

## Chapter 4 of book *Farther Than the Moon*



### CHAPTER 4

**ROBBIE SANG OUT** a happy cry from the living room. Houston pushed away thoughts of his grandfather and headed down the hall. Robbie clicked his tongue in a rapid pattern as a greeting.

“Hey, you’re supposed to be napping,” Houston teased, kneeling next to him.

“Mmm.” Robbie curled his knees into his chest, tipping his body toward his brother and closing his eyes. A second later, he started fake-snoring.

Houston laughed.

Robbie cheeseball-grinned, clearly pleased with himself. He thumped his left fist against the carpet. It was the signal that he wanted his iPad.

Robbie couldn’t talk like most people. He could blink *yes* and shake his head *no*, but generally, Robbie’s communication was limited to grunting, wailing, and lots of body language. That is, until Mom got him an iPad with an accessible language app when he was five. Robbie had been over the moon about it. It had thousands of preprogrammed words and phrases, and as long as someone was helping to support his arm, Robbie could type out anything he wanted to say. He’d started by choosing simple pictures to express his thoughts, which occasionally took some decoding on Houston’s end. But once Robbie learned how to read, he was able to use more and more words to express himself clearly. Now he could even send texts and emails. It was awesome.

Houston fetched the iPad from the charge station and adjusted Robbie so he was sitting more upright against the pillows piled on the floor. He held Robbie’s wrist to stabilize his arm. Robbie leaned toward the screen, chewing his tongue in concentration as he tapped on the words he wanted

## Chapter 4 of book *Farther Than the Moon*

to say, which appeared in a text box. As always, he communicated in short phrases that reminded Houston of poetry.

You brother  
Best astronaut

"Thanks, buddy." Houston kissed the top of his head and Robbie hummed contentedly.

Sunlight slanted across the floor, illuminating his face as he continued typing.

Best astronaut  
3 2 1 Blastoff  
Tomorrow

"Yep. Can you believe it? I feel like I've been waiting for this my whole life."

Robbie hummed again, then returned his focus to the iPad.

Mission go?

Houston grinned and glanced around the room, even though he knew Mom wasn't home. He leaned his shoulder against Robbie's and spoke conspiratorially.

"Mission: Meet Grandpa is a go!" he confirmed.

Robbie hooked his index finger over his bottom teeth and blinked a long blink. Yes.

The day Houston had been accepted into the JARP, he'd made a decision. He was going to meet his grandfather while he was in Texas. The only problem was, he didn't know how to work it out without his mother's permission. It wasn't like he could leave the JARP campus on his own. For one thing, he couldn't drive. And for another, without a parent or guardian's consent, Jr. Astronaut Candidates weren't allowed to leave the Johnson Space Center grounds for any reason.

Late one night, Houston had climbed into Robbie's bed with the iPad, as he often did after Mom was asleep, so the two of them could talk about their day. Robbie could tell Houston was distracted, though. He kept making his frog noises and knocking his knees into Houston's side whenever Houston got so lost in thought that he'd let the iPad sag. Finally, Robbie had typed

## Chapter 4 of book *Farther Than the Moon*

three question marks in a row, wanting to know what was on his brother's mind.

Houston had told Robbie about Grandpa years ago, of course. Robbie was just as thrilled as Houston to be the grandson of Carey Broderick. So when Houston explained he was trying to figure out a way to meet him, Robbie had typed, simply, *invite*.

"Invite? Who, Grandpa?" Houston whispered.

Long blink. Yes.

"To what?"

Robbie scrunched his face like Houston was being ridiculous. He sucked his tongue, making a frog noise in the back of his throat.

### F M P

Houston smacked his own forehead. The Final Mission Proposals. Why hadn't he thought of that?

At the end of every summer, Jr. Astronaut Candidates gave a presentation of their final projects to a panel of judges from both NASA and SpaceX. The Final Mission Proposals, or FMPs, were one of the most important parts of the whole program. Jr. ASCANs (short for Jr. Astronaut Candidates) worked on their FMPs throughout the whole month, and their final presentations were scored. The candidates with the highest-scoring presentation received an internship opportunity at NASA or SpaceX.

"Invite Grandpa to my FMP!" Houston whispered. "Robbie, you're a genius!"

Robbie clicked his tongue and blinked. Yes.

And so, Mission: Meet Grandpa was born. Houston would be the best Jr. ASCAN in the program. He'd win the Challenges and gain mission patches for his flight suit, which was the official uniform for Jr. ASCANs. He'd come up with the best Final Mission idea ever, and then he'd send his grandfather an email to invite him to the presentation. That way, when Grandpa met him for the first time, he'd see Houston onstage, wearing proof of his many successes on his flight suit. He'd be so proud, he'd rush to meet him after the presentation was over. They'd shake hands, and Grandpa would tell Houston he had the right stuff. *You'll definitely be an astronaut someday*, he'd say. *No doubt about it.*

Houston had been dreaming of it for months, and now it was almost here.

"I can't believe I leave tomorrow," he said.

## Chapter 4 of book *Farther Than the Moon*

Robbie grunted. He curled his body tighter, leaning into Houston's side. Houston tipped his head against his brother's and breathed in the familiar scent of him. Vanilla nutrition shake, minty shampoo, and the subtle, sharp tang of urine—a sign he needed to have his underwear changed again soon. It was a scent uniquely Robbie, and even though he knew other people might think it was weird, Houston loved it. To him, Robbie smelled like home.

His brother reached for the iPad and Houston supported his arm.

You brother  
Take Robbie

"I wish I could," Houston said. He knew how much Robbie wanted to be a part of the JARP, too. How much he wanted to go to space and see the Moon and stars up close.

But Robbie was too young for the JARP. Kids had to be at least twelve. Robbie was only ten. And, as far as Houston could tell, the program didn't accept kids with disabilities like Robbie's. The Junior Astronaut Recruitment Program wasn't an educational program meant for kids of all interests and abilities, like Space Camp in Huntsville, Alabama, was. It was an actual recruitment program for NASA. The application process was long and hard and super competitive, just like the one for adult Astronaut Candidates. Kids who entered the JARP got top grades in math and science. They had to have a special interest in things like robotics, scuba diving, and coding. And they had to be in good physical shape. The program required Jr. ASCANs to run, climb, swim, lift. They were training to be real astronauts, after all. They had to be able to perform complicated and difficult physical tasks.

As smart and clever and determined as Robbie was, there were some things he couldn't do. Houston knew it frustrated him. It frustrated Houston, too. He'd love to train with his brother. But astronaut recruitment programs weren't built for people like Robbie.

Robbie groaned. He shoved the iPad away and chomped down on his fingers. He bit them so often that the skin around his knuckles was chapped and thick with calluses. Guilt cut through Houston's heart. He hated leaving Robbie behind. He knew he had to go and train hard enough for the both of them, though. How else could he keep his promise of taking him to space someday?

"Hold on," Houston said, standing. "I'll be right back."

He hurried to his room and grabbed the model of the lunar rover he'd finished that morning.

## Chapter 4 of book *Farther Than the Moon*

"I made this for you."

Robbie made a sucking sound in the back of his throat. Houston set the rover on Robbie's stomach. He blinked down at it. One of his hands floated above it, fingers gently grazing the gold satellite dish.

"Sorry you can't come with me, Robbie. I really wish you could."

Robbie grunted.

"I know this doesn't make up for it, really. But don't worry. I haven't forgotten my promise."

Robbie's brown eyes met Houston's. He blinked. *Yes.*

Houston nodded. "I know. We'll get to space someday. I promise. But first, I have to go to Texas."

He ran his fingers through Robbie's dark hair as he held in the words he hated most. The words Dad had said the night he left, when Robbie had typed *take Robbie* as Dad packed his truck with all the things he wanted. The words Houston had sworn he'd never say to Robbie himself.

*I have to go without you.*