

THE
SAM GUNN
OMNIBUS

BEN BOVA



THE SAM GUNN OMNIBUS

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SAM GUNN
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**Featuring every story ever written
about Sam Gunn, and then some**

BEN BOV



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in these stories are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE SAM GUNN OMNIBUS

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These tales are dedicated to the entrepreneurs who are striving to open the space frontier for all humankind— and make a few bucks in the process.

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A thing worth having
is a thing worth cheating for.

ATTRIBUTED TO W. C. FIELDS

It isn't easy to put all the tales of Sam Gunn together in any sequence that even vaguely resembles chronological order. Sam's various tales are spread all over the solar system (and even beyond) and span a lifetime filled with adventure, romance, and more than a little trickery.

I've done my best. I've sifted through all the stories about Sam Gunn and even added a couple of new ones. It's been tricky, though. In the pages of this book, Sam's life story is told from its beginning to the present moment. Please don't expect exact chronological order or a well-defined sequence of events. Sam is far too clever to be pinned down like an ordinary person.

All I can offer, at this point, is a quotation from a much better writer than I, Mr. Samuel Clemens, aka Mark Twain:

Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted;
persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons
attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.

I suggest you merely read the stories and enjoy them. Trying to make order out of the chaotic events of Sam Gunn's life can drive you to drink. That's one of the things that I like about Sam.

BEN

Naples, Florida

January 2000

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SAM GUNI
Omnibu

THE STORY OF SAM GUNN IS INEXTRICABLY INTERWOVEN with the story of a beautiful, vulnerable, and determined young woman. Knowing Sam, you would expect she was an object of his rabid testosterone-fed sex drive (or, as Shakespeare put it, the bottomless cistern of his lust).

But you'd be wrong.

She likes to be called Jade, although her name is actually Jane. Jane Avril Inconnu. Sometimes new acquaintances mistake that last name for Romanian, although her flame-red hair and dazzling green eyes speak of more northern and flamboyant lands. She will tolerate such misunderstandings—when there is some advantage to being tolerant.

She received her name from the Quebecois surgeon who adopted her as a foundling at the old original Moonbase, back when that precarious settlement was civilization's rugged frontier. There were no pediatricians on the Moon; the surgeon happened to be on duty when the female infant, red-faced and squalling, was discovered in the corridor just outside the base's small hospital. No more than a few days old, the infant had been placed in a plastic shipping container, neatly bundled and warmly blanketed. And abandoned. Who the baby's mother might be remained a mystery, even though Moonbase hardly supported more than two hundred men and women in those days, plus a handful of visitors.

Her adopted mother's name was Jane, the month was April, and *inconnu* is the French word for "unknown." So the orphaned baby girl became Jane Avril Inconnu, raised alone by the surgeon for the first four years of her life.

By the time the surgeon's five-year contract with Moonbase was completed and she was due to return to Montreal, the medical staff—which doted on the little girl—had discovered that Jane Avril suffered from a congenital bone defect, a rare inability to manufacture sufficient amounts of calcium. Neither exercise nor medicine could help. Although she could walk and run and play normally in the gentle gravity of the Moon, on Earth she would be a helpless cripple, confined to a wheelchair or a mechanical exoskeleton, in constant danger of snapping her brittle, fragile bones.

Her adopted mother bravely decided to remain with the child, but then the news came from Montreal that her own mother was gravely ill, dying. Torn between the generations, the woman returned to Earth, promising to return soon, soon. She never did. There were family obligations on Earth, and later a husband who wanted children of his own.

Jane Avril remained at Moonbase, orphaned once again, raised by a succession of medical personnel at the hospital. Some were warm and loving, some were distant and uncaring. A few were actually abusive now and then.

Moonbase grew, over those years, into the city called Selene. The frontier of civilization crept across the battered old face of the Moon and expanded into cislunar space, where great habitats were built in the dark emptiness to house hundreds of thousands of people. Explorers reached out to Mars, and then farther. Entrepreneurs, some wildly reckless, some patient and cunning, began to reap the

wealth of space. Fortunes were built on lunar mining, on power satellites to feed the energy hungry of Earth, on prospecting the metals and minerals of the asteroids.

Of all those daring and dashing fortune-seekers, the first, the most adventurous, the best known of them all was Sam Gunn. As she grew into young womanhood, Jane Avril heard endless stories about Sam Gunn and the fortunes he had found in space. Found and lost. For Sam was more impetuous and unpredictable than a solar storm. Long before Jane Avril acquired the nickname Jade, Sam Gunn was already a living legend.

She could not consider herself beautiful, despite the gorgeous red hair and those dazzling green eyes that gave her the sobriquet. She was small, just a shade over one hundred sixty-five centimeters tall. Her figure was slim, elfin, almost childlike. Her face was just a trifle too long and narrow to suit her, although she could smile very prettily when she wanted to. She seldom did.

Being raised as an orphan had built a hard shell of distrust around her. She knew from painful experience that no relationship ever lasted long, and it was foolish to open her heart to anyone.

Yet that heart of hers was a romantic one. Inside her protective crust was a yearning for adventure and love that would not die, no matter how sternly she tried to repress it. She dreamed of tall handsome men, bold heroes with whom she would travel to the ends of the solar system. She wanted with all her heart to get free of the dreary monotony of Selene, with its gray underground corridors and its unending sameness every day, year after year.

She knew that she was forever barred from Earth, even though she could see its blue beautiful globe shining at her in the dark lunar sky. Earth, with all its teeming billions of people and its magnificent cities and oceans of water so deep and blue and raging wild. Selene was a cemetery by comparison. She had to get away, to fly free, anywhere. If she could never set foot on Earth, there were still the great habitats at the La-grangian points, and the bridge ships plying out toward Mars, the rugged frontier of the Asteroid Belt, and beyond, to the deadly beautiful dangers of the gas giant worlds.

Such were her dreams. The best she could do, though, was to get a job as a truck driver up on the dusty dead lunar surface.

But still she dreamed. And waited for her opportunity.

THE SPRING-WHEELED TRUCK ROLLED TO A SILENT STOP ON the Mare Nubium. The fine dust kicked up by its six wheels floated lazily back to the mare's soil. The hatch to the truck cab swung upward, and a space-suited figure climbed slowly down to the lunar surface, clumped a dozen ponderously careful steps, then turned back toward the truck.

“Yeah, this is the spot. The transponder's beeping away, all right.”

At first Jade had been excited by her work as a truck driver. Even inside a space suit, being out on the wide-open surface of the Moon, beneath the solemn eyes of the unblinking stars, was almost like being able to run wild and free in comparison to the dreariness of Selene's underground corridors. But now she had been at the job for nearly a year. The excitement had worn away, eroded as inevitably as the meteor-pitted rocks of the Sea of Clouds.

And always in that dead-black sky there hung the glowing jewel of Earth, tantalizing, beautiful, forever out of her reach.

She and the hoist operator (male and married) clambered down from the cab, bulbous and awkward-looking in their bulky space suits. Jade turned a full three hundred sixty degrees, scanning the scene through the gold-tinted visor of her suit's bubble helmet. There was nothing to be seen except the monotonous gray plain, pockmarked by craters like an ancient, savage battlefield that had been petrified into solid stone long eons ago.

“Merde, you can't even see the ringwall from here!” she exclaimed.

“That's what he wanted,” came the voice of their supervisor through her helmet earphones. “To be out in the open, without a sign of civilization in sight. He picked this spot himself, you know.”

“Helluva place to want to be buried,” said the hoist operator.

“That's what he specified in his will. Come on, let's get to work. I want to get back to Selene City before the sun goes down.”

It was a local joke: the three space-suited workers had more than two hundred hours before sunset.

Grunting even in the gentle lunar gravity, they slid the gleaming sarcophagus from the back of the truck and placed it softly on the roiled, dusty ground. It was made of stainless steel, delicately inscribed in gold by the solar system's most famous sculptress. At one end, in tastefully small lettering, was a logo: *S. Gunn Enterprises, Unlimited*.

The supervisor carefully paced to the exact spot where the tiny transponder lay blinking, and used his hand laser to draw an exact circle around it. Then he sprayed the stony ground inside the circle with the blue-white flame of a plasma torch. Meanwhile, Jade helped the hoist operator swing the four-meter-high crate down from the truck bed to the ground next to the sarcophagus.

“Ready for the statue?” Jade asked.

The supervisor said nothing as he inspected his own work. The hot plasma had polished the stony ground. Jade and the hoist operator heard him muttering over their helmet earphones as he used the hand laser to check the polished ground's dimensions. Satisfied, he helped them drag the gold-filigreed sarcophagus to its center and slide it into place over the transponder.

“A lot of work to do for a dead man.”

“He wasn't just any ordinary man.”

“It's still a lot of work. Why in hell couldn't he be recycled like everybody else?” the hoist operator complained.

“He's not in the sarcophagus, dumbskull,” snapped the supervisor. “Don't you know any goddamned thing?”

“He's not... ?”

Jade had known that the sarcophagus was empty, symbolic. She was surprised that her coworker didn't. Some people pay no attention to anything, she told herself. I'll bet he doesn't know anything at all about Sam Gunn.

“Sam Gunn,” said the supervisor, “never did things like everybody else. Not in his whole cussed life. Why should he be like the rest of us in death?”

They chattered back and forth through their suit radios as they uncrated the big package. Once they had removed all the plastic and the bigger-than-life statue stood sparkling in the sunlight, they stepped back and gaped at it.

“It's glass!”

“Christ, I never saw any statue so damned big.”

“Must have cost a fortune to get it here. Two fortunes!”

“He had it done at Island One, I heard. Brought the sculptress in from the Belt and paid her enough to keep her at L-4 for two whole years. God knows how many times she tried to cast a statue this big and failed, even in low gee.”

“I didn't know you could make a glass statue this big.”

“In micro-gee you can. It's hollow. If we were in air, I could ping it with my finger and you'd hear it ring.”

“Crystal.”

“That's right.”

Jade laughed softly.

“What’s so funny?” the supervisor asked.

“Who else but Sam Gunn would have the gall to erect a crystal statue to himself and then have it put out in the middle of this godforsaken emptiness, where nobody’s ever going to see it? It’s a monument to himself, for himself. What ego! What monumental ego.”

The supervisor chuckled, too. “Yeah. Sam had an ego, all right. But he was a smart little SOB, too.”

“You knew him?” Jade asked.

“Sure. Knew him well enough to tell you that he didn’t pick this spot for his tomb just for the sake of his ego. He was smarter than that.”

“What was he like?”

“When did you know him?” the hoist operator asked.

“Come on, we’ve still got work to do. He wants the statue positioned exactly as he stated in his will, with its back toward Selene and the face looking up toward Earth.”

“Yeah, okay, but when did you know him, huh?”

“Oh golly, years ago. Decades ago. When the two of us were just young pups. The first time either of us came here, back in—Lord, it’s thirty years ago. More.”

“Tell us about it. Was he really the rogue that the history disks say he was? Did he really do all the things they say?” Jade found to her surprise that she was eager to know.

“He was a phony!” the hoist operator snapped. “Everybody knows that. A helluva showman, sure, but he never did half the stuff he took credit for. Nobody could have, not in one lifetime.”

“He lived a pretty intense life,” said the supervisor. “If it hadn’t been for that black hole he’d still be running his show from here to Titan.”

“A showman. That’s what he was.” “What was he like?” Jade asked again.

So, while the two young workers struggled with the huge, fragile crystal statue, the older man sat himself on the lip of the truck’s hatch and told them what he knew about the first time Sam Gunn had come to the Moon.

THE SKIPPER USED THE TIME-HONORED CLICHE. HE SAID, "Houston, we have a problem here."

There were eight of us, the whole crew of Artemis IV, huddled together in the command module. After six weeks of living on the Moon, the module smelled like a pair of unwashed gym socks. With woman President, the space agency figured it would be smart to name the second round of lunar exploration after a female: Artemis was Apollo's sister. Get it?

But it had just happened that the computer that made the crew selections for Artemis IV picked all men. Six weeks without even the sight of a woman, and now our blessed-be-to-God return module refused to light up. We were stranded. No way to get back home.

As usual, Capcom in Houston was the soul of tranquility. "Ah, A-IV, we read you and copy that the return module is no-go. The analysis team is checking the telemetry. We will get back to you soonest."

It didn't help that Capcom, that shift, was Sandi Hemmings, the woman we all lusted after. Among the eight of us, we must have spent enough energy dreaming about cornering Sandi in zero gravity to propel each of us right back to Houston. Unfortunately, dreams have a very low specific impulse, and we were still stuck on the Moon, a quarter-million miles from the nearest woman.

Sandi played her Capcom duties strictly by the book, especially since all our transmissions were taped for later review. She kept the traditional Houston poker face, but she managed to say, "Don't worry, boys. We'll figure it out and get you home."

Praise God for small favors.

We had spent hours checking and rechecking the cursed return module. It was engineer's hell: everything checked but nothing worked. The thing just sat there like a lump of dead metal. No electrical power. None. Zero. The control board just stared at us cold and glassy-eyed as a banker listening to your request for an unsecured loan. We had pounded it. We had kicked it. In our desperation we had even gone through the instruction manual, page by page, line by line. Zip. Zilch. The bird was dead.

When Houston got back to us, six hours after the Skipper's call, it was the stony unsmiling image of the mission coordinator glowering at us as if we had deliberately screwed up the return module. He told us:

"We have identified the problem, Artemis IV. The return module's main electrical power supply has malfunctioned."

That was like telling Othello that he was a Moor.

"We're checking out bypasses and other possible fixes," Old Stone Face went on. "Sit tight, we'll get back to you."

The Skipper gave a patient sigh. “Yes, sir.”

“We ain’t going anyplace,” said a whispered voice, just loud enough to be heard. Sam’s.

The problem, we finally discovered, was caused by a micrometeoroid, no less. A little grain of sand that just happened to roam through the solar system for four and a half billion years and then decided to crash-dive itself into the main fuel cell of our return module’s power supply. It was so tiny that it didn’t do any visible damage to the fuel cell; just hurt it enough to let it discharge electrically for most of the six weeks we had been on the Moon. And the two other fuel cells, sensing the discharge through the module’s idiot computer, tried to recharge their partner for six weeks. The result: all three of them were dead and gone by the time we needed them.

It was Sam who discovered the pinhole in the fuel cell, the eighteenth time we checked out the power supply. I can remember his exact words, once he realized what had happened: “Shit!”

Sam was a feisty little guy who would have been too short for astronaut duty if the agency hadn’t lowered the height requirements so that women could join the corps. He was a good man, a whiz with a computer and a born tinkerer who liked to rebuild old automobiles and then race them on abandoned freeways whenever he could scrounge up enough old-fashioned petrol to run them. The Terror of Cle Lake, we used to call him. The Texas Highway Patrol had other names for him. So did the agency administrators; they cussed near threw him out of the astronaut corps at least half a dozen times.

But we all liked Sam, back in those days, as we went through training and then blasted off for our first mission on the Moon. He was funny; he kept us laughing. And he did the things and said the things that none of the rest of us had the guts to do or say.

The Skipper loved Sam a little less than the rest of us, especially after six weeks of living in each other’s dirty laundry. Sam had a way of *almost* defying any order he received. He reacted very poorly to authority figures. Our Skipper, Lord love him, was as stiff-backed an old-school authority figure as any of them. He was basically a good joe, and I’m cursed if I can remember his real name. But his big problem was that he had memorized the rule book and tried never to deviate from it.

Well, anyway, there we were, stranded on the lunar surface after six weeks of hard work. Our task had been to make a semipermanent underground base out of prefabricated modules that had been, as the agency quaintly phrased it, “landed remotely on the lunar regolith in a series of carefully coordinated unmanned logistics missions.” In other words, they had dropped nine different module packages over a fifty-square kilometer area of Mare Nubium and we had to find them all, drag them to the site that Houston had picked for Base Gamma, set them up properly, scoop up enough of the top layers of soil to cover each module and the connecting tunnels to a depth of 0.9144 meters (that’s three feet in English), and then link all the wiring, plumbing, heating and air circulation units. Which we had done, adroitly and efficiently, and now that our labors were finished and we were ready to leave—no go. Too bad we hadn’t covered the return module with 0.9144 meters of lunar soil; that would have protected the fuel cells from that sharpshooting micrometeoroid.

The Skipper decided it would be bad procedure to let us mope around and brood.

“I want each of you to run a thorough inventory of all your personal supplies: the special foods you’ve brought with you, your spare clothing, entertainment kits, everything.”

“That’ll take four minutes,” Sam muttered, loud enough for us all to hear him. The eight of us were crammed into the command module again, eight guys squeezed into a space built for three. It was barely high enough to stand in, and the metal walls and ceiling always felt cold to the touch. Sam was pressed in with the guys behind me; I was practically touching noses with the Skipper. The guys in back giggled at Sam’s wisecrack. The Skipper scowled.

“Goddammit Gunn, can’t you behave seriously for even a minute? We’ve got a real problem here.”

“Yessir,” Sam replied. If he hadn’t been squeezed in so tightly I’m sure he would have made a snappy salute. “I’m merely attempting to keep morale high, sir.”

The Skipper made an unhappy snorting noise, and then told us that we would spend the rest of the shift checking out *all* the supplies that were left: not just our personal stuff, but the mission’s supplies of food, the nuclear reactor, the water recycling system, equipment of all sorts, air....

We knew it was busywork, but we had nothing else to do. So we wormed our way out of the command module and crawled through the tunnels toward the other modules that we had laid out and then covered with bulldozed soil. It was a neat little buried base we had set up, for later explorers to use. I got a sort of claustrophobic feeling just then, that this buried base might turn into a mass grave for eight astronauts.

I was dutifully heading back for barracks module A—where four of us had our bunks and personal gear—to check out my supplies, as the Skipper had ordered. Sam snaked up beside me. Those tunnels back in those days, were prefabricated Earthside to be laid out once we got to the construction site. I think they were designed by midgets. You couldn’t stand up in them: they were too low. You had to really crawl along on hands and knees if you were normal size. Sam was able to shuffle through them on bent knees, knuckle-walking like a young chimpanzee. He loved those tunnels.

“Hey, wait up,” he hissed to me.

I stopped.

“Whattaya think will get us first, the air giving out or we starve to death?”

He was grinning cheerfully. I said, “I think we’re going to poison the air with methane. We’ll fart ourselves to death in another couple of days.”

Sam’s grin widened. “C’mon ... I’m setting up a pool on the computer. I hadn’t thought of air pollution. You wanna make a bet on that?” He started to King-Kong down the shaft to the right, toward the computer and life-support module. If I had had the space I would have shrugged. Instead, I followed him there.

Three of the other guys were in the computer module, huddled around the display screen like Boy Scouts around a campfire.

“Why aren’t you checking out the base’s supplies, like the Skipper said,” I asked them.

“We are, Straight Arrow,” replied Mickey Lee, our refugee from Chinatown. He tapped the computer screen. “Why go sorting through all that junk when the computer already has it listed in alphabetical order for us?”

That wasn’t what the Skipper wanted and we all knew it. But Mickey was right. Why bother with busywork? We wrote down lists that would make the Skipper happy. By hand. If we had let the computer print out the lists, Skip would have gotten wise right away.

While we scribbled away, copying what was on the screen, we talked over our basic situation.

“Why the hell can’t we use the nuke to recharge the fuel cells?” Julio Marx asked. He was our token Puerto Rican Jew, a tribute to the space agency’s Equal Opportunity employment policy. Julio was also a crackerjack structural engineer who had saved my life the day I had started to unfasten my helmet just when one of those blessed prefab tunnels had cracked its airlock seal. But that’s another story.

Sam gave Julio a sorrowful stare. “The two systems are incompatible, Jules. Two separate teams of engineers designed them and none of the geniuses in the labs ever thought we might have to run one off the other in an emergency.”

Julio cast an unbelieving glance at Sam. So Sam grinned and launched into the phoniest Latino accent you ever heard. “The nuclear theeng, man, it got too many volts for the fuel cells. Like, you plug the nukie to the fuel cells, man, you make a beeg boom an’ we all go to dat beeg San Juan in the sky. You better steek to pluckin’ chickens, man, an’ leave the eelectreecity alone.”

Julio, who towered a good inch and a half over Sam, laughed good-naturedly and answered, “Okay Shorty, I dig.”

“Shorty! Shorty?” Sam’s face went red. “All right, that’s it. The hell with the betting pool. I’m gonna let you guys die of boredom. Serve you right.”

We made a big fuss and soothed his feathers and cajoled him into setting up the pool. With a great show of hurt feelings and reluctant but utterly selfless nobility, Sam pushed Mickey Lee out of the chair in front of the computer terminal and began playing the keyboard like a virtuoso pianist. Within a few minutes the screen was displaying a list of the possible ways for us to die, with Sam’s swiftly calculated odds next to each entry. At the touch of a button the screen displayed a graph showing how the odds for each mode of dying changed as time went on.

Suffocation, for example, started off as less than a one percent probability. But within a month the chances began to rise fairly steeply. “The air scrubbers need replacement filters,” Sam explained, “and we’ll be out of ‘em inside of two more weeks.”

“They’ll have us out of here in two weeks, for Christ’s sake,” Julio said.

“Or drop fresh supplies for us,” said Ron Avery, the taciturn pilot we called Cowboy because of his lean, lanky build and slow western drawl.

“Those are the odds,” Sam snapped. “The computer does not lie. Pick your poison and place your bets.”

I put fifty bucks down on Air Contamination, not telling the other guys about my earlier conversation with Sam. Julio took Starvation, Mickey settled on Dehydration (Lack of Water) and Cowboy picked Murder—which made me shudder.

“What about you, Sam?” I asked.

“I’ll wait till the other guys have a chance,” he said.

“You gonna let the Skipper in on this?” asked Julio.

Sam shook his head. “If I tell him ...”

“I’ll tell him,” Cowboy volunteered, with a grim smile. “I’ll even let him have Murder, if he wants it. I can always switch to Suicide.”

“Droll fellow,” said Sam.

“Well, hell,” Cowboy insisted, “if a feller takes Suicide he can always make sure he wins just by killing himself, can’t he now?”

It was one of those rare occasions when Sam had no reply. He simply stared at Cowboy in silence.

Well, you probably read about the mission in your history classes. Houston was supporting three separate operations on the Moon at the same time and they were stretched to the limit down there. Old Stone Face promised us a rescue flight in a week. But they had a problem with the booster when they tried to rush things on the launch pad too much and the blessed launch had to be put back a week, then another week. They sent an unmanned supply craft to us, of course, but the descent stage got gummed up. Our fresh food, air filters and water supply wound up orbiting the Moon fifty miles over our heads.

Sam calculated the odds against all these foul-ups and came to the conclusion that Houston was working overtime to kill us. “Must be some kind of an experiment,” he told us. “Maybe they need some martyrs to make people more aware of the space program.”

Cowboy immediately asked if that fell under the category of Murder. He was intent on winning the pool, even if it killed him.

We learned afterward that Houston was deep in trouble because of us. The White House was firing people right and left, Congressional committees were gearing up to investigate the fiasco, and the CIA was checking out somebody’s crackbrained idea that the Japanese were behind all our troubles. Or

maybe Arianespace, the European space company.

Meanwhile, we were stranded on the Mare Nubium with nothing much to do but let our beards grow and hope for sinus troubles that would cut off our ability to sense odors.

Old Stone Face was magnificent, in his unflinching way. He was on the line to us every day, despite the fact that his superiors in Houston and Washington were either being fired directly by the President herself or roasted over the simmering fires of media criticism. There must have been a zillion reporters at Mission Control by the second week of our marooning. We could *feel* the hubbub and tension whenever we talked with Stony.

“The countdown for your rescue flight is proceeding on an accelerated schedule,” he told us. It would never occur to him to say, *We’re hurrying as fast as we can*. “Liftoff is now scheduled for 0700 hours on the twenty-fifth.”

None of us needed to look at a calendar to know that the twenty-fifth was seventeen days away. Sam’s betting pool was looking more serious by the hour. Even the Skipper had finally taken the plunge: Suffocation.

If it weren’t for Sandi Hemmings we might all have gone crazy. She took over as Capcom during the night shift, when most of the reporters and the agency brass were either asleep or drinking away their troubles. She gave us the courage and desire to pull through, partly by just smiling at us and looking female enough to *make* us want to survive, but mainly by giving us the straight info with no nonsense.

“They’re in deep trouble over at Kennedy,” she would tell us. “They’ve had to go on triple shifts and call up boosters that they didn’t think they would need until next year. Some Senator in Washington is yelling that we ought to ask the Russians or the Japanese to help us out.”

“As if either of them had upper stages that could make it to the Moon without six months worth of modification work,” one of our guys grumbled.

“Well,” Sandi said with her brightest smile, “you’ll all be heroes when you finally get back here. The women will be standing in line to admire you.”

“You won’t have to stand in line, Sandi,” Cowboy answered, in a rare burst of words. “You’ll always be number one with us.”

The others crowded into the command module added their heartfelt agreement.

Sandi laughed, undaunted by the prospect of having the eight of us grabbing for her. “I hope you shave first,” she said.

Remember, she could see us but she couldn’t smell us.

A night or two later she spent hours reading to us the suggestions made by the Houston medical team on how to stretch out our dwindling supplies of food, water, and air. They boiled down to one

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