

Eric Walters

HOUSTON,
IS THERE A
PROBLEM?

A
Teen Astronauts
novel



**Houston, Is There
A Problem?**



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A Teen Astronauts novel



Eric Walters

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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*To those who are willing to boldly go where no one
has gone before.*



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Acknowledgments

One

"I'm home," I called out as I came into the house and dropped my backpack on the floor.

"Houston! Houston!" the twins yelled as they came barreling out of the kitchen and threw themselves into me with such power that they almost knocked me over. They were only four, but they were getting big.

I picked up Brett and threw him into the air and onto the couch, and he shrieked.

"Me now, me now!" Dylan screamed. I did the same thing with him.

I rushed over and started tickling both of them.

"Stop! Stop!" Dylan yelled.

"You're gonna make me pee!" Brett yelled as he rolled off the couch.

"Boys! Boys! Boys!" Suzie called out as she came into the room. "You need to go and finish your dinner."

"Mooommm," they both whined.

It wasn't unusual for them to talk in one voice. I'd read that twins, especially identical twins, often did that. "Go, *now*, or there's no dessert for either of you," she said. "I'll give it all to Houston."

They scrambled to their feet and disappeared into the kitchen.

Suzie was their mother and my aunt. My mother's younger sister. But she and her husband had been my

guardians for the past three years. Since my parents were killed. The boys were just babies when I moved in and had never known me not living here. To them I was more like a brother than a cousin. And Suzie was more than my aunt, but she would never be my mother.

“You’re a little later than I thought you were going to be,” Suzie said.

“I told you we were getting together at Jen’s to celebrate the end of the school year.”

“You didn’t tell me it was going to be this late.”

“I guess I lost track of time. Sorry,” I said.

“You know I worry.”

She did worry, and I really should have called. It was just that I was pretty well the only person in my grade who didn’t have a cell phone, and it was embarrassing to always borrow one. Cell phones cost money, and we didn’t have much of that.

Besides, it was definitely “uncool” to have to call home. I’d worked hard all year to be seen as cool – well, at least not “uncool” – and I didn’t want to lose my hard-earned status.

“Everybody must have been pretty happy about the start of summer vacation,” she said.

“For sure.” Although most were more excited than me. “It was pretty emotional saying our goodbyes.”

“Goodbyes? Aren’t you going to be seeing each other over the summer?”

“Dwayne’s family is moving, and some are gone for most of the summer, and then we’re not all heading to the same high school next year.”

“That’s right! End of eighth grade and start of high school. Big difference.”

It was going to be different. It was hard enough moving here and having to make all new friends in fifth grade and I’d have to try to do it all again. I wasn’t looking forward to it.

“Let’s have it,” she said.

“Have what?” I asked, playing dumb.

“Give me your report card or you’re not having dessert either.”

I reached into my backpack, pulled it out and handed it to her.

“Is it just good or really good?” she asked.

“I guess you’ll be the judge of that.”

She pulled the report out of the envelope and unfolded it.

“Wow...six A’s...and three A-pluses.” She then shrugged. “Average.”

“Average?”

“Average for you, and spectacular for anybody else.”

“So, does that mean I do or don’t get dessert?”

“Dessert and this.” She put an arm around me and gave me a big hug. It felt good, although I was getting too old for hugs from my aunt, and my arms hung limply at my side.

“Your mother would be proud of you,” she said. Her voice was just a whisper.

I felt my body stiffen. I was surprised she’d mentioned her. My mother—her sister—wasn’t someone we talked much about.

“And I guess your father would be too,” she added. “It’s just those were the sort of marks your mother always got. We all knew she was so special that she could have become anything if...well...you know.”

I did know. If my father hadn’t come along. If she hadn’t gotten pregnant when she was in high school and had gone on to college instead, like she was supposed to. If I hadn’t come along.

“Not that your mother ever felt bad about not going further. You know that, right?”

“I know.”

I also knew it had changed her life. And I guess, eventually, ended it. If she’d gone down another path, she—both of my parents—never would have been killed in that car accident.

Snap out of it, I ordered myself. I couldn’t overthink it. That was always the danger. I overthought some things. Actually, I overthought almost *everything*. Why couldn’t I just go with the flow, like my aunt and uncle? And, really, like almost everybody else in the world.

“Do you know how hard it was to have a big sister who was that smart?” Suzie asked. “It always felt like teachers didn’t think I was really trying.”

It probably would have been hard, but it wasn’t so easy being the smartest either. I knew some of my friends—even my close friends—sometimes didn’t seem pleased that I did so well. I think some of them would even have celebrated if I were to blow a test. Maybe I’d have to explore that theory in September. No, not right away. It was a new school with new teachers, and I needed the teachers to know I was smart. Being the smart kid was about the only thing I had. The difficult part was letting the teachers know you’re smart

without letting the other students know that you're *too* smart.

"I'm glad there are nine years between you and the twins, so nobody will be comparing them to you," Suzie said.

"And it's not like we even have the same last name," I added.

"Of course, you know that at any time you're welcome to use our last name."

"I know." Although I was never going to do that. My last name was all that was left of my parents. My father was an only child. His parents were gone. I carried on his name. Besides, being Houston Williams sounded a lot better than having my aunt's married name and being called Houston Honey. That sounded like a cartoon character or the name of an all-female country band from Texas.

"Come on. I kept a plate warm for you and for Brad. He isn't home yet either."

Brad hardly ever made it home for supper. Especially at this time of year. He ran his own business building decks and landscaping, so during the spring, summer and fall he worked really long hours. The twins were often still in bed when he left in the morning and asleep when he got home. He'd arrive dirty, tired and hungry and plop himself in front of the TV to have dinner. I liked Brad, and I knew he liked me, but we didn't talk that much. He didn't talk much to anybody. He wasn't much of a talker.

I sat down at my place at the table. I liked that I had a specific place to sit. I had one twin on each side. They were just finishing up their food as Suzie put down the meal in front of me. Fish sticks and french fries. I liked fish sticks and french fries.

“Be careful—the plate is hot,” she said.

“Thanks.”

Suzie wasn't much of a cook, but she was a good mother. I often “heard” my mother when she was talking to the boys. She and my mother had the same voice, used the same phrases and had the same kindness. That made me happy and sad all at once.

The twins were just as much of a surprise to her and Brad as I had been to my mother. She and Brad had been together since she was in tenth grade and he was in twelfth. It was just after she graduated from high school that she got pregnant and they got married.

Brett reached out and took a french fry from my plate. I grabbed a couple more and put them on his plate and then did the same for Dylan. They both gave me a smile. They were good kids. They could be annoying, but I really liked them. Well, really, I loved them. They were my family. At least what was left of my family.

“It sounds like some of your friends are going away for the summer,” Suzie said. “Are they doing anything special?”

“Jenny and Devon are going away to camp for a month. Scott and his family are going to Europe. Tasha's family has a lake house, and she's going to be spending the summer there. Farley's grandparents are taking him to Disney World for two weeks.”

“They say Disney World is the happiest place on the planet,” she said.

“At least in the commercials.”

“Brad and I are going to take you all to Disney World someday. It's just that summer is too busy for him to take time off.”

“I understand. Someday.”

I wasn't going away, but I was going to be busy. I was going to spend the summer working with Brad, doing some of the grunt work, like cutting grass and moving dirt and lumber.

“You're not going away but you know you don't have to work with Brad if you don't want to,” Suzie said.

“I want to work with him. I like helping. He's going to pay me, and besides, what else am I going to do?”

“Hang out with friends, play video games or do nothing,” she said.

“I'm still going to do a lot of that.”

Besides, I felt like I *should* be helping. Suzie and Brad were good to me. They never said anything, but I knew money was tight. Anything that *was* for me *wasn't* for the twins. I took a couple more fries from my plate and put them on the twins' plates.

“Oh, I forgot, you got mail today,” Suzie said.

“I got mail? From who?”

She got up and returned, placing an envelope in front of me.

It was fairly fancy-looking. There was my full name, and in the corner was a large logo that said *Futures Space Camp*, and there were pictures of space vehicles and kids in space suits strewn across the front.

“It looks like some sort of advertising,” Suzie said.

“Yeah, it's for a space camp.”

“Space camp?”

“There are four or five scattered around the country. I've checked some of them out online. Some are even attached

to actual NASA facilities.”

“NASA. The organization that actually sends people to space?”

“The same.”

“And these camps send people to space?”

I laughed. “I wish. They’re for people to learn about space travel and even go through some of the same training astronauts go through.”

“That sounds pretty exciting.”

“It would be,” I agreed.

“You read a lot about space. It really interests you, right?” I nodded. I knew so much about space. I’d studied it from before I went to school. I knew all about the planets, the solar system, theories about black holes and the Big Bang and about every space mission that had ever taken place. Not to mention I could practically recite every line from *Star Trek* and the *good Star Wars* movies.

“Sure, but doesn’t space interest everybody?” I asked.

“I could see how it would be restful to get away from the twins and spend some time in space.”

I laughed. The twins didn’t seem to notice.

“Do you ever think about being an astronaut?” she asked.

“Nobody becomes an astronaut unless they have graduate degrees, and they’re doctors or physicists or at least a pilot, like in the military.”

“You could enlist in the air force and become a pilot. And with your marks, you’re going to be offered scholarships for college, just like your mother was.”

I'd never thought about her getting scholarship offers, but it didn't surprise me.

"Mommy, can we have dessert now?" Dylan asked.

"You have a little more on your plate."

"I'm finished," Brett said. He picked up his empty plate and licked it a couple of times to prove his point.

Brett was hilarious even when he didn't mean to be.

I turned the envelope over in my hands. More pictures of people hanging around rockets, and kids in blue jumpsuits sitting inside the thrusters of a gigantic rocket. I recognized it as the *Saturn V*. Standing upright, it would have been as tall as a thirty-six-story building. Those were the rockets that took the *Apollo* missions to the moon. I'd seen pictures and videos of liftoffs. How amazing would it have been to be at Cape Canaveral to see that in person? Forget Disney World—the Kennedy Space Center was where I'd go on vacation if I could. I'd read that when the rockets took off, the ground shook, and during night launches, the whole sky became so bright it was almost like daytime. To be there for a launch would be amazing. To be strapped inside that rocket was beyond anything I could even imagine.

"You mentioned you'd been checking on space-camp websites, so maybe that's why you got something mailed to you."

"It could be, but I didn't go to the website of this camp."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm 100 percent positive."

"I know I should believe you. You're like my sister with that photographic memory."

"I don't have a photographic memory. That's when people have the ability to recall images from memory after

a few exposures—some people call it eidetic memory. I don't have that—almost nobody does." What I had was an exceptional memory. Words, phrases, images and ideas seemed to lodge in my brain much faster than with other people.

She laughed. "You sound so much like her."

"And even if I did go on their website, how would they get my home address?" I asked.

"I'm positive that Google listens in to phone calls and monitors our computers, so they could easily figure that out," Suzie said.

"It doesn't matter. They wasted a stamp on me, because there's no way I could afford to go there. I'll throw it out."

I went to get up.

"Wait!" Suzie yelled. "You can't throw it out without opening it first."

"Why not?"

"It's like letting a phone just ring. You have to open the envelope."

"You can go ahead." I handed it to her.

She ripped it open. "Fancy paper," she said as she pulled something out.

I popped another fish stick into my mouth.

"Oh my goodness," Suzie said.

I looked up. Her eyes were wide open. "What?"

"Houston, you won."

"Won what?"

"A two-week stay at space camp."

Two

Brad and I sat looking at his laptop. On the screen was the website for Futures Space Camp. On the table beside the computer was the invitation I'd received and Brad's cell phone.

The twins' bedroom door opened and Suzie slipped out, silently closing the door behind her. She came over to us.

"Are the Boo-Boos asleep?" Brad asked.

"They're asleep, and please don't call them the Boo-Boos."

"I'm just joking, they can't hear me, and besides it wasn't like we planned them," Brad said.

"You don't plan your blessings. You just accept them when they arrive," she said.

"They are blessings—loud blessings."

She reached down and gave Brad a little squeeze and a kiss on the top of his head.

I remember when my parents used to do things like that.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"It's pretty impressive," Brad said.

He scrolled onto another page showing pictures of kids—most my age or older—doing different activities.

"That's a simulator of the *Orion* capsule," I said, pointing at a picture. "That's the next-generation spaceship that will take people to Mars."

“And they have a pool at the camp too,” added Suzie, pointing at the screen. “That’s exciting that you can also swim.”

“They’re probably using it for neutral buoyancy training,” I suggested.

They both looked at me. Obviously neither knew what I was talking about.

“To train astronauts to deal with zero gravity, they spend time underwater. It’s the best approximation of floating in space.”

“And this camp looks legitimate?” Suzie asked.

“I think so,” Brad said. “Do you know what’s the really impressive part?” Before Suzie could answer, he pointed at the fees.

She whistled. “That is a whole lot of money. Apparently, it’s not just going to space that’s expensive, but even just going to space camp. They’re offering Houston a full scholarship though, right?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I’m not completely sure, but I think maybe.”

“*Maybe* isn’t good enough. I’m still afraid it could be some sort of marketing thing. You know, pay for one week and get one week free,” Suzie said.

“If it were that, we could only afford for Houston to stay for about three hours.”

“Where is it?”

“Texas,” I said.

“And it says in the letter that transportation is provided to and from the camp,” Brad added.

“It all just seems too good to be true,” Suzie said.

“Do you think one of your teachers could have nominated you for the scholarship?” Brad asked me.

I shrugged. “I think some of my teachers would be happy if I left the state or even the planet.”

“I’m sure some are grateful enough that you’re just leaving the school,” Brad said.

“But you’ve been working on that, right?” Suzie asked.

I nodded. I had been working on that. Some teachers really didn’t like when you were smarter than them, and liked it even less when you let them know it. That was the part I’d been working on. Along with trying not to make other students feel foolish because I was smart.

“But a teacher sending in my name for this camp is the only thing I can think of,” I said.

“It sounds like something Mr. Johnston would do,” Suzie suggested.

Mr. Johnston was my science teacher. Everybody joked that I was his favorite student. He was certainly my favorite teacher. He was smart and funny and always encouraged me and he loved talking about stuff—particularly space stuff. It had to be him.

“But why wouldn’t he have told you he was doing it?” Brad asked.

“He might have thought it was such a long shot that he didn’t want Houston to get his hopes up,” she said.

“And now, with summer vacation, there’s no way to check with Mr. Johnston or anybody at your school,” Brad added.

“It would be nice if we could talk to somebody,” Suzie said.

“Brad and I sent the camp an email,” I said.

“You did?”

“Yes, but there’s no reply yet. Here’s the contact information. Address, email and phone number.”

“Phone number? Why don’t we call the camp?” Suzie asked.

“It’s almost eight at night,” Brad said.

“It’s a camp. Don’t people live there all the time?”

Suzie picked up her phone and dialed. She put it on speaker. It started to ring. One...two...three...four.

“Good evening, Futures Space Camp,” a woman answered.

“Good evening,” Suzie said. “I’m calling to speak to... um...speak to whoever is in charge.”

“That would be Colonel Sanderson.”

“Yes, I’d like to speak to Colonel Saunders.”

“Sanderson,” I hissed.

“Sorry, I meant to say Colonel Sanderson,” Suzie said. “I knew I wasn’t ordering a bucket of chicken.”

The woman chuckled. “No need to apologize. Can I tell him who’s calling?”

“He’s there?”

“He often works late,” the woman said.

“My name is Suzie, um, *Suzanne* Honey, but I’m calling regarding my nephew, Houston Williams.”

“Is he one of our campers?”

“We received an invitation for him to attend.”

“Oh, he must be one of the scholarship recipients.”