

ROBERT KUNTZ

# MOON SWINDLER, MOON SHAKERS

TWO UNLIKELY PEOPLE WHO  
TRANSFORMED THE MOON



# Moon Swindler, Moon Shakers

Robert Kuntz

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## *Dedication*

To Harry and Maggie Kuntz, my mom and dad who taught me to read and gave me their love of stories.





# CHAPTER 1.

## DUMPSTER DIVING AND A LONG RIDE

*NASA Luna is accepting applications for spacesuit repair technician for a three-year term on the Moon Base. Must be experienced in nanotechnology design, micro-electronics, and titanium silk welding. Salary above industry standard with increases based on experience. Plus Moon bonus. Before applying, review Moon Rules. ~* **Job Opening Notice posted by NASA Luna in IEEE World Bulletin**

From the open window, Crandell heard drumming rain and sharp cracks of thunder. Hunger clenched his stomach. No one had work for him. Grocery dumpsters and restaurant bins had been frustratingly empty. He hadn't eaten in five days, the longest he could remember in his fifteen years. *Check the dumpsters at the spaceport.* He looked out the window of the fifty-story concrete block-riser. Thick gray rain obscured any sign of the tall launch gantries or squat, endless buildings of the Greater Detroit-Ford Space Launch Area.

The spaceport was dangerous. If they caught him, they'd ship him to a foster family. Crandell would hate that. When they paid people to be your family, they weren't family at all.

Hunger insisted. *Check the dumpsters. You won't get caught.*

Grabbing his collection cup and string-mesh scavenging bag, he slipped from his hiding place, ran down the corridor, and jumped into a capsule on the outside mag-lev lift pole. The clear quantiglass capsule, magnetically anchored a whisper away from the pole, plunged to the ground so quickly the outside world was a blur.

Crandell ran through the pelting rain to the spaceport's outer perimeter. Crouching in a doorway, he waited until a string of self-driving delivery vans pulled up at the gate. Sprinting through the downpour, he jumped on the rearmost van's back bumper.

He knew the spaceport. Before the elevator accident, his father had taken them to every tour and open house. His dad might have sold shoes, but he knew his science. And every time his dad had seen the security measures—cameras, heat detection sensors, drones circling overhead—he'd say, "Don't they know that's all useless when it rains?"

The vans rumbled through the outer gate toward the inner security fence. Lightning strobed. Thunder deafened him. Crandell jumped off the van and dashed through the drumming rain. The guards couldn't see him in this onslaught. Slipping from shadow to shadow, he reached the inner fence. In the downpour, the cameras wouldn't register him to trip an alarm. The drones wouldn't be flying. The heat-recognition sensors would not function. As far as he was concerned, the weather was perfect.



He wriggled under the fence and raced across the alley to the side of a long, tan building. Reaching the first dumpster, he threw open the cover and climbed in. All he found was deflated isogrid bags and cardboard for recycling. After clambering out of the dumpster, he sprinted along the building to the next one. Five dumpsters later, he'd barely covered half the distance along the mammoth Launch Staging Warehouse. Crandell could suck the nutrients out of an orange rind, but he found no food scraps, no remnants from anyone's lunch, no organic waste whatsoever.

The thunderstorm showed no sign of abating, so Crandell sprinted to another dumpster. Lifting the heavy lid against the rain, he heard a cow mooing.

Crandell froze. Wonder and disbelief surged through him like opposing tides. The cow lowed again. *It's not my dad*, he told himself. His father had entertained his three children with the high squeaky voice of dolphins, the snorting whinny of a horse, the extended mooing of a cow.

*No*, Crandell told himself firmly, *that's not Dad. It's a real cow.*

The cow mooed again, a slow, tired, complaint. *Why do they have a cow here?* Hunger pulled Crandell from the dumpster to the wide, corrugated warehouse door, open less than half a meter at the bottom. He squirmed through the gap. Inside the dimly lit warehouse, he looked past isogrid containers, shrink-wrapped bundles, and net-bagged supplies, until he spotted two heavy wooden crates, echoing from their lowing occupants.

Crandell had never milked a cow, but he was hungry enough to try. To the left of the crate, a crowbar leaned against the wall. He pried open the end of one crate and slipped through, shoving the wood back into place so no one could see evidence of his entry.

Glow bars at the top of the crate shed a dim yellow light. The red-brown beast was huge, warm, and smelly, standing woodenly with a vacant stare. *Does this cow even know I'm here?* Rayesthetic restraints that would inflate under pressure secured the beast.

Studying the scene through the shadows, Crandell located the udder. He maneuvered around the warm animal, crouched close enough to squeeze the teats, and shot milk into his cup. When it was a quarter full, he couldn't wait any longer. He raised it carefully and drank. The warm milk tasted like home.

He milked and drank, milked and drank. For the first time this month, he was full. He wormed his way from underneath the cow to stand beside her. She drifted off to sleep. *Is that normal? Do cows do that after they're milked?* He wavered on his feet and stifled a yawn. *There's no time for this. I have to get out of here.* But the deep weight of sleep spread through him. He slumped against the cow.

His body felt thick and stiff. His mind drifted into a dense cloud. Dimly, he heard the whirr of a haul bot. It stopped outside the crate. The crate tipped, shook, lifted. Vaguely, he thought, *This isn't safe.*

The bot's motor whined. The crate shook again, moving forward. He felt it being lowered. The crate

bumped the ground and settled. The bot whirred away. Crandell plunged into a deep sleep.

~\*~

Crandell roused to an ear-shattering roar. Everything shuddered, then shook furiously. Crandell thought he would fly apart. A great force lifted him and the cow, slowly for a moment, then thrust them upward. An immense pressure squeezed him against the floor. The shuddering intensified. In an instant, he felt as if he weighed as much as a block-riser. Rumbling forces pressed him into human laminate. He blacked out.

A jerk and a thud woke him. Countless wisps of cotton, weightless and warm, clogged his mind. A fuzzing thought tugged at him. *Did I dream about milking a cow?* Trying to brush away the mental fog, he moved his hand. It flew as though it had a life of its own, smacking against something hard and warm.

Jumbled thoughts crowded his mind. He was hungry. He wasn't dreaming. He wasn't on the ground. *What!* He flailed his arms, spinning and knocking against firm warmth. *It's a cow!* He groaned. *I drank a drugged cow's milk.* He was floating, weightless. *I'm not on Earth. What's going on?*

The crate shook. Beside him, the cow shuddered. He climbed against her to stand upright. *Which way is up?* The crate rumbled, jostling wildly. He grabbed the cow and held on. Suddenly, weight slid back into his body. The rumbling got louder, and then slowly faded

to a stop.

Something wasn't right. He had weight, but he didn't. Straw filled him, not bones. It felt as though he'd started to have weight, but far from enough. *It isn't real gravity...because I'm not on Earth. Could I be...no, that's crazy, impossible...but I don't have weight!*

Then nothing. No sound. No movement. *Are we stuck? Is something broken?* For a long time, nothing happened. He was trapped in the dark. With a cow. A huge jerk and the crate rasped against the floor. The cow stirred. The whirl of haul bots echoed. The crate jolted and lifted. Crandell clung to the restraints. The crate vibrated and then moved. After long, jostled minutes, the crate lowered, tapped against the ground, bounced upward, only to settle down again.

Crandell's mind snapped clear. *Got to get out. If these bots pile up other crates, I'll be trapped in here.* He grabbed the crowbar. As if with a mind of its own, it swung up, smacked the wood, bounced back at him, barely missing his head.

He pried the crate open and slipped out. A haul bot lumbered toward him carrying a large isogrid packet. The bot stopped, beeping and flashing its lights impatiently until Crandell moved aside. The bot lowered the isogrid against his crate.

Crandell's first step sent him bouncing up into the air. *Whoa!* He dropped the crowbar and flung his arms wide to keep from spinning. He gyrated helplessly, floating above piles of cargo before finally settling gently to the ground.

He had to be—there wasn't any other

explanation— *It isn't possible.* But he had no weight. He had to be on the Moon. *What will I do? How can I find food?* He took a deep breath and steadied himself. *You made it on the street, you can make it here. Just. Don't. Get. Caught.*

He stumble-walked until he reached an open space. In the huge, dimly lit warehouse, thick walls rose to the distant ceiling. Faint light gleamed from a wide, three-story-tall aluminum door. The weak air felt dry, all the moisture sucked out of it. He inhaled the heavy scent of oil, the odor of manure, and the foresty fragrance of pine. Around him, hauler bots whirled as they unloaded net-bagged supplies from a huge, battered silver Moon shuttle that would have barely fit through the warehouse door. The shuttle with the BlueNSpace logo scarred but still discernable, dripped water onto the gray-brown concrete. *I must have been on that one.* He wondered why the shuttle was wet. It couldn't have flown through rain landing on the Moon.

To his left, plastiform crates, shrink-wrapped pallets, and isogrid containers stood crowded in high piles. He climbed a stack of crates and scanned the vast warehouse. Below, stretched rows of cargo. Far overhead, metal girders supported the ceiling. No one was in sight.

A string of haul bots trundled beneath him, lowering their crates to the ground. He took a step and felt as if he could fly. He lowered to a crouch and gave a great leap, rocketing upwards. *Oh, no! Too much.* He thrust his hands above his head to shove off from a

girder that would have knocked him out. He descended slowly, as if the Moon was reluctant to have him return. A weird, amazing strangeness shivered in him. Too late, he realized he'd pushed off too hard. He was coming in slowly, but still too strong. He relaxed his knees so when he slammed into the floor, they took most of the shock. *This low-G stuff is dangerous. I'm lighter than on Earth, but all of me is still here.*

Cautiously, he jumped again. Soon, he was soaring, spinning in the air, taking in great ragged breaths, laughing, tumbling, floating like a dust mote in the dimly lit warehouse. He was swimming in air, and he couldn't get enough of it.

He jumped to the top of another stack of crates, then leapt toward the ceiling and grabbed a girder. Below him, square, rugged haul bots—with pallet forks or lift beds—kept unloading and stacking cargo in orderly piles. He whooped and gave himself a gentle shove downward, landing behind a tall stack of light green flexform loadpacks. He studied the labels: "Soil." "Seeds." "Irrigation lines." "Tilapia." "Chicken Feed." "Water."

Driven by thirst, Crandell reached toward that last loadpack, unclipped the pack lines, and freed the spigot. He opened it and guzzled water until his stomach felt bloated.

As he turned the spigot off, his mom's words, with their full Irish lilt, sounded in his mind. "Hydration for perspiration, boyo. If you'll be playin' ball in this sun, you see to your thirst. Am I talking biscuits to a bear?" And once again, he heard the piercing, unrelenting

song of “never.” He’d never hear his mother’s voice again. He’d never be wrapped in her sheltering hug. He’d never hear his father root for him when he stepped up to bat. He’d never see the impatient tap-tap-tapping of his sister’s foot as she stood on deck, or watch the slow grin slide across his brother’s face when he was about to steal a base. He would never—never—have a family again.

God had been real to Crandell’s parents. But if God was real, why had his family died? Deep sadness tumbled through him. The unyielding weight of grief dragged him down. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t pull in air.

“Aaugh!”

The unexpected voice startled him. Footsteps sounded. He shoved the memories away. He had to hide.

On the streets of Detroit, Crandell had learned that people rarely looked up. Cops did, and so did the rare person who paid close attention to their surroundings. But most people noticed only from their eye level to the ground. A gentle jump took Crandell to a low girder. Grabbing a stress bar, he swung into the shadows and crept along the girder to see who was coming.

## CHAPTER 2.

### *HIGH-G, DEEP CERTAINTY, AND A JOB OFFER*

*Your time on the Moon is about two things and two things only: survival and research. The Moon is dangerous: an absolute vacuum, brutally cold and bombarded with radiation, completely unfit for human life. Your survival demands that you accept restrictions unnecessary on Earth. Failure to abide by these restrictions endangers not only you, but everyone on the Moon. Those who cannot keep the Moon Rules will be sent back to Earth immediately. ~*

**Introduction to Moon Rules for Survival and Research; established 2044, revised 2051, 2067.**

*You can't have a doughnut*, Billy Jepler told himself for the tenth time. He crouched, stepping from the Detroit humidity to squeeze into the Moon shuttle. The narrow blue decking was clean, worn, and sturdy under his weight. He maneuvered his travel bag ahead of him through the low, nano-aluminum mesh tunnel and onto the manhole-sized circle that was the center platform of the shuttle's passenger level.

Over his decades at NASA, he'd stowed countless essentials in this bag. In the mountains of Peru, the bag had held a pouch of dried banana chips as a source of



potassium against altitude sickness. In China, it had contained a micro-tent that sheltered him from a Gobi desert sandstorm. In the slums of Antwerp, it had held an opal necklace that he'd brought to trade for a museum-ready collection of feathers from rare European birds. But through all that, nothing had been as important to him as the three dozen doughnuts now packed in his bag.

*William*, he told himself, wondering if he'd win the argument, *you must abstain from a double chocolate doughnut. And a cinnamon frosted, and the blueberry pecan.* Pertinaciously, he countered, *I should eat them now.* The G-forces would inevitably smash them flat.

He crammed his broad-shouldered, sixty-one-year-old body into seat number four and balanced his bag on his knees. He buckled the safety restraints and pressed his shoulders against the seat back, using the stretch his football coach had taught him at Columbia. *Coach would say, "No doughnuts,"* he told himself sternly. The nauts had told him about the effects of G-forces and weightlessness on stomachs. *You don't want to be the Mount Vesuvius of this trip.*

"Hi, Dr. Jepler."

A flight attendant stood before him in her bold BlueNSpace uniform. She was short enough she didn't have to duck her head in the low space. "I'll stow this for you." She resolutely tugged his travel bag from his grasp and slipped it into the bin overhead.

Billy sighed and ran his hand through his hair.

"I need to close your pod cover now," the attendant said. "You'll see the launch countdown on

the top right of your screen. It will take you fifteen minutes to complete your pre-launch. Pay attention to the Moon Rules. They take them seriously up there."

After he nodded, she went on. "At takeoff, your G-seat will protect you from most of the acceleration. You'll experience a little more than two Gs. According to your physical, you're in great shape, so that should be no problem. After the booster drops, you'll be weightless. Most people adjust with a few deep breaths. Use that refuse bag if you need it."

She looked at her slate. "You're scheduled for exercise on the deck below at liftoff plus two. You'll need to be back in your seat at liftoff plus three. I'll have a meal for you, if your stomach is ready." She paused and a look of concern crossed her face. "I'm sorry about the fire on *Galileo II*. I hope everyone is OK."

"Thank you," Billy said. "Some bad burns, but nothing major. FarSpace is working assiduously, monitoring the ship and guiding damage repair."

She nodded and closed the deep blue and white pod cover.

Billy swiped and stabbed his way through the pre-launch protocols. Then, in the brief moments before liftoff, his mind filled with his father's adamantine displeasure. "*William, this is a monumentally senseless undertaking. They don't need mushrooms on the Moon. You're squandering overwhelmingly more than you'll ever profit. Your unconsidered trades demonstrate again that you're a hopeless loser.*"

*They're not unconsidered,* he argued. In his mind, as

it had always been back home in New York, his father was not mollified. *"You've traded a cow for a handful of beans."*

Billy could never win arguments with his father. But he'd show him.

Finally, the clock reached zero. A roar shook the shuttle. His seat vibrated wildly. Suddenly, it felt as though a concrete wall was falling on him, pinning Billy to his seat. *Without the G-seat it's worse?* The vibrations exploded, threatening to shake all the organs from his body.

He was glad he hadn't eaten the doughnut.

*NASA is seeking breeding pairs of the following reptiles for the FarSpace Ship, Galileo III: black neck garter snake, blue tongued skink, parachute gecko, and side blotched lizard. Please contact Dr. Vincent Sólyom at NASA Houston. ~ Ad on Reptile Breeder's Web Center*

When the shuttle landed, Billy was on his phone in the middle of delicate negotiations to obtain ten-year-old mangrove trees for the *Galileo III*. The trees, and the swamp biome where they would grow, were an essential part of the ship's air and water purification systems.

By the time he eased himself out of the shuttle, the crew and other passengers were gone. He set his travel bag on the ground and stretched out his cramped limbs. Looking carefully around the Moon Base's main warehouse, he breathed a sigh of relief. The animal crates remained intact; loadpacks were neatly stacked; no plant boxes had broken open, scattering dirt. He grinned. *Dad, both the cows and beans are here. And they*

*are magic beans. You'll see.*

He took a first, wavering step from the shuttle, breathed in the cold, brittle air, and hoped the rest of the Moon Base was better insulated than this. Within the warehouse's gray, shadowed walls, bots scurried to their charging stations. The dry air smelled foreign, heavy with grease and oil.

He saw a wet spot beneath a loadpack of water and hurried toward it. In the low gravity, he shot up higher than he intended. His foot hit a crate, knocking him sideways. "Aaugh!" he shouted. He fell slowly enough that he had time to rotate his body and didn't land on his hip. He put out both hands to absorb the force of hitting the floor. Easing himself to his feet, he laughed. "I'm definitely an airfoot."

Newbies on the Moon were called "airfeet" because they bounced too high and landed too hard, wobbling and losing their balance when they walked. Billy was itching to see what it was like to jump in low-G. He shook his head. *Not now.* Taking care of the animals came first.

At the loadpack, he checked to see if it was leaking. *No.* Someone had freed the spigot and taken a drink. Was water rationing on the Moon so severe that people would steal his water?

When Billy Jepler was on a gray hunt, meeting disreputable traders for questionably legal undertakings, his situational awareness was superb. He always looked up. As he did, he was stunned to see a dim figure crouching in the rafters. *What's he doing here?* He studied the shadows, making out a thin

young man, a boy, really, obviously trying to hide. He looked afraid.

Little surprised Billy, but the boy in the rafters did.

*What's this kid doing on the Moon?* He must have stowed away on the shuttle. *What a gutsy thing to do! How would you do that?* Too bad the boy would immediately get sent back to Earth. NASA Luna monitored the Moon so completely this stowaway would be caught before he could leave the warehouse.

Billy felt sad for the boy. But this kid was trouble. *He has to go.* Billy didn't need any disruptions to his meeting with Dr. Negl. NASA's Luna administrator was already less than delighted that Billy was bringing a farm to the Moon.

Suddenly, as if a door had opened and he'd fallen into a new room, a deep, unshakable certainty filled him: the kid in the rafters would accomplish something essential on the Moon. And Billy was to help him.

*No, he protested. Don't saddle me with the kid.*

But there was no arguing with the certainty, even though his philosophy professor at Columbia had mocked him for it. He sighed. This certainty would bring trouble. Certainly. But he had learned to trust it.

On his first day at NASA, over thirty years ago, he'd found himself standing next to a tall, thin man with straight, sand-colored hair. Billy read his precise, hand-printed name tag: "Grant Jonathan Chapman." Suddenly, as if a bell had rung, Billy knew, with every atom in his being, that Grant Jonathan Chapman would become crucial for the future of NASA FarSpace. He wasn't even astounded that he knew this