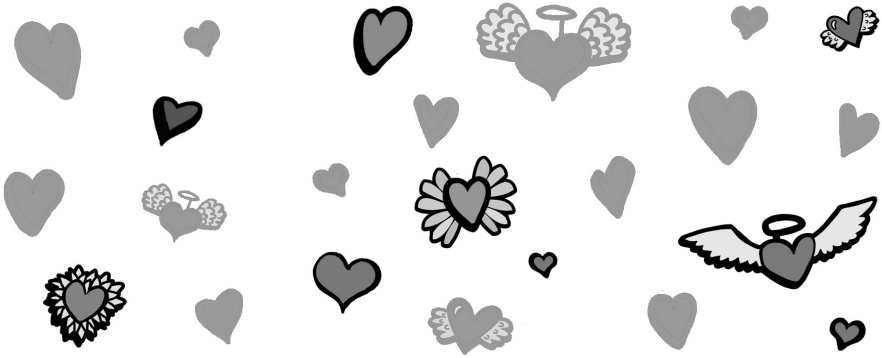
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A Million Angels

Kate Maryon



HarperCollins *Children's Books*



Chapter 1

Tomorrow there will be no pancakes...

Tomorrow's going to be different and I don't like different. I like things the same. The same like Dad and me. The same like peas in pods and chips off old blocks. The same like our dark curly hair, like our gunmetal grey eyes, like the little dimple on our chins. It's to do with pancakes too. My dad is the pancake king and I'm the princess. That's what Mum and Milo say, and every Sunday while we're waiting for them to get up and come downstairs we make a pile as high as Everest. Taller than the sky. The best pancakes in the world. Then we sit on the back doorstep to talk while we polish our boots. We brush and buff till they shine like silver, till we can see

our eyes twinkling in the black. And we talk about everything, Dad and me. About all the mysteries inside of us. About all our wonderings of the world.

But tomorrow we won't have pancakes because my dad will be gone.

The stars are bright tonight. Glittering bursts of silver shining through midnight blue. But grey clouds are grumbling across the horizon. Rolling across the moon. Rubbing out the stars, and the wind is whisking up a storm that's sweating under my skin and heating me up with fear.

I've tried sleeping, but every time I drift off a huge eagle with sharp claws swoops down and drags me back. Then worrying images of bombs exploding everything to pieces start bouncing around again like popcorn in my brain. They pop, pop, pop and explode out of nowhere. Dark shadowy lumps that are hard to swallow. I'm trying hard to rub them out so my brain is blank and clean.

But it's impossible to stop them.

If only there was something I could do.

My phone explodes in the dark.

Pip. Pip. *U still awake?*



It's Jess. I don't really like Jess and Jess definitely doesn't like me. We're not the same kind of girl. She's all noisy and nosy, like her mum, Georgie, and I'm more quiet and like to be on my own. Well, I don't really like being on my own, of course. I would like a friend. Just not a friend like Jess – someone much more like me. But that's never going to happen because of everything about my life and how things are. So Jess and me just have to make do.

I text her back. *Yeah, can't sleep.*

Pip. Pip. *Me 2! Just can't stop thinking they might die. U know, they might never come home. It's really bad out there.*

I try swallowing the hard lump that feels like popcorn sticking in my throat, but it won't go down. I cross my fingers. I touch the little wooden table by my bed for luck.

Me 2, I text.

Pip. Pip. *We have 2 face facts, Mima… It might happen. We have 2 prepare 4 the worst. There's nothing we can do. That's what my mum keeps saying. What U doin for UR end of term presentation?*

More things smash and explode in front of my eyes, shooting worry fireworks through my veins. I *am* facing

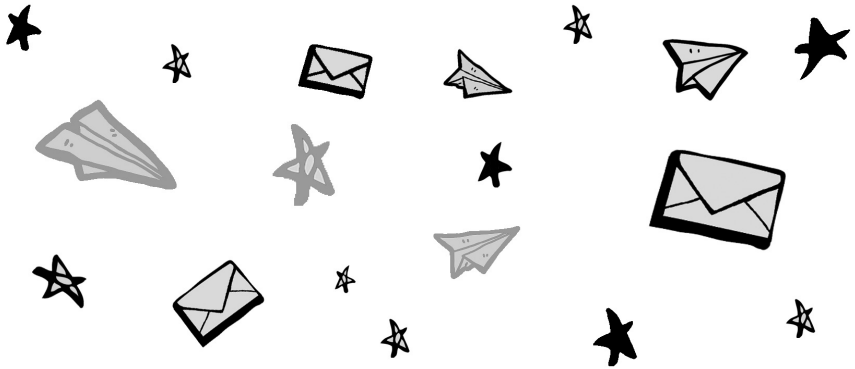


facts. I don't have any choice. I know very well that our dads might die or come back really hurt. I don't need Jess to keep rubbing it in.

Not thinking bout presentation. I hate speaking in front of every1.

Pip. Pip. *I'm really excited bout it. I want to do something really cool. Night. Hope U sleep. C U at the car boot.*

Wish I could get excited bout it, but I just get too scared. Night. I text back.



Chapter 2

His words bite me...

I creep into Milo's room. He's fast asleep with his mouth wide open like a fish. He's cuddling a toy tank, and hasn't even noticed the thunder that's raging outside. I creep downstairs to spy on my mum and dad through the crack of the open door to the sitting room. My heart is a tennis ball in my chest, pounding on concrete. My neck is sticky with sweat from the storm.

They're snuggled together on the sofa watching the late-night news. She sobs and wrings a damp hanky in her hands. He sighs and strokes her hair, twisting the threads of gold.

"*The worst year for killings since the war in Afghanistan began*," the newsreader is saying.



On the TV screen loads of people have gathered in the street. They're watching the coffins of dead soldiers coming home from war. A woman holding flowers and crying rushes forward and presses herself against the big black hearse. She places her red, red roses on its roof and then crumples in a heap on the floor. A policewoman scurries closer and helps her up. Everyone is crying. Everything on the TV is so, so sad.

My tummy twists like my mum's wet hanky. Tying up in knots. Stopping my insides from falling out.

The thunder rumbles through me. Lightning flickers on the stairs. I start to spin so I steady myself on Dad's kit. It's been stacked in the hallway for days. He's obsessed with it. It's become his life raft on the rough and stormy sea of emotions that have been raging through our house for months. Every few hours he picks up his helmet. He smoothes it. He rocks it. He strokes it. Then he settles it back down like a precious baby nestled on top of the pile. He fusses with the straps on his bag. He straightens and sorts. He unzips and peers inside. He fiddles and straightens and sorts some more. Like a frantic bluebottle. Buzzing. Worrying. Picking at flesh. Milo loves it too. He helps with the checking.



He wanders about the house with Dad's precious helmet wobbling on top of his head.

"He's mine, remember?" I hiss at the bag. "Not yours."

Mum switches off the news. She heaves her huge dome of a belly round to face my dad. He rests his hand on it and smiles. He lowers his ear to listen to the secret baby world inside.

"Hello, little Bean," he says.

"It's so cruel," my mum says. "You've been away every time I've given birth." She grips Dad's hands and her eyes well up again. "Please come home safe, James," she says. "Please, I couldn't handle all this without you. I find Jemima so difficult when you're away. She misses you so much and tries so hard to hold it all together that she kind of closes in on herself. If I didn't know her for the sweetheart she is I'd go as far as to say that I sometimes find her behaviour quite weird. And I feel I don't do her justice. I wish I could manage her like you can. I wish I had your touch."

"Jemima's easy, Bex," he says. "She just needs a bit of reassurance, that's all. She likes to talk. To get things off her chest."

"It's all right for you," Mum sighs. "You're away. You

don't see how much she changes. To be honest, she can be really hard work when you're not here and I'm dreading it. And bless her – I know it's not her fault. She was just getting settled at school, starting to make friends, and now you going away has somehow unhinged her again. It's unhinged us all."

Unhinged? I'm not unhinged! I hate them talking about me and I know I shouldn't be spying, but I can't help it. Mum sighs.

"I don't know how much longer I can live like this, James. I have this constant worry chipping at me when you're away. You're on my mind twenty-four seven. It drives me crazy. I can't stop myself from constantly looking out of the window. It's like I'm expecting bad news. Like it would almost be a relief if it came because then the worrying would stop."

Dad runs his hand through his hair and takes hold of her hand.

"You have to get it in your head, Bex," he says, "that I've been really well trained. They wouldn't let untrained soldiers set foot in the place. It's my job to protect people, to look after those who need my help, and I do my best to do my job well. It's what I'm committed to



and I need you to start trusting that every day we're all doing our best to keep safe. I'm coming back home, Bex. I won't leave you. I promise."

His words bite me. I don't trust them. How can he be so sure that he'll come home safe? Like Jess says, some soldiers *do* get killed. It's a fact of war and we have to face it. I don't trust my mum either, talking about me behind my back. And I'm not *unhinged*. I can't help it that I feel safe when my dad's here and scared when he's not. I can't help it that I keep looking out of the window too and if she took the trouble to really get to know her own daughter well, then she'd know that I'm a worrier too. I wouldn't be such a puzzle for her to solve.

Mum pushes Dad away from her tummy.

"How can I trust you when we've just watched four coffins flying back from the very place you're flying out to tomorrow?" she snaps. "For God's sake, James, I'm not stupid, I know what happens in war. It's *me* you're talking to now, not the kids. Don't patronise me, *please*."

Dad looks at her and sighs. He says nothing to comfort her.

I creep back upstairs. If lightning strikes our house tonight my dad will keep us safe.

But not if it comes tomorrow.

Later, when the black storm rages right over our roof, my dad comes into my room. He rests his hand on my back. He rubs soft warm circles, round and round, like he did when I was small. I want to curl into him like a kitten, but I'm scared I might break like the clouds.

"I'm sleeping, Dad," I lie. "Leave me alone."

"Hey," he whispers, leaning right over me so he can see my face. "Don't do this, sweetie, not now. I know it's late, but I just wanted to check you're OK with the storm, to tell you that you're safe. I've checked all the windows and locked all the doors. Nothing's going to happen. I promise. Let's say goodbye, shall we? Just one last time."

"Don't say things like *one last time,* OK?"

I turn over to look at him and drink him in like an ice-cold lemonade on a hot summer's day. I must never forget him. The dark whiskers sprouting from his chin. The map of blue veins like motorways on his hands. The puddle of curry stain yellowing his shirt. The waft

of smelly underarm odour that's drifting up my nose. I must memorise him, just in case… and I'll keep him safe and undisturbed in a beautiful heart room where he'll shimmer in the light.

"Don't go, Dad," I squeak. "Please?"

"I have to, sweetie," he says, nuzzling tickly whiskers in my neck. He plants a kiss on my cheek. "Promise me you'll take good care of yourself? And be kind to Milo and really good for Mum? I need you to be a big girl and look after her for me while I'm away. She's got a lot going on with the baby coming. She'll need your help, Mima, so try not to stress her out, OK?"

I nod even though I don't want to. At least my dad understands me.

"Good girl. I'm leaving really early in the morning so I won't wake you again."

When he leaves my room I touch his kiss and wish it would grow into a flower.

At five the next morning my dad creeps into my room. I lie still and hold my breath. He pulls my duvet up to my chin and strokes my hair. He gives me one last clean-shaven kiss and creeps away. My tummy sinks. It sinks

right through the bed and through the floor, and as if a huge crack in the earth has opened up I feel like I'm falling, falling, falling into a deep black hole.

"Please don't go," I whisper.

I hear him in the other rooms. Now he's going down the stairs and into the hall. I hear scrapes and scuffs and clunks and I know he's putting on his sparkling black boots, shuffling his kit about and loading it on to his back. I hear someone hug him. Then the front door clicks shut and I freeze. My hand flies to my cheek, to his kiss where the flower didn't grow. I jump out of bed and race like lightning down the stairs. I open the front door and step out into the storm. A soldier with a silver car salutes my dad. A river of rain runs down his sleeve.

"Dad!" I call.

My dad spins round.

"Jemima! Sweetie! You're getting soaked!"

"I don't care," I say, paddling up to him. "Dad, please don't go. Please don't leave me. Afghanistan is too far away. I just need to be near you."

"Oh, darling," he sighs. "As much as I'd love to stay, I have to go, you know that. Let's not make it any harder than it already is, eh?"



"But, Dad," I whisper, "what if something bad happens. There might be a fire or a burglar. Or someone might get hurt. We might need you."

"Mima," he says, "this is why I didn't wake you, sweetheart. It's much easier if I just slip away."

"Not for me it isn't," I say. "Just one more hug then?"

And Dad scoops me into his arms as if I were a tiny toddler. He squeezes me so tight I think my lungs might burst out of my chest and splat down on the floor. We're not crying, but tears from the thundering black storm clouds soak us through and settle like diamonds on our lashes. We find each other's eyes and tie a knot in our gaze.

"Love you, pipsqueak," Dad says. He kisses my nose.

"Love you, Lieutenant Colonel Taylor-Jones."

He stands me down. We salute one another. The soldier drives my dad away.

The rain puddles between my toes and bounces off my skin. My tummy sinks through the tarmac road, through the earth's muddy crust, right down to the blackest, darkest hole at the bottom of the world. I can't let him go. I can't. I run after the car. I shout.

"Dad, quick, stop!" He moves further and further away. "Dad, please, stop! Please!"

The road is empty. I leap into the middle and wave my arms like mad.

"Dad!" I call.

At last, the red brake lights go on and the soldier reverses the car until it's level with my feet.

"What is it, Mima?"

I stand frozen like a dummy in the road, with a million words raining on my mind.

"I… erm…" I stumble. "I… I… What would make you come back home, Dad? I mean, how bad a thing would have to happen?"

My face is soaked with rain. He can't see my tears.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," he says, checking his watch. "I haven't got time to talk about it now – everyone's waiting for me. But I promise you you'll be OK. Everything will be fine. Mum's here, Granny's here and I'll be home for a two-week R & R break before you know it. Then my tour will be halfway done, Mima, and then I'll be back home for good."

"Until they send you away again," I sigh.

Dad salutes me one last time.



"Trust, Mima, trust."

The soldier drives him away and my words tumble like rocks through the air.

"I'm scared you're going to die, Dad. I'm scared you're never coming home."