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Angel of the Battlefield

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On the hottest day of the hottest summer on record, Maisie and Felix Robbins stood on the rolling front lawn of Elm Medona and wished more than anything that they could go back in time. Five hours ago they had left the apartment at 10 Bethune Street in New York City, where they had lived their entire twelve years, and driven in a U-Haul with their mother to this gigantic, peacock-blue mansion on Bellevue Avenue in Newport, Rhode Island. To Maisie and Felix, it looked more like a museum than a place to live.

“Home, sweet home,” their mother said as the three of them stared up at Elm Medona.

Maisie folded her arms across her chest and
glowered at the ridiculous monstrosity their great-great-grandfather Phinneas Pickworth had built in 1909. She would never like living here, she decided. No matter what happened, she would hate it.

Felix, her twin brother, tried not to cry. He was homesick already, and he missed their father, who was having his own moving day halfway across the world.

A horn beeped to announce the arrival of the moving truck.

“Right on time!” their mother said, sprinting across the expansive front lawn to greet the movers.

“What do you think Dad is doing right now?” Felix managed to say. He was a skinny boy and not very tall for twelve, and standing in front of Elm Medona made him feel practically tiny.

“I don’t know,” Maisie grumbled. On a regular day, her blond curls stuck out of her head like springs. With the heat and humidity, it got even more unruly. She ran her hands over her tangle of hair, trying to tame it a little.

“And I don’t care, either,” she added, which Felix knew meant she did care. A lot. Maisie might be seven minutes older than Felix was, but he was definitely more mature than her.

Everything in their lives had changed all at once. Or so it seemed to them. Until breakfast one Saturday at the corner diner—Maisie had French
toast, Felix a cheese omelet—Maisie and Felix and their parents all lived happily at 10 Bethune Street. But that April morning, their parents told the twins they were getting divorced. *People grow apart,* their mother had said. *They want different things,* their father explained. Those “different things” appeared to be their father taking a job at a big, new museum in Doha, Qatar, and their mother joining a law firm in Newport. *What about us?* Maisie had demanded. Their mother had leaned back in her chair and said, *We get to live in Elm Medona.*

Except they weren’t going to live in the mansion. Not exactly. Great-Aunt Maisie, Phinneas Pickworth’s daughter, had made an arrangement with the local preservation society years ago. It allowed her to live in the third-floor servants’ quarters while the preservation society could give tours of all seventy rooms and eighty acres of it and throw fancy events for wealthy people. Right before that awful morning at the diner, Great-Aunt Maisie had had a stroke and moved into assisted living, leaving the apartment–like attic available for them.

“Aren’t we lucky?” their mother said now, pausing to stand beside them. Her own unruly blond hair poked out from a pink bandana she’d tied around her head. She held a box on which she’d written *FRAGILE* in black Sharpie about a million times.
Maisie and Felix exchanged a look. They had made a vow not to complain to their mother about the terrible twists their lives had taken. *She’s going through a lot, too,* Felix had said. *New job. New town. New everything.* Maisie had agreed, reluctantly. *Grown-ups should be able to deal with all this stuff,* she thought. *Especially the grown-ups who made it all happen.*

“So lucky,” Maisie said, trying to keep the edge out of her voice.

“At least all of our things have arrived safely,” her mother said.

“Do you think there’s a pool nearby?” Felix asked as the sun shone down on them through a hazy, humid sky. “Like on Carmine Street?”

“Stop thinking about what *was,*” their mother said, “and start thinking about what *is.*” With that, she headed through the door with her box.

“It sure is big,” Felix said, turning his hazel eyes back to Elm Medona. His square, tortoiseshell glasses slipped down his nose, and he pushed them up.

“It’s positively vulgar,” Maisie cried. She liked to use vocabulary words whenever possible.

“Can you believe they used to call these things cottages?” Felix said.

He had read the brochure the preservation society had sent them in preparation for their move. It had explained how during the Gilded
Age at the end of the nineteenth century, the tycoons of finance, industry, and mining had built bigger and bigger mansions along Bellevue Avenue. Elm Medona had been the biggest and most lavish of them all. If he didn’t have to live there, Felix might have found this information fascinating. Instead, it just gave him a pit in his stomach. He had tried to read the brochure out loud on the drive up, but Maisie made him stop. *I don’t care about Elm Medona or the Gilded Age or stupid Phinneas Pickworth!* she’d said miserably.

“I hate Phinneas Pickworth,” Maisie said, wiping her sweaty forehead with the back of her hand. “Not only did he build this awful place, but he also fathered Great-Aunt Maisie. And if he hadn’t done that, she wouldn’t have been able to let us move into this awful place.”

Her logic was illogical, but Felix understood. She only meant that she wanted to be back at home on Bethune Street, Rollerblading down the hallway between the apartments and playing softball in Central Park, both of their parents cheering her on.

Felix draped his damp arm around his sister’s shoulders. “I hate him, too,” he said softly.

Maisie leaned her head on his chest—awkwardly because she was taller than him. The smell of her
coconut shampoo mixed with the salty smell of sweat filled his nose.

“There’s a gazebo somewhere on the grounds,” Felix offered hopefully. *Gazebo* was a good vocabulary word, too. Maybe that would win her over.

Maisie sighed.

“Phinneas copied it from a famous French temple called the Temple of Love,” Felix added.

Maisie glanced up at him. Even though they were twins, they looked nothing alike. Maisie had inherited everything from their mother—unruly blond hair, big, green eyes, long legs—and Felix had inherited everything from their father—hazel eyes flecked with gold and afflicted with nearsightedness, stick-straight, brown hair, and even the cowlick that refused to be tamed.

She turned those green eyes on him now and said, “I want to go back. I want to close my eyes, and when I open them again, I want to be in our room on Bethune Street with Mom and Dad both in the kitchen, laughing and singing show tunes.”

“Me too,” Felix said, giving her a squeeze. “But there’s no going back.” Saying that gave him a big lump in his throat. He swallowed hard three times, trying to make it go away.

For most of their childhood, their mother had been an actress, going to auditions and taking
voice and dance lessons and scene-study classes; their father had been a sculptor, working in a big studio downtown that he rode his bike to every morning after he dropped them off at school. But a few years ago, their mother had gone to law school, and their father had taken a job in an art gallery. *Maybe*, Felix thought, *that was when everything started to change.*

From high above them, their mother pushed open a window and popped her head out. “Are you just going to stand there all day, or are you going to help unpack some boxes?”

“We’re going to explore!” Maisie shouted back.

“Don’t go too far,” their mother said. “And make sure you can find your way back.”

Felix laughed. “Not everybody has a backyard as big as eighty football fields where they can actually get lost,” he said. “With real temples and English gardens and who knows what else.”

“Isn’t there a carriage house with a bunch of old cars in it?” Maisie said.

Felix pointed a finger at her. “Aha! You *were* listening.”

“Reluctantly,” she said, peering off into the distance where the grounds seemed to go on forever. “I see something way down there,” she said.
Without hesitating, Maisie walked off. As usual, Felix had to hurry to catch up with her.

Later, Felix and Maisie entered Elm Medona through a side door off a circular driveway practically hidden by trees and high hedges. It was the same door the servants and deliverymen used to use. Inside, no one would ever guess they were in a mansion. The small vestibule had a worn linoleum floor and a plain wooden staircase. One flight down was the mansion’s enormous kitchen. And three flights up were the servants’ quarters—which Maisie and Felix would now call home.

“This is depressing,” Maisie said as they climbed the stairs. With each flight they climbed, the staircase grew narrower and steeper.

Felix didn’t answer. Once again, homesickness swept over him.

At the top, the door flew open and their mother came out, her big polka-dot purse slung over her shoulder and her blond hair pulled into a ponytail.

“It’s as hot as Hades in there,” she warned them. “No way am I turning on the stove. Start unpacking while I grab us some sandwich stuff.”
“You’ll be right back, right?” Felix asked her as she hurried past them.

“See if you can find the fan,” their mother called over her shoulder.

When Maisie and Felix walked into the apartment, Felix groaned. It was hotter inside than outside, the walls were painted a depressing, dull yellow, and he could smell the distinct odor of old lady.

“It’s not bad,” Maisie said, just so her brother would feel better.

Truthfully, it was worse than bad. She walked through the small kitchen into an equally small living room. Their boxes stood stacked against the walls. The windows were tiny and smudged, the floors were old and scuffed, and nothing about it seemed like home. The living room opened onto a long, dark hallway with bedrooms lining each side and a bathroom all the way at the end. It had a big claw-foot tub and a tiled floor with funny pictures of goats and bulls and fish.

When Maisie opened one bedroom door she saw a small, square room with two twin beds, a bureau, and a rocking chair. She opened the door across the hall to reveal an identical room. The next room was the same. And the next.

“Boy,” Felix said, trying to imagine all the
people who used to live there a long time ago. “Phinneas Pickworth had a lot of servants.”

“Well,” she said to Felix, “which room do you want? Not that it matters since they’re all the same.”

“The one across the hall from yours,” Felix said. Maisie pointed to the first room she’d looked at. “I’ll take that one then,” she said.

“Okay,” Felix said. “I guess we should start unpacking.”

“We’re going to die of heat exhaustion,” Maisie said as she went back into the living room to find the boxes with her name written on them.

“I’ll get us some water,” Felix said.

In the kitchen, he tried to find glasses in the cupboards, but they were all empty. Then he saw it: a door that opened into a tall, narrow elevator.

“You’ve got to see this!” he called to his sister. Maisie came over and peered inside. She tried to squeeze in, but Felix yanked her out.

“You’re no fun,” she said. “Hey, I know! Let’s go see what the rest of the house looks like.”

“I don’t think we’re supposed to do that,” Felix told her.

“Says who?”

He thought for a minute. No one had actually told them they couldn’t go downstairs, but it had been made clear that they lived on the third
floor, and the rest of the house belonged to the preservation society.

“We’re getting a tour on Monday,” Felix reminded Maisie.

“Monday is a million years from now,” Maisie said.

He would have reminded her that Monday was Labor Day and the mansion was closed to the public so they would be getting a private VIP tour, but she went out the kitchen door, into the hallway, and down the steps. Felix rushed out behind her.

On the first landing, Maisie paused in front of the door. Felix came beside her and looked out the window. Down below he could see the circular driveway, mostly hidden by foliage.

Maisie grunted. “Locked,” she said, disappointed as she tugged on the door. Immediately she turned and continued down the stairs to the next landing.

Surely something interesting lies beyond these doors, she thought. Like when she stepped outside their apartment building on Bethune Street, she always saw something new. Once she had seen a man walking a rabbit on a leash, and she had followed him all the way to the Bleecker Street Playground. Another time, she had practically walked right into Lance Armstrong, and she had stayed beside him
until he had ducked into the French bistro up the street. Who knew what she might find behind one of these doors.

“Locked!” she cried as she tried the next door.

“Clearly,” Felix said, “they don’t want anyone going inside.”

Maisie ignored him. She placed her hip against the door and gave a good, hard shove. The door didn’t budge.

“Aaarrgghhh,” she cried, frustrated.

“They have to keep it locked, Maisie,” Felix said. “There must be millions of dollars worth of valuable stuff in there.” When she didn’t answer him and just kept pushing against the door with not only her hip but her shoulder and both hands, too, he added, “Maybe even billions of dollars worth.”

Maisie stopped pushing long enough to say, “Don’t be dumb.” Then she threw her whole body at the door as if her life depended on getting inside. The door sighed softly. It shuddered as if it might open. But it remained closed.

“Maybe if we both try?” Maisie asked.

If he said no, Felix knew she would pester him until he said yes.

“Okay,” Felix said in a voice that let her know he didn’t really want to do this.

The two of them stepped back, leaned their
shoulders forward, and hurled themselves at the stubborn door.

Another sigh. But this time it budged ever so slightly.

“It’s probably just a sitting room or something,” Felix said, rubbing his shoulder. “Not very interesting.”

Maisie frowned at the door.

“I’m starving,” Felix said, thinking of a turkey sandwich with American cheese. “We haven’t eaten since we stopped in Connecticut on the way here. And that was hours ago.”

Maisie ignored him. She bent and inspected the lock, fiddled with the knob, and then stepped back again.

“I bet she’ll get that ham you like,” he said, trying to get his sister to go back upstairs.

She brightened. “We need a ruler,” she said. “I’ll push, and when it opens a crack, you can stick the ruler in and, I don’t know, pop the lock.”

“In the movies, robbers use credit cards,” Felix said. His stomach grumbled.

“Even better!” she said. “We’ll wait till Mom goes to sleep, and then you can sneak into her wallet—”

“Me?” Felix said.

“Well, why do I have to do everything?” Maisie asked.
“But I don’t even care what’s in there. And even if I did, I’m going to find out in two days when we get our tour,” Felix responded. They glared at each other. The stairway felt like it had no air at all. “Maybe she’ll get lemonade,” Felix said hopefully.

“She did get lemonade,” their mother said, appearing on the stairway below them. “Are you two snooping around?”

“We’re not,” Felix answered.

Their mother’s flip-flops shuffled up the stairs until she loomed in front of them, her arms full of grocery bags. Her ponytail drooped, and her face glistened with sweat.

“Upstairs,” she said, handing each of them a bag. “Now.” “But it’s so boring—” Maisie began.

“You have been here all of what? A few hours?” their mother said, stepping aside and waving her one free arm for them to get moving. “You haven’t had time to get bored.”

Felix gave her a big smile when he walked past her, but she did not smile back.

“How am I going to trust you two when I start work on Tuesday?” their mother said as they climbed up, single file. “This is a new job that I
wouldn’t even have if I wasn’t Phinneas Pickworth’s great-granddaughter. Do you think law firms in Newport, Rhode Island, are desperate for lawyers? They are not,” she answered before they could. “I have to prove myself, you know, and not worry that you two are going to get into all kinds of trouble.”

“I didn’t know we had to stay locked up all day like Rapunzel or somebody,” Maisie said.

When they reached the top of the stairs and the door to their apartment, their mother turned to face them. The heat had made her mascara melt and leave black smudges around her eyes so she resembled a raccoon.

“This is hard,” she said. “Hard, hard, hard. But we have to put one foot in front of the other. All of us do.” For an instant it looked as though she might cry. But she took a deep breath and collected herself. “There are eighty acres of grounds out there,” she said. “You can spend the next six days until school starts exploring them.”

She opened the door to their tiny, hot apartment.

“Your great-great-grandfather was an explorer, you know,” she said, unpacking the shopping bags.

Felix smiled as he watched her take out turkey and a package of American cheese.
“Why, he sailed down the Nile,” she continued, “and visited the tombs of Queen Hatshepsut and—”

Maisie watched her unpack, too. “I bet they don’t even have the ham I like here,” Maisie said miserably.

“They do,” their mother said. She held up a neatly wrapped package of deli meat. “See? We’re not exactly in the middle of nowhere.”

That was when Felix told his mother about the gazebo. He thought it might make her happy that they had indeed explored a little.

“The inside ceiling is painted light blue with clouds,” he said. “And there’s a little bench in there with the back shaped like a heart.”

“Phinneas Pickworth was a romantic.” Their mother sighed.

After they finished their sandwiches and potato chips—barbecue for Maisie, ripples for Felix—their mother brought out a pound cake.

“Let them eat cake,” she said. They looked at her, puzzled.

“That’s Marie Antoinette’s most famous line,” their mother told them. “She said it when—”

“Mom, who cares what some lady who died a million years ago said?” Maisie asked.

Their mother sighed again. “It wouldn’t hurt you to learn a little something about history and
people you’ve never heard of.”

“Mom?” Felix said, his mouth full of cake.

“Swallow first,” she said.

Felix swallowed. “Why aren’t we allowed in the mansion? I mean, isn’t it technically ours?”

She shook her head. “It belongs to the preservation society. As long as heirs of Phinneas Pickworth are alive, they can rent this apartment for a dollar a year.”

“A dollar?” Maisie gasped. “For this whole place?”

“The money is kind of symbolic. That’s the agreement Great-Aunt Maisie made when she couldn’t afford the upkeep on Elm Medona any longer.”

“Why didn’t she just sell it?” Maisie asked.

“It’s where she lived her whole life,” their mother said. She collected the paper plates and wiped the crumbs from the table onto them. “You should hear her stories about growing up in this place. Her father built it as a summer cottage, but the family liked it so much they ended up living here full time. She and her twin brother used to slide down the Grand Staircase and hold tea parties on the lawn.”

“Great-Aunt Maisie is a twin?” Maisie said, surprised.

“You have more in common with your namesake
than you thought.” Their mother grinned. “She has a twin brother, Thorne, who lives in London. Growing up, they used to be as close . . . well, as close as you two. According to Great-Aunt Maisie, they had adventures like no one else. Adventures they could have only at Elm Medona. She seems to believe there’s something so special about this place that she can’t let it go.”

Maisie shook her head. “I can’t imagine anything that special here.”

“Wait until you get the VIP tour,” their mother said. “Maybe you’ll change your mind.”

“Don’t count on it,” Maisie said, cutting another piece of pound cake.

“Maybe we’re in for a big surprise,” Felix said. He said it to make his mother feel better. But secretly he hoped something amazing did lay in store for them in Elm Medona.