

Lauren's Amazing Brothers

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Chapter 1

Sir Rodney's Slip-Up

The walls of Lauren's bedroom seemed to be melting and her heart had stopped frozen mid-beat. Her last exhale of breath hung stale in the air between her eyes and the screen of her phone. Lauren Sanguine, which name invariably leads the painfully-unaware-I'm-not-funny type of person to call her Lauren *Penguin*, was reading her latest personal diary entry about Tommy Stauffen and his new cute haircut that matched his cute dimples in an online social media notification. She was sure of only three things: 1) she was the last one in her entire school to read the post, 2) Lauren, herself, had not accidentally posted it, and 3) she had a good idea which of her younger brothers had done it. This thought about her brother perpetrating such a horrible invasion of her privacy at once froze her surroundings and fired her heart.

Lauren, deep down, and I mean really deep, loved her four little brothers despite their smells, stickiness, and noisiness. Without mincing words, Lauren was the closest thing they had to a mother. Yes, their mother lived in their house but mostly ignored her children. Sure, Lauren's mom and dad provided food, clothing, and shelter but little else. Her dad worked long days at his job and when he got home he disappeared into the garage to work on his latest woodworking project or to the country club to play in a tennis or golf league. Her mom abhorred anything that required effort, including all tasks related to the proper raising of children. The one exception was when they became over-mothered like when the ladies in her circle of friends were coming over or she

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chanced to meet them while out with her family on errands Lauren couldn't run for her, like getting her hair and nails done or going to the tanning place. These occasions subjected the Sanguine children to a barrage of hugs, smiles, attention, and laughter from their mother. The children would grin and bear it, knowing that if they embarrassed their mother in front of *the ladies*, they would be punished in some way that required as little oversight as possible—usually being sent to their room without supper.

Despite this bleak parenting history Lauren had made it possible for her brothers to grow up with someone looking out for them. They seemed to everyone pretty normal boys. Chet, 12 years old, was the noise maker. He mostly sang crazy made-up songs or played instruments loudly. If Lauren asked him to quiet down, he only got louder. Johnny, ten, spent his time at home burping excess gas—a lot—and he also had the annoying habit of sneaking up behind Lauren and scaring her when she was least expecting it. Elvis and Sivle were eight year old twins. Elvis was always taking things apart in the house and putting them back together again. They usually worked better after he reassembled them, so he had that going for him. Sivle remembered everything he heard, saw, or smelled, which Lauren perceived as being irritating since his special skill had lost Lauren many arguments from the time he had first learned to talk.

To top things off the family dog named Sir Rodney (also a male) was the pickiest eater known to dog-kind. He insisted on eating at the table from his own plate like he was descended from some kind of canine royalty! Lauren's brothers acted like this was normal and generally treated Sir Rodney like he was smarter than her. Lauren had reached the point of not letting this habit bother her but rather took it as a sign that despite her

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efforts, there was still something off-balance with her brothers' brains.

Lauren's family came from a spark ignited one fateful day in ancient times when the young awkward Emma Barrus clumsily spilled her small soda on the young friendly Roger Sanguine. This critical meeting, which ended up eventually affecting our national security so profoundly, occurred during their sophomore year at Arizona State University. Her klutzy move had at first mortified her! As it turned out, after his smiling-rather-than-yelling gaze met her flustered wish-to-get-swallowed-by-the-earth flinch, something happened inside of her agitated heart like a baby rattle filling with oil or a flag becoming starched on a windy day. She gazed into his eyes and felt sure that she had finally found that person whom she imagined would supply her the happiness she wanted for the rest of her life.

After graduation from ASU, Roger got a job with the federal government and moved the family to Arlington, Virginia next to Washington D.C. Emma halfheartedly secured a job there too, although she soon quit explaining to Roger that her boss didn't like her, "FOR NO REASON!"

Roger wanted a big family. Lauren joined their family right before their second wedding anniversary. Emma had never felt so happy as she held her baby girl. However, that feeling soon evaporated when her mother came into the room and disapprovingly criticized the baby, "She looks too much like Roger!"

Emma scrutinized her baby girl, "Don't you think she is cute?"

"She'll be lucky to get a single date later on in high school."

"Oh," Emma sighed dejectedly.

A boy came four years later. Roger liked the name Chet from the Hardy Boys books he read as a kid so that is what they named him. "I love my little Chet," Emma whispered to Roger.

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Emma's dad then entered the room and demanded, "Why didn't you name the boy after me?"

"Roger wanted to name him Chet," Emma whimpered.

"Humph!" stormed her dad as he put on a disgusted face and marched out the door. Emma suffered through her disappointment again and again whenever she looked at Chet after that.

As Chet grew, Emma became more determined than ever to be happy. The couple had another boy whom they named after Emma's father John. Roger, of course, called him Johnny to make sure he had his own identity that was different from his grandpa. Emma's mother and father refused to visit the new baby, but her sister visited when Johnny was a year old. Emma tried as hard as she could to hide her baby from her sister's close scrutiny because he burped much more than normal babies. Of course, this plan burned to ashes. After meeting Johnny for the first time she held him in her arms and patted his back like she had seen people do on television. Unfortunately, he let out a burp right into her ear. Emma's sister handed him back to his horrified mother and declared, "That baby is gross! He is too gassy!"

Emma felt mortified and beaten. She had given her best effort. But alas, any happy family feelings from fleeting moments of overpowering love she had felt as a mother over the years had somehow only been temporary and short-lived.

When Johnny was almost two years old, an unexpected last chance at finding offspring happiness presented itself to Emma in the form of another pregnancy. Emma was wary at how happy Roger seemed at the prospect of yet another walk down that path of unfulfilled dreams, and in the end, she found that those suspicions were indeed correct.

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Twins this time. She let Roger name them after he conducted a drawn-out campaign consisting of mostly pleading and begging for the opportunity. Then, after all of that, and Emma's graciousness in allowing him to name his own children, he had unfeelingly drawn upon his weird sense of humor that had so often caused her humiliation in front of other people. He named the two new boys Elvis and Sivle.

Twins required lots of work as *Lauren* soon found out. Emma's biggest concern was the dread of people asking, "What are their names?" I mean, how does one expect strangers to swallow a name like Sivle? Every time she had to explain that it was Elvis spelled backwards it felt like another shovel full of dirt dug out of her ever-deepening hole of shame and rejection.

Eventually, Emma became submerged in a pit of unhappiness at home and could obtain solace for her lot in life only by her reliance on an unexpected friend—despondency. Not feeling anything doesn't let you be happy. On the other hand, you can't feel too unhappy either. Right? Roger, out of concern for Emma, eventually lost his sparkle and Lauren noticed that he was away from home much more than he was there.

By the time of Lauren's embarrassing diary post, Emma had degenerated to mostly sitting in front of the television, submerged in noise, while endlessly flipping through online social media posts on her phone. Inside she was wishing for the happy lives she read about with all of the perfect children and husbands other people had been lucky enough to procure.

Bedtime for all of the boys was at nine o'clock. They were not allowed to bother their parents between seven o'clock and nine o'clock because that was when Emma always watched a movie, and if Roger was home, he didn't want his boys lurking about the power tools in the garage. As a sixteen year old girl with four energetic brothers this was also the only time of peace and quiet for Lauren.

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“It is almost nine now,” she gasped while glancing down at her watch. Lauren knew she had to hurry if she was going to yell at Chet for posting that particular entry from her diary. After all, being mad is no fun, and really has no point, if the person you’re mad at doesn’t know it!

He’ll be watching out for me, so I have to be super quiet, she thought to herself. *The last thing I want to do is give Chet any kind of warning that I’m on the hunt for sneaky boy!*

Lauren managed to make it to the bottom of the stairs quietly enough because she stepped over the second and fifth steps—the ones that squeaked. While descending the stairs she had the thought of perhaps doubling her revenge by finding Chet doing something she could get him in trouble for. She tiptoed the last few feet over to the door of the playroom and opened it slowly, without a noise.

As she peeked in she could see no boys. However, she did observe their dog Sir Rodney typing away on a computer that was embedded in the wall! Lauren let out a gasp and quickly closed the door. She pinched herself a couple of times, blinked and rubbed her eyes, then peered into the room again. This time she saw Sir Rodney lazily laying down on the floor in front of where she thought she had seen the computer in the wall.

Just to be sure, Lauren opened the door fully, marched over to the wall, then inspected it up close. She couldn’t find any sign of a hidden computer, so she gave Sir Rodney a suspicious look and asked him, “Where are the boys?” Sir Rodney didn’t say a word. Instead he turned his head away like he was trying to ignore her or get rid of her.

“Why did I just talk to the dog like he might answer me?” she scolded herself out loud as she sprinted up the stairs to tell her mother that the boys weren’t in the playroom. At the top of the stairs she shook her head and

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added, "Why am I talking to myself?" To her satisfaction she noticed that she didn't answer herself.

Lauren burst into the living room. However, right before she could bawl out that the boys were missing, her eyes spied the dreaded pointer finger of her mother Emma Sanguine.

She knew her mother's sign well. When her finger was held like an unbending spike directed straight up at the ceiling it meant punishment (most likely phone privilege denial) for making even so much as a squeak. For Lauren, it was like hitting a cement wall head-on. She silently swallowed her triumphant tattle like it was bitter medicine and slowly slunk back to the basement to involuntarily wait for two more minutes when it would be exactly nine o'clock. She consoled herself on the way by telling herself that she would pass the two minutes by looking forward to getting Chet and the boys into trouble for leaving the house. As everyone knows, the anticipation of causing any trouble for those viewed as your enemy is much more satisfying than actually eating the fruits of the revenge—seeing your enemy suffer. This is because feeding a grudge instantly blossoms into temporary gratification even with the slightest of attentions, like the pleasure of gorging on candy to reach a sugar high before the agony of the unavoidable stomach ache.

"Do you think she will come back?" she heard Johnny ask from inside as she approached the playroom again. The door was slightly open, so she could only hear him, not see him.

"Undoubtedly," an unfamiliar voice answered.

"Well, either way, you've got to be more careful," Johnny reprimanded whomever he was talking to. Of course, he used a kind tone since Johnny never really got mad at anyone. In fact, Johnny was the most chill boy Lauren knew even though she didn't like to acknowledge it to herself, let alone Johnny.

Lauren furrowed her brow in confusion about who Johnny was talking to and swung the door open. Her mouth drooped in surprise at what she now saw. All four boys were sitting on the floor playing with random toys. Well, to be

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perfectly correct, Elvis was taking one apart. “Where did you come from?” she stammered. “I was just here, and you weren’t!” She paused, evidently needing to catch her breath, then continued, “And who was just talking? I know it wasn’t any of you!”

The four boys looked somewhat nervously at each other. Then, like it was orchestrated before Lauren had come back down the stairs, the three younger boys began staring at Chet like he should answer.

“We were playing hide-and-seek so it’s no wonder you couldn’t see us,” he blurted out. Then he added in that same forced, unnatural voice he used when he thanked his Grandma Barrus for giving him a hug, “Now you’re *it!*”

“Was the dog *it* before me? He was the only one not hiding,” Lauren countered sarcastically.

The boys searched each other’s expressions for a sign of someone willing to answer her. Finally, Sivle silently volunteered and answered for the guilty-looking group, “Yes. Sir Rodney was *it*. You know how good a dog’s sense of smell is, right? I bet Sir Rodney could even sniff out a brain cell or two in your head.”

Lauren tapped her foot, ignoring the weak insult. “And who was just talking? I heard someone else’s voice.”

“I have a slight cold,” Elvis suggested in a near flawless replica of the strange voice she had heard.

Lauren wasn’t done yet, even though she knew her defeat was imminent like every other time she had tried to get her brothers in trouble. “That’s another thing, does Sir Rodney know how to...,” Lauren caught herself before she could say *type on a computer keyboard* since there was no computer out anywhere and she wasn’t entirely sure what she had seen was real. The boys were leaning in now, wondering how she was going to finish her question. She obliged them by bouncing out a connected thought instead, “...take himself for a walk? It’s nine o’clock and I’m not taking him.” Lauren silently

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congratulated herself with her nice recovery without sounding like a lunatic.

“I’ll go!” Johnny exclaimed like he was glad for any excuse to leave.

Lauren attempted to wrap up the strained conversation with an air-clearing, “Humph!” She then turned and tromped out the door. However, before she got too far, she remembered why she had even come down to the basement in the first place. She spun around in the hallway to return and tell off Chet about reading and publishing her diary. However, when she poked her head in this time, Chet had vanished again leaving only two twin boys trying very hard to appear innocent and pretending to search the room for Chet in an unimpeachable game of hide-and-seek. This time, she let out a less-satisfying, “Grrrr!” before stomping back to her room for the night.

Chapter 2

Mission Planning

“I have a res from last night’s mission,” Chet proclaimed proudly to his three younger brothers.

They squinted at him through the chain link fence that separated Chet’s middle school from the elementary school playground where Johnny, Elvis, and Sivle attended. The Sanguine boys met almost every day at lunch to review their mission from the previous night and plan for whatever was on their plate for that evening. However, before Chet could explain what his res was, Studebaker came strolling up to Chet from the football practice field behind him.

“People are starting to think you’re a weird dork,” whined Studebaker to Chet. His brown eyes reminded Chet of a puppy Chihuahua. His ears reminded him of a Basset Hound. “Not only do you talk with your little brothers during lunch, you seem to actually enjoy it!”

“I’m not a weird dork, so why does it matter what people are saying Studebaker?” countered Chet. “You know we’re talking mission stuff.”

“Easy! I’m just sayin’,” Studebaker recanted while waving his arms like windshield wipers.

“Whatever,” Chet grunted, facing his brothers again. Then a smile, the kind teachers give when they know they are about to give a pop quiz, began to expand across his face corresponding to a growing thought or idea sprouting in his brain.

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Chet continued to address Studebaker while winking at Sivle, “Just so you know, I’m glad you’ve finally decided to show up for our daily briefing. However, since you’re late, you get to be my test case for a res I have from last night that I wanted to demonstrate to the boys here.”

Studebaker stopped walking short of Chet and stiffened up like he had somehow morphed into a tree and grown roots. Chet noticed this and chuckled, “What? You don’t want to participate in real spy work?”

“No...I...just don’t want to be a guinea pig demonstration case for whatever the INR pumped into your head to perform your mission last night.”

“Aw. Don’t worry Studebaker. It was just a routine mission. We stopped the kidnapping of the Sudanese ambassador who happens to be here in Washington D.C. for talks this week. Although, we almost failed when we were forced to bail early in order to protect our cover. You remember, when our sister walked in on Sir Rodney while he was working the logistics on the mission computer?”

At this, Studebaker became unstuck from his spot and defensively sputtered, “Hey! I’m not the one in charge of Lauren’s schedule or movements, I’m just responsible for you four. Plus, it’s hard to work with a dog for a mission point man!”

“Why did you blush when Chet mentioned Lauren?” Johnny slyly intoned. Studebaker didn’t answer, he just blushed some more.

By now he had indignantly strode his way right up behind Chet. Suddenly, Chet whirled around, pulled on Studebaker’s shirt, stuck out his leg to trip him, flipped him around as he fell from being tripped, and ended up on his chest face-down in the dirt with his hands held behind his back.

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“Ow,” Studebaker groaned quietly to no one in particular. Any blush or fluster that had been in his cheeks had now disappeared.

Johnny, Elvis, and Sivle began laughing on the other side of the fence like they did while watching Saturday morning cartoons—in other words—rolling around on the ground and holding their stomachs with both arms crossed.

Studebaker glanced up at Chet's grinning face and whimpered, “I'm guessing your res was part of the jiu-jitsu imprint you got from the INR's imprintrainer?”

“Nope. I think it was part of the karate imprint,” Chet corrected Studebaker as he helped him back onto his feet from the ground with a friendly hand.

Studebaker looked a little stiff and acted like his shoulder hurt. His face wore a look of irritation, not surprise, when he realized that none of the Sanguine boys acknowledged his injuries. Instead, they were already on to the mission planning for that night.

Johnny opened the face of his wristwatch and revealed a hidden button. He pressed this and a small holographic display flashed on and hung in front of his eyes with glowing green words. He read quietly for a few seconds then he began officiously, “The intelligence report indicates that the target for the kidnapping attempt last night wasn't the ambassador at all. Rather it was a Sudanese student, some kind of genius, who was also attending the dinner as part of the Sudan party.”

Elvis interrupted, clearly startled, “Not the ambassador? Some kid?”

Chet cleared his throat and spun his pointer finger around at the small group gathered at the fence line, “Ah, ya, kids—you know, like us.”

“Right,” Elvis said sheepishly. “All kids aren't, well, kid-like.”

Chet nodded his head solemnly like he was a righteous priest teaching a youth group an ethical principle from the

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scriptures. He was obviously pleased that he had effectively driven home his point.

Johnny began studying the hologram message again then went on, “This conclusion led the analysts to assign us tonight the mission of stopping another possible student kidnapping by Perium agents. This time it is a teenager named Emmanuel Bondah who comes from Ghana. He’s apparently some technology prodigy who spent most of his life unknown in a slum somewhere. He is in the United States to start engineering school next semester—and get this—he is only sixteen years old!”

“That’s the same age as Lauren,” commented Elvis.

“Why would Vishreek Serseave or any other member of Perium want to kidnap this boy from Africa?” asked Studebaker, temporarily forgetting his sore shoulder.

“It doesn’t matter,” Chet sounded off like a soldier in boot camp. “We just do the mission and let our senior leaders do the figuring out.”

“How can that be sufficient for you?” inquired Studebaker.

Chet glanced at him sideways, but his gaze went right through Studebaker like he was looking into the past. His face resembled the look of a spooked child during a power outage at night who is afraid of the dark, then it was gone. “It just is,” Chet snapped more forcefully than was typical for him.

Johnny read off the list of imprints that they were to get before the mission, “Electronic basics, calculus, hand-to-hand combat, ninja, gymnastics...”

Sivle whined, “I don’t like the gymnastics one. I’m always so sore after we have to do those fancy flips and aerial twists. Just because I know how to do it, temporarily, doesn’t mean my body is ready to do it!”

“Relax,” Chet soothed. “Would you rather fail the mission and get captured by Perium?”

“No,” Sivle pouted like a normal eight-year-old.

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"I'll continue," Johnny muttered, himself not a fan of sore muscles after some of the missions. "Let's see, gymnastics—oh, I already said that one—communication codes and protocols, and the standard INR agent proficiency package. There doesn't seem to be any special imprints for anyone this time," he finished briefing while turning the hologram off and closing his watch again.

Chet now spoke to begin the mission planning portion of their daily meeting, "It seems to be a pretty straightforward mission."

As Chet said this, Studebaker mouthed the same words mockingly behind him. Elvis giggled, despite a valiant attempt to hold it in.

"What?" Chet scowled, his motivational speech having been thrown off track.

"Ah Chet, you say the same thing every day, and we have yet to have a mission that was straightforward!" bawled Studebaker.

"Well, last night would have been, except Lauren wandered into the playroom and caught Sir Rodney acting very un-dog like!"

Studebaker rolled his eyes and whispered defiantly under his breath, "She's not my responsibility."

Earlier, that same morning, Lauren's every single nerve had been strained as she entered her high school. She had drawn up a mental list of everyone that would try to harass her due to Chet's post of her diary entry about Tommy Stauffen. It was fairly short, only consisting of two people, owing to the fact that most people in her high school made it a general rule to ignore her. So, strictly speaking, the two people on her list were the only ones that would say something directly to her face instead of behind her back. The first one on her list met her on only her second step into the entrance.

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“Tom is the bomb!” a gangling boy named Ron Scallow bantered loudly through what Lauren identified in her mind as a stupid smile on his skinny face.

Lauren had all sorts of come-backs and personal insults ready for Ron, mostly because he was the first name on her list due to a nauseous gut feeling that he’d be the first one to rag on her. However, what came out of her mouth shocked her to her bones. “Yep. He’s great!” she chirped like a love bird.

Ron stopped dead on his path of ridicule. The stupid infection that had plagued his smile had now somehow become contagious and spread to the rest of his body. His entire person, frozen on the spot, actually radiated dimwittedness! Lauren hadn’t seen Ron speechless since Mrs. Adams had caught him in second grade trying to hold Lauren’s hand before gym class.

She kept walking down the hall to the sound of a faint gurgling coming from Ron. “I guess I’ll see ya around,” he sputtered weakly as she turned the corner toward her locker.

“One down, one to go,” she breathed out in a relieved sigh, almost as surprised as Ron was at her unexpected and effective comeback.

Lauren didn’t have to wait long for number two on her list of tormentors. She ran smack into her as she rounded the next corner.

“Your skirt looks awful—like always,” giggled Aimee Mulor. Her trio of sidekicks echoed her distinctive acidic snigger like they had practiced it for hours.

Lauren tried to ignore them by walking around the group, but it moved like a blob to block her.

“I noticed your awkward post last night. If I were you, I’d be humiliated and probably start home schooling,” Aimee smirked in fraudulent friendliness as she nodded her head up and down slightly with a pouting, protruding lower lip. The three fellow members of Aimee’s species

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that seemed to surround her at all times excitedly whispered to each other in their amusement at the slight blush this comment had induced in Lauren's cheeks.

Lauren had no awesome comeback this time like she had with Ron Scallow. She just bowed her head down and managed to scurry past them to her locker, chased down the hall by a loud laughing chorus led by Aimee. How Lauren wished that Aimee hadn't moved into her suburban school from D.C. the year before! Life had been much harder for Lauren with Aimee around.

Lauren opened her locker and peered at her reflection in a small magnetic mirror she kept on the back wall. As with most people, she was blind to the actual image. Instead she moaned, "My skirt *is* ugly!"

As she closed her locker she added with narrow eyes and pinched cheeks, "One thing is for sure, I'm going to get even with Chet tonight!"

Her planning on how to do this began as she slammed her locker shut and hiked off to her first class, hoping against hope that she wouldn't run into Tommy Stauffen ever again.

Chapter 3

Lauren's Revenge

Emma and Roger Sanguine sat down together on their well-worn couch at exactly 6:59 p.m. that night. Roger's golf and tennis leagues were over, and he didn't have a project to keep him busy in the garage. Emma's bottom fit nicely into the couch beside her husband because her imprint in the soft stuffing was by that time, more or less, permanent.

Lauren had already secretly taken up residence inside the closet of her brothers' playroom by that time. Her phone's camera was ready to catch Chet doing something juvenile with his toys so she could send it around to his twelve-year-old friends. She reasoned, and reasoned correctly, that middle school boys had little-to-no mercy for anyone different from the unspoken definition of cool. She wasn't positive, but she felt confident that playing with transformer dolls—ahem, action figures—was not part of that definition.

The only problem she was having with her little covert operation was that her nose all of a sudden became very itchy just as her little brothers walked into the room. She put her phone down and began to scratch it, thinking she would have two hours of prime opportunity to get a video worthy of humiliating Chet. However, before she knew what was happening, the wall right behind her opened and she found herself tumbling backward down a long slide. She was so surprised that she forgot to scream.

She ended up on her back inside what looked like some kind of airplane. It was small inside, probably about the size

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of a personal jet. “What is this?” Lauren wondered out loud. “Where did all of this gear come from?”

The gear she was referring to were stacks of odds and ends that you might expect to find in a back-country hiker’s garage.

“Sir Rodney, after you,” she heard Johnny say from the top of the chute that she had just ungracefully tumbled down. Lauren peered up the chute and saw that it began in the closet she had concealed herself in.

Instantly terrified at being discovered spying, especially by her little brothers, she quickly hid herself behind a pile of rope, uniforms, and some other equipment in a closet. Sir Rodney slid down first and began trotting toward the front of the airplane where there were some controls in a cockpit. However, before he got too far, he stopped and twitched his nose into the air. Lauren became uneasy, well aware of how good a dog’s sense of smell was—being reminded of that fact by Sivle just the night before. As Sir Rodney began to turn himself to investigate whatever it was that his nose had picked up on, Elvis, followed by Sivle, came flying down the chute and into the airplane. Lauren noted with some annoyance that her twin brothers landed on their feet, not on their back. She was sure this was because they had obviously done this before unlike her.

“Hey Sir Rodney, can you enhance that chute? Maybe make it into a water slide or mud slide, you know, spice it up to make it more fun?” Elvis asked the dog.

Lauren had to stifle a sudden laugh. Her crazy brother was talking to the dumb dog like he was an engineer. *Kids!*

“The current conduit is sufficient for our needs, Elvis,” the dog answered back.

Now Lauren stifled a squeal. The dog actually talked! She had all at once figured out who the real owner of the strange voice that she had heard the night before was—

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the family's pet! She frantically searched for her phone to get proof for later when the psychotherapists began questioning her sanity.

"Why is Lauren's phone in our closet?" she heard Chet ask from the closet at the top of the chute. This stopped her short search.

Johnny's faint reply from inside the toy room reached Lauren's ears, "Elvis and Sivle were probably trying to prank her." Then in his best grown-up voice he added, "*Kids!*"

A few seconds later both older boys appeared in the airplane door and Sir Rodney returned from the cockpit where Elvis and Sivle were now sitting. "Chet, the Celerity is ready for takeoff and the mission coordinates have been entered."

Chet looked down at his dog and without the slightest sign or hint that he found conversing with his pet weird in any way replied, "Thanks Sir Rodney. You'll be manning the mission control station in the playroom again." Chet paused here. His face changed to resemble their dad's face when he was trying to be stern with his kids, "Be more careful with Lauren. She might be curious from her glimpse of you working last night and start lurking around."

"I'll lock the door, or at least put something heavy behind it so I have some warning. Plus, I'll play a recording of you four playing so anyone that comes by the door will think you're all inside," Sir Rodney recited, all in military fashion, like Chet was a general.

"Fine, fine," Chet muttered, his mind now on other things.

Sir Rodney scampered back to the chute, pressed a button with his paw that turned the chute into some stairs, then climbed back up to the closet. On the top stair, he looked over his shoulder and commented, "The Celerity smells like a girl for some reason." Then, under his breath as the airplane door closed on four boys and one concealed girl, he said, "An improvement over little boy odor for sure!"

Lauren, trapped in a hidden airplane under her house that was apparently called the Celerity, felt an urge to come out of

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her hiding place and demand to know what was going on. However, as she made her move to come out, she heard Chet begin telling a joke.

“Hey Johnny, did you hear about that chicken who yelled across the road, ‘Hey Lauren! How do I get to the other side?’” Chet began to giggle and couldn’t finish the joke for a few seconds while he tried to regain his composure.

“No Chet. I didn’t hear about a chicken yelling across the road at Lauren,” Johnny replied to accommodate the telling of the joke.

Sivle was smiling and poking Elvis in anticipation of the punch line.

Chet couldn’t get control of himself until, finally, with the pleading of the twins, Chet continued, “Lauren yelled back to the chicken, ‘You already are on the other side!’”

At this, all four boys started rolling on the airplane floor, holding their stomachs just like they had done when Studebaker was at the receiving end of Chet’s karate res. Lauren forgot her urge to confess herself and wedged even more tightly into her hiding spot wondering how anything so stupid could entertain anyone so thoroughly. When her brothers finally finished their cackle caucus, they wiped the tears from their eyes and sat down again on four seats in the cockpit.

“INR base,” Chet droned into a microphone that was attached to a headset he had put on when he sat down.

A loudspeaker crackled to life, “Celerity, you are cleared to dock at INR base. The imprinter is ready for your team’s mission this evening. Please proceed now.”

Chet quickly checked to make sure his brothers were buckled into their seats. Of course, he didn’t check to see if Lauren was secured. He then hit a button and the airplane took off like a rocket. Lauren found herself pinned to the wall to her left. As they continued to their

Lauren's Amazing Brothers

blistering acceleration her lips spread over her teeth to her cheeks under the intense g-forces. Then, after a few seconds of this, the airplane flipped around 180 degrees.

Now flying backward, the Celerity slowed them down just as fast as they had sped up. Surrounding gear pressed on Lauren's chest making it hard to breathe. However, after only a few seconds they had apparently arrived at their destination and the g-forces went back to just plain old gravity.

"Okay guys," Chet hummed with a hint of eagerness. "Let's get to the imprintrainer room and then on to save this Emmanuel Bondah guy from the planned Perium kidnapping!"

"Yea," his three brothers sang in unison while exiting the airplane.

Lauren was left alone tucked away in a strange jet aircraft that was parked in a strange place. "I don't think this is my brother's closet anymore," she whimpered, sure of only one fact—she and her brothers didn't belong there.