

ACTS OF GOD

Ben Bova

WHO ELSE BUT SAM GUNN WOULD SUE THE POPE?

I'd known Sam since we were both astronauts with NASA, riding the old shuttle to the original Mac Dac Shack—but sue the Pope? That's Sam.

At first I thought it was a joke, or at least a grandstand stunt. Then I began to figure that it was just the latest of Sam's ploys to avoid marrying me. I'd been chasing him for years, subtly at first, but once I'd retired from the Senate, quite openly.

It got to be a game that we both enjoyed. At least, I did. It was fun to see the panicky look on Sam's Huck Finn face when I would bring up the subject of marriage.

"Aw, come on, Jill," he would say. "I'd make a lousy husband. I like women too much to marry one of 'em."

I would smile my most sphinxlike smile and softly reply, "You're not getting any younger, Sam. You need a good woman to look after you."

And he'd arrange to disappear. I swear, his first expedition out to the asteroid belt was as much to get away from me as to find asteroids for mining. He came close to getting himself killed then, but he created the new industry of asteroid mining—and just about wiped out the metals and minerals markets in most of the resource-exporting nations on Earth. That didn't win him any friends, especially among the governments of those nations and the multinational corporations that fed off them.

I still had connections into the Senate Intelligence Committee in those days, and I knew that at least three southern hemisphere nations had put out contracts on Sam's life. To say nothing of the big multinationals. It was my warnings that saved his scrawny little neck.

Sam lost the fortune he made on asteroid mining, of course. He'd made and lost fortunes before that, it was nothing new to him. He just went into other business lines; you couldn't keep him down for long.

He was running a space freight operation when he sued the Pope. And the little sonofagun knew that I'd be on the International Court of Justice panel that heard his suit.

"Senator Meyers, may I have a word with you?" My Swedish secretary looked very upset. He was always very formal, always addressed me by my old honorific, the way a governor of a state would be called "Governor" even if he's long retired or in jail or whatever.

"What's the matter, Hendrick?" I asked him.

Hendrick was in his office in The Hague, where the World Court is headquartered. I was alone in my house in Nashua, sipping at a cup of hot chocolate and watching the winter's first snow sifting through the big old maples on my front lawn, thinking that we were going to have a white Christmas despite the greenhouse warming. Until Hendrick's call came through, that is. Then I had to look at his distressed face on my wall display screen.

"We have a very unusual . . . situation here," said Hendrick, struggling to keep himself calm. "The chief magistrate has asked me to call you."

From the look on Hendrick's face, I thought somebody must be threatening to unleash nuclear war, at least.

"A certain . . . person," Hendrick said, with conspicuous distaste, "has entered a suit against the Vatican."

"The Vatican!" I nearly dropped my hot chocolate. "What's the basis of the suit? Who's entering it?"

"The basis is apparently over some insurance claims. The litigant is an American citizen acting on behalf of the nation of Ecuador. His name is"—Hendrick looked down to read from a document that I could not see on the screen—"Samuel S. Gunn, Esquire."

"Sam Gunn?" I did drop the cup; hot chocolate all over my white corduroy slacks and the hooked rug my great-grandmother had made with her very own arthritic fingers.

Sam was operating out of Ecuador in those days. Had himself a handsome suite of offices in the presidential palace, no less. I drove through the slippery snow to Boston and took the first Clipper out; had to use my ex-Senatorial and World Court leverage to get a seat amidst all the jovial holiday travelers.

I arrived in Quito half an hour later. Getting through customs with my one hastily packed travel bag took longer than the flight. At least Boston and Quito are in the same time zone; I didn't have to battle jet lag.

"Jill!" Sam smiled when I swept into his office, but the smile looked artificial to me. "What brings you down here?"

People say Sam and I look enough alike to be siblings. Neither Sam nor I believe it. He's short, getting pudgy, keeps his rusty red hair cropped short. Shifty eyes, if you ask me. Mine are a steady brown. I'm just about his height, and the shape of my face is sort of round, more or less like his. We both have a sprinkle of freckles across our noses. But there all resemblance—physical and otherwise—definitely ends.

"You know damned well what brings me down here," I snapped, tossing my travel bag on one chair and plopping myself in the other, right in front of his desk.

Sam had gotten to his feet and started around the desk, but one look at the blood in my eye and he retreated back to his own swivel chair. He had built a kind of platform behind the desk to make himself seem taller than he really was.

He put on his innocent little boy face. "Honest, Jill, I haven't the foggiest idea of why you're here. Christmas vacation?"

"Don't be absurd."

"You didn't bring a justice of the peace with you, did you?"

I had to laugh. Every time I asked myself why in the ever-loving blue-eyed world I wanted to marry Sam Gunn, the answer always came down to that. Sam made me laugh. After a life of grueling work as an astronaut and then the tensions and power trips of Washington politics, Sam was the one man in the world who could make me see the funny side of everything. Even when he was driving me to distraction, we both had grins on our faces.

"I should have brought a shotgun," I said, trying to get serious.

"You wouldn't do that," he said, with that impish grin of his. Then he added a worried, "Would you?"

"Where did you get the bright idea of suing the Vatican?"

"Oh, that!" Sam visibly relaxed, eased back in his chair and swiveled around from side to side a little.

"Yes, that," I snapped. "What kind of a brain-dead nincompoop idea is that?"

"Nincompoop?" He looked almost insulted. "Been a long time since I heard that one."

"What's going on, Sam? You know a private citizen can't sue a sovereign state."

"Sure I know that. I'm not suing the Vatican. The sovereign nation of Ecuador is suing. I'm merely acting as their representative, in my position as CEO of Ecuador National Space Systems."

I sank back in my chair, thinking fast. "The Vatican isn't a party to the International Court of Justice's protocols. Your suit is null and void, no matter who the plaintiff may be."

"Christ, Jill, you sound like a lawyer."

"You can't sue the Vatican."

Sam sighed and reached out one hand toward the keyboard on his desk. He tapped at it with one finger, then pointed to the display screen on the wall.

The screen filled with print, all legalese of the densest kind. But I recognized it. The Treaty of Katmandu, the one that ended the three-way biowar between India, China, and Pakistan. The treaty that established the International Peacekeeping Force and gave it global mandatory powers.

"`All nations are required to submit grievances to the International Court of Justice,'" Sam quoted from the treaty, "'whether they are signatories to this instrument or not.'"

I knew it as well as he did. "That clause is in there to prevent nations from using military force," I said.

Sam gave a careless shrug. "Regardless of why it's in there, it's there. The World Court has jurisdiction over every nation in the world. Even the Vatican."

"The Vatican didn't sign the treaty."

"Doesn't matter. The treaty went into effect when two-thirds of the membership of the UN signed it," Sam said. "And any nation that doesn't obey it gets the Peacekeepers in their face."

"Sam, you can't sue the Pope!"

He just gave me his salesman's grin. "The nation of Ecuador has filed suit against the Vatican State. The World Court has to hear the case. It's not just my idea, Jill—it's the law."

The little sonofabitch was right.

I expected Sam would invite me to dinner. He did, and then some. Sam wouldn't hear of my staying at a hotel; he had already arranged for a guest suite for me in the presidential palace. Which gave the lie to his supposed surprise when I had arrived at his office, of course. He knew I was coming. It sort of surprised me, though. I wouldn't have thought that he'd want me so close to him. He had always managed to slip away when I'd pursued him before. This time he ensconced me in presidential splendor in the same building where he was sleeping.

I should have been suspicious. I've got to admit that, instead, I sort of half thought that maybe Sam was getting tired of running away from me. Maybe he wanted me to be near him.

He did. But for his own reasons, of course.

When we ate dinner that evening it was with the president of Ecuador himself: Carlos Pablo Francisco Esperanza de Rivera. He was handsome, haughty, and kind of pompous. Wore a military uniform with enough braid to buckle the knees of a Ukranian weightlifter. Very elegant silver hair. A noble profile with a distinguished Castilian nose.

"It is an extremely serious matter," he told me, in Harvard-accented English. "We do not sue the head of Holy Mother Church for trivial reasons."

The fourth person at the table was a younger man, Gregory Molina. He was dark and intense, the smoldering Latino rebel type. Sam introduced him as the lawyer who was handling the case for him.

We sat at a sumptuous table in a small but elegant dining room. Crystal chandelier, heavy brocade napkins, damask tablecloth, gold-rimmed dishes, and tableware of solid silver. Lavish Christmas trimmings on the windows; big holiday bows and red-leaved poinsettias decorating the dining table.

Ecuador was still considered a poor nation, although as the Earthbound anchor of Sam's space operations there was a lot of money flowing in. Most of it must be staying in the presidential palace, I thought.

Once the servants had discreetly taken away our fish course and deposited racks of roast lamb before us, I said, "The reason I came here is to see if this matter can be arbitrated without actually going to court."

"Of course!" said el Presidente. "We would like nothing better."

Sam cocked a brow. "If we can settle this out of court, fine. I don't really want to sock the Pope if we can avoid it."

Molina nodded, but his burning eyes told me he'd like nothing better than to get the Pope on the witness stand.

"I glanced through your petition papers on the flight down here," I said. "I don't see what your insurance claims have to do with the Vatican."

Sam put his fork down. "Over the past year and a half, Ecuador National Space Systems has suffered three major accidents: A booster was struck by lightning during launch operations and forced to ditch in the ocean; we were lucky that none of the crew was killed."

"Why were you launching into stormy weather?" I asked.

"We weren't!" Sam placed a hand over his heart, like a little kid swearing he was telling the truth. "Launchpad weather was clear as a bell. The lightning strike came at altitude, over the Andes, out of an empty sky."

"A rare phenomenon," said Molina. "The scientists said it was a freak of nature."

Sam resumed, "Then four months later one of our unmanned freight carriers was hit by a micrometeor and exploded while it was halfway to our lunar mining base. We lost the vehicle and its entire cargo."

"Seventy million dollars, US," Molina said.

President de Rivera's eyes filled with tears.

"And just six months ago a lunar quake collapsed our mine in the ringwall of Aristarchus."

I hadn't known that. "Was anyone killed?"

"The operation was pretty much automated. A couple technicians were injured," Sam said. "But we lost three mining robots."

"At sixteen million dollars apiece," Molina added. The president dabbed at his eyes with his napkin.

"I don't see what any of this has to do with the Vatican," I said.

The corners of Sam's mouth turned down. "Our mother-loving insurance carrier refused to cover any of those losses. Claimed they were all acts of God, not covered by our accident policy."

I hadn't drunk any of the wine in the crystal goblet before me, so there was no reason for me to be slow on the uptake. Yet I didn't see the association with the Vatican.

"Insurance policies always have an 'Acts of God' clause," I said.

"Okay," Sam said, dead serious. "So if our losses were God's fault, how do we get Him to pay what He owes us?"

"Him?" I challenged.

"Her," Sam snapped back. "It. Them. I don't care."

President de Rivera steepled his long, lean fingers before his lips, and said, "For the purposes of our discussion, and in keeping with ancient tradition, let us agree to refer to God as Him." And he smiled his handsome smile at me.

"Okay," I said, wondering how much he meant by that smile. "We'll call Her Him."

Molina snickered and Sam grinned. El Presidente looked puzzled; either he didn't appreciate my humor, or he didn't understand it.

Sam got back to his point. "If God's responsible for our losses, then we want to get God to pay for them. That's only fair."

"It's silly," I said. "How are you—"

Sam's sudden grin cut me off. "The Pope is considered to be God's personal representative on Earth, isn't he?"

"Only by the Roman Catholics."

"Of which there are more than one billion in the world," Molina said.

"The largest religion on Earth," said the president.

"It's more than that," Sam maintained. "Nobody else claims to be the personal representative of God. Only the Pope, among the major religious leaders. One of his titles is 'the vicar of Christ,' isn't it?"

The two men nodded in unison.

"The Catholics believe that Christ is God, don't they?" Sam asked.

They nodded again.

"And Christ—God Himself—personally made St. Peter His representative here on Earth."

More nods.

"And the Pope is Peter's descendant, with all the powers and responsibilities that Peter had. Right?"

"Exactly so," murmured el Presidente.

"So if we want to sue God, we go to his personal representative, the Pope." Sam gave a self-satisfied nod.

Only Sam Gunn would think of such a devious, convoluted scheme.

"We cannot sue the Pope personally," Molina pointed out, as earnest as a missionary, "because he is technically and legally the head of a state: the Vatican. A sovereign cannot be sued except by his own consent; that is ancient legal tradition."

"So you want to sue the state he heads," I said. "The Vatican. Yes."

"And since an individual or corporation can't sue a state, the nation of Ecuador is entering the suit."

Sam smiled like a jack-o'-lantern. "Now you've got it."

I picked my way through the rest of the dinner in stunned silence. I couldn't believe that Sam would go through with something so ridiculous, yet there he was sitting next to the president of Ecuador and a

fervent young lawyer who seemed totally intent on hauling the Pope before the World Court.

I wondered if the fact that the present Pope was an American—the first US cardinal to be elected Pope—had anything to do with the plot hatching inside Sam's shifty, twisted, Machiavellian brain.

After the servants had cleared off all the dishes and brought a tray of liqueur bottles, I finally gathered enough of my wits to say, "There's got to be a way to settle this out of court."

"Half a billion would do it," Sam said.

He hadn't touched any of the after-dinner drinks and had only sipped at his wine during dinner. So he wasn't drunk.

"Half a billion?"

"A quarter billion in actual losses," Molina interjected, "and a quarter billion in punitive damages."

I almost laughed in his face. "You want to punish God?"

"Why not?" The look on his face made me wonder what God had ever done to him to make him so angry.

President de Rivera took a silver cigarette case from his heavily braided jacket.

"Please don't smoke," I said.

He looked utterly shocked.

"It's bad for your lungs and ours," I added.

Sighing, he slipped the case back into his pocket. "You sound like my daughter."

"Thank you," I said, and made a polite smile for him. "Do you think we can settle out of court?" Sam asked.

"Where's the Pope going to get half a billion?" I snapped.

Sam shrugged good-naturedly. "Sell some artwork, maybe?"

I pushed my chair from the table. Molina and the president shot to their feet. De Rivera was closer to me; he held my chair while I stood up.

"Allow me to escort you to your room," he said. "Thank you so much," I replied.

Sam, still seated, gave me a suspicious look. But he didn't move from his chair. The president gave me his arm, and I placed my hand on it, just like we were Cinderella and the Prince at the ball. As we walked regally out of the dining room I glanced back at Sam. He was positively glowering at me.

We took an intimately small elevator up two flights. There was barely room enough in it for the two of us. De Rivera wasn't much taller than I, but he kept bobbing up on his toes as the elevator inched its way up. I wondered if it was some sort of exercise for his legs, until I realized that he was peeking down the front of my blouse. I had dressed casually. Modestly. And there wasn't much for him to see there anyway. But he kept peeking.

I took his proffered arm once again as he walked me to my door. The wide upstairs corridor was lined with portraits, all men, and furniture that looked antique and probably very valuable.

He opened the door to my suite, but before he could step inside I maneuvered myself into the doorway to block him.

"Thank you so much for the excellent dinner," I said, smiling my kiss-off smile.

"I believe you will find an excellent champagne al-ready chilled in your sitting room," said the president.

I gave him the regretful head shake. "It's much too late at night for me to start drinking champagne."

"Ah, but the night is young, my lovely one."

Lovely? Me? I was as plain as a pie pan, and I knew it. But el Presidente was acting as if I was a ravishing beauty. Did he think he could win me over to his side by taking me to bed? I've heard of tampering with a judge, but this was ridiculous.

"I'm really very tired, Mr. President."

"Carlos," he whispered.

"I'm really very tired, Carlos."

"Then it would be best for you to go directly to bed, would it not?"

I was wondering if I'd have to knee him in the groin when Sam's voice bounced cheerfully down the corridor, "Hey, Jill, I just remembered that there was another so-called act of God that cost us

ten–twenty mill or so."

The president stiffened and stepped back from me. Sam came strolling down the corridor with that imp's grin spread across his round face.

"Lemme tell you about it," he said.

"I'm very tired, and I'm going to sleep," I said firmly. "Good night, Sam. And good night, Carlos."

As I shut the door I saw Carlos glaring angrily at Sam. Maybe I've broken up their alliance, I thought.

Then I realized that Sam had come upstairs to rescue me from Carlos. He was jealous! And he cared enough about me to risk his scheme against the Pope.

Maybe he did love me after all. At least a little.

We tried to settle the mess out of court. And we might have done it, too, if it hadn't been for the other side's lawyer. And the assassins.

All parties concerned wanted to keep the suit as quiet as possible. Dignity. Good manners. We were talking about the Pope, for goodness' sake. Maintain a decent self-control and don't go blabbing to the media.

All the parties agreed to that approach. Except Sam. The instant the World Court put his suit on its arbitration calendar, Sam went roaring off to the newspeople. All of them, from BBC and CNN to the sleaziest tabloids and paparazzi.

Sam was on global television more than the hourly weather reports. He pushed Santa Claus out of the head-lines. You couldn't punch up a news report on your screen without seeing Sam's jack-o'-lantern face grinning at you.

"I think that if God gets blamed for accidents and natural disasters, the people who claim to represent God ought to be willing to pay the damages," Sam said glee-fully, over and again. "It's only fair."

The media went into an orgy of excitement. Interviewers doggedly tracked down priests, ministers, nuns, lamas, imams, mullahs, gurus of every stripe and sect. Christmas was all but forgotten; seven "holiday specials" were unceremoniously bumped from the entertainment networks so they could put on panel discussions of Sam's suit against the Pope instead.

Philosophers became as commonplace on the news as athletes. Professors of religion and ethics got to be regulars on talk shows all over the world. The Dalai Lama started his own TV series.

It was a bonanza for lawyers. People everywhere started suing God—or the nearest religious establishment. An unemployed mechanic in Minnesota sued his local Lutheran Church after he slipped on the ice while fishing on a frozen lake. An Englishwoman sued the Archbishop of Canterbury when her cat got itself run over by a delivery truck. Ford Motor Company sued the Southern Baptists because a ship carrying electronic parts from Korea sank in a typhoon and stopped Ford's assembly operation in Alabama.

Courts either refused to hear the suits, on the grounds that they lacked jurisdiction over You-Know-Who, or held them up pending the World Court's decision. One way or another, Sam was going to set a global precedent.

The Pope remained stonily silent. He virtually disappeared from the public eye, except for a few ceremonial masses at St. Peter's and his regular Sunday blessing of the crowds that he gave from his usual balcony. There were even rumors that he wouldn't say the traditional Christmas Eve mass at St. Peter's.

He even stopped giving audiences to visitors—after the paparazzi and seventeen network reporters infiltrated an audience that was supposed to be for victims of a flood in the Philippines. Eleven photographers and seven Filipinos were arrested after the Swiss Guard broke up the scuffle that the newspeople started.

The Vatican spokesman was Cardinal Hagerty, a dour-faced Irishman with the gift of gab, a veteran of the Curia's political infighting who stonewalled the media quite effectively by sticking to three points:

One: Sam's suit was frivolous. He never mentioned Ecuador at all; he always pinpointed the notorious Sam Gunn as the culprit.

Two: This attempt to denigrate God was sacrilegious and doomed to failure. Cardinal Hagerty never said it in so many words, but he gave the clear impression that in the good old days the Church would

have taken Sam by the scruff of his atheistic little neck and burned him at the stake.

Three: The Vatican simply did not have any money to spend on malicious lawsuits. Every penny in the Vatican treasury went to running the Church and helping the poor.

The uproar was global. All across the world people were being treated to "experts" debating the central question of whether or not God should be—or could be—held responsible for the disasters that are constantly assailing us.

There were bloody riots in Calcutta after an earthquake killed several hundred people, with the Hindus blaming Allah and the Moslems blaming Kali or Rama or any of the other hundreds of Hindu gods and goddesses. The Japanese parliament solemnly declared that the Emperor, even though revered as divine, was not to be held responsible for natural disasters. Dozens of evangelist ministers in the US damned Sam publicly in their TV broadcasts and as much as said that anyone who could stop the little bugger would be a hero in the eyes of God.

"What we need," yowled one TV evangelist, "is a new Michael the Archangel, who will smite this son of Satan with a fiery sword!"

In Jerusalem, the chief rabbi and Grand Mufti stunned the world by appearing in public side by side to castigate Sam and call upon all good Jews and Moslems to accept whatever God or Allah sends their way.

"Humility and acceptance are the hallmarks of the true believers," they jointly told their flocks.

My sources on the Senate Intelligence Committee told me that the chief rabbi added privately, "May He Who Is Nameless remove this evil man from our sight."

The Grand Mufti apparently went further. He promised eternal Paradise for anyone who martyred himself assassinating Sam. In a burst of modernism, he added, "Even if the assassin is a woman, Paradise awaits her." I thought he must have been either pretty damned furious at Sam or pretty damned desperate.

Officially, the Vatican refused to defend itself. The Pope would not even recognize the suit, and the Curia—which had been at odds with the new American Pope—backed him on this issue one hundred percent. Even though they knew that the World Court could hear the suit in their absence and then send in the Peacekeepers to enforce its decision, they felt certain that the Court would never send armed troops against the Vatican. It would make a pretty picture, our tanks and jet bombers against their Swiss Guardsmen. Heat-seeking missiles against medieval pikes. In St. Peter's, yet.

But the insurance conglomerate that carried the policy for Ecuador National Space Systems decided that it would step forward and represent the Vatican in the pre-trial hearing.

"We've got to put a cork in this bottle right away," said their president to me. "It's a disgrace, a shameful disgrace."

His name was Frank Banner, and he normally looked cheerful and friendly, probably from the days when he was a salesman who made his living from sweet-talking corporate officials into multimillion-dollar insurance policies. We had known each other for years; Frank had often testified before Senate committees—and donated generously to campaign funds, including mine.

But now he looked worried. He had flown up to Nashua to see me shortly after I returned from Quito. His usual broad smile and easygoing manner were gone; he was grim, almost angry.

"He's ruining the Christmas season," Frank grumbled.

I had to admit that it was hard to work up the usual holiday cheer with this lawsuit hanging over us.

"Look," he said, as we sipped hot toddies in my living room, "I've had my run-ins with Sam Gunn in the past, Lord knows, but this time the little pisser's gone too god-damned far. He's not just attacking the Pope, although that in itself is bad enough. He's attacking the very foundation of Western civilization! That wise-assed little bastard is spitting in the eye of every God-fearing man, woman, and child in the world!"

I had never seen Frank so wound up. He sounded like an old-time politician yelling from a soap box. His face got purple, and I was afraid he'd hyperventilate. I didn't argue with him; I merely snuggled deeper into my armchair and let him rant until he ran out of steam.

Finally, he said, "Well, somebody's got to stand up for what's right and decent."

"I suppose so," I murmured.

"I'm assigning one of our young lawyers to act as an amicus curiae in your pretrial hearing."

"I'm not sure that's the proper legal term," I said.

"Well, whatever!" His face reddened again. "Somebody's got to protect the Pope's ass. Might as well be us."

I nodded, thinking that if Sam somehow did win his suit against the Pope it would turn the entire insurance industry upside down. Amicus curiae indeed.

The moment I laid eyes on the lawyer that Frank sent I knew we'd have nothing but trouble.

Her name was Josella Ecks, and she was a tall, slim, gorgeous black woman with a mind as sharp as a laser beam. Skin the color of milk chocolate. Almond-shaped eyes that I would have killed for. Long silky legs, and she didn't mind wearing slitted skirts that showed them off cunningly.

I knew Sam would go ape over her; the little juvenile delinquent always let his hormones overpower his brain.

Sure enough, Sam took one look at her and his eyes started spinning like the wheels in a slot machine. I felt myself turning seventeen shades of green. If Sam had seemed a little jealous of Carlos de Rivera, I was positively bilious with envy over Josella Ecks.

The four of us met ten days before Christmas in my formal office in the World Court building in The Hague: Sam, his lawyer Greg Molina, the delectable Ms. Ecks, and my plain old self. I settled into my desk chair, feeling shabby and miserable in a nubby tweed suit. Josella sat between the two men; when she crossed her long legs her slitted skirt fell away, revealing ankle, calf, and a lot of thigh. I thought I saw steam spout out of Sam's ears.

She didn't seem to affect Greg that way, but then Gregory Molina was a married man—married to President de Rivera's daughter, no less.

"This pretrial hearing," I said, trying to put my emotions under some semblance of control, "is mandated by the International Court of Justice for the purpose of trying to come to an amicable agreement on the matter of Ecuador v. Vatican without the expense and publicity of an actual trial."

"Fine by me," Sam said breezily, his eyes still on the young woman sitting beside him. "As long as we can get it over with by eleven. I've gotta catch the midnight Clipper. Gotta be back at Selene City for the Christmas festivities."

I glowered at Sam. Here the future of Christianity was hanging in the balance, and he was worried about a Christmas party.

Greg was more formal. His brows knitting very earnestly, he said, "The nation of Ecuador would be very much in favor of settling this case out of court." He was looking at me, not Josella. "Providing, of course, that we can arrive at a reasonable settlement."

Josella smiled as if she knew more than he did. "Our position is that a reasonable settlement would be to throw this case in the trash bin, where it belongs."

Sam sighed as if someone had told them there is no Santa Claus. "A reasonable settlement would be a half billion dollars, US."

Josella wagged a finger at him. I saw that her nails were done in warm pink. "Your suit is without legal basis, Mr. Gunn."

"Then why are we here, oh beauteous one?"

I resisted the urge to crown Sam with the meteoric iron paperweight on my desk. He had given it to me years earlier, and at that particular moment I really wanted to give it back to him—smack between his leering eyes.

Josella was unimpressed. Quite coolly, she answered, "We are here, Mr. Gunn, because you have entered a frivolous suit against the Vatican."

Greg spoke up. "I assure you, Ms. Ecks, the nation of Ecuador is not frivolous."

"Perhaps not," she granted. "But I'm afraid that you're being led down the garden path by this unscrupulous little man."

"Little?" A vein in Sam's forehead started to throb. "Was Napoleon little? Was Steinmetz little? Did Neil Armstrong play basketball in college?"

Laughing, Josella said, "I apologize for the personal reference, Mr. Gunn. It was unprofessional of

me."

"Sam."

"Mr. Gunn," she repeated.

"I still want half a bill," Sam growled.

"There isn't that much money in the entire Vatican," she said.

"Baloney. They take in a mint and a half." Sam ticked off on his fingers. "Tourists come by the millions. The Vatican prints its own stamps and currency. They're into banking and money exchange, with no internal taxes and no restrictions on importing and exporting foreign currencies. Nobody knows how much cash flows through the Vatican, but they must have the highest per capita income in the solar system."

"And it all goes to funding the Church and helping the poor."

"The hell it does! They live like kings in there," Sam growled.

"Wait," I said. "This is getting us nowhere."

Ignoring me, Sam went on, "And the Pope has absolute authority over all of it. He's got all the executive, legislative, and judicial powers in his own hands. He's an absolute monarch, responsible to nobody!"

"Except God," Greg added.

"Right," Sam said. "The same God who owes me half a billion dollars."

I repeated, "This is getting us nowhere."

"Perhaps I can set us on a useful course," Greg said. I nodded hopefully at him.

Greg laid out Sam's case, chapter and verse. He spent nearly an hour tracing the history of the Petrine theory that is the basis for the Pope's claim to be "the vicar of Christ." Then he droned on even longer about the logic behind holding the Pope responsible for so-called acts of God.

"If we truly believe in a God who is the cause of these acts," he said, with implacable logic, "and we accept the Pope's claim to be the representative of God on Earth, then we have a firm legal, moral, and ethical basis for this suit."

"God owes me," Sam muttered.

"The contract between God and man implied by the Ten Commandments and the Scriptures," said Greg, solemnly, "must be regarded as a true contract, binding on both parties, and holding both parties responsible for their misdeeds."

"How do you know they're misdeeds?" Josella instantly rebutted. "We can't know as much as God does. Perhaps these acts of God are part of His plan for our salvation."

With an absolutely straight face, Greg said, "Then He must reveal his purposes to us. Or be held responsible for His acts in a court of law."

Josella shook her head slowly. I saw that Sam's eyes were riveted on her.

She looked at me, though, and asked, "May I present the defendant's argument, Your Honor?"

"Yes, of course."

Josella started a careful and very detailed review of the legal situation, with emphasis on the absurdity of trying to hold a person or a state responsible for acts of God.

"Mr. Gunn is attempting to interpret literally a phrase that was never so meant," she said firmly, with a faint smile playing on her lips.

Sam fidgeted in his chair, huffed and snorted as she went on and on, cool and logical, marshaling every point or precedent that would help her demolish Sam's case.

She was nowhere near finished when Sam looked at his wristwatch, and said, "Look, I've got to get to Selene. Big doings there, and I'm obligated to be present for them."

"What's happening?" I asked.

"Christmas stuff. Parties. We've brought in a ballet troupe from Vancouver to do The Nutcracker. Nothing that has anything to do with this legal crapola." He turned to Greg. "Why don't you two lawyers fight it out and lemme know what you decide, okay?"

Sam had to lean toward Josella to speak to Greg, but he looked right past her, as if she weren't there. And he was leaving Greg to make the decision? That wasn't like Sam at all. Was he bored by all these

legal technicalities?

He got to his feet. Then a slow grin crept across his face, and he said, "Unless the three of you would like to come up to Selene with me, as my guests. We could continue the hearing there."

So that was it. He wanted Josella to fly with him to the Moon. Greg and I would be excess baggage that he would dump the first chance he got.

And Josella actually smiled at him, and replied, "I've never been to the Moon."

Sam's grin went ear-to-ear. "Well, come on up! This is your big chance."

"This is a pretrial hearing," I snapped, "not a tourist agency."

Just then the door burst open and four women in janitorial coveralls pushed into my office. Instead of brooms they were carrying machine pistols.

"On your feet, all of you, godless humanists!" shouted their leader, a heavyset blonde. "You are the prisoners of the Daughters of the Mother!" She spoke in English, with some sort of accent I couldn't identify. Not Dutch, and certainly not American.

I stabbed at the panic button on my phone console. Direct line to security. The blonde ignored it and hustled the four of us out into the corridor to the bank of elevators. The corridor was empty; I realized it was well past quitting time, and the Court's bureaucrats had cleared out precisely at four-thirty.

But security should be here, I thought. No sign of them. They must have been out Christmas shopping, too. The Daughters of the Mother pushed us into an elevator and rode up to the roof. It was dark and cold up there; the wind felt as if it came straight from the North Pole.

A tilt-rotor plane sat on the roof, its engines swiveled to their vertical position, their big propellers swinging slowly like giant scythes, making a whooshing sound that gave the keening sea wind a basso counterpoint.

"Get in, all of you." The hefty blonde prodded me with the snout of her pistol.

We marched toward the plane's hatch.

"Hey, wait a minute," Sam said, pulling his sports jacket tight across his shivering body. "I'm the guy you want; leave these others out of it. Hell, they'd just as soon shoot me as you would."

"I said all of you!" the blonde shouted.

Where was security? They couldn't be so lax as to allow a plane to land on our roof and kidnap us. They had to be coming to our rescue. But when?

I decided to slow us down a bit. As we approached the plane's hatch, I stumbled and went down.

"Ow!" I yelled. "My ankle!"

The big blonde wrapped an arm around my waist, hauled me off the concrete, and tossed me like a sack of potatoes through the open hatch of the plane. I landed on the floor plates with a painful thump.

Sam jumped up the two-step ladder and knelt beside me. "You okay? Are you hurt?"

I sat up and rubbed my backside. "Just my dignity," I said.

Suddenly the whole roof was bathed in brilliant light, and we heard the powerful throbbing of helicopter engines.

"YOU ARE SURROUNDED!" roared a bullhorn voice. "THIS IS THE POLICE. DROP YOUR WEAPONS AND SURRENDER."

I scrambled to the nearest window, Sam pressing close behind me. I could see two helicopters hovering near the edge of the roof, armored SWAT policemen pointing assault rifles at us.

"What fun," Sam muttered. "With just a little luck, we could be in the middle of a firefight."

The blonde came stumping past us, heading for the cockpit. Greg and Josella were pushed into the plane by the other three Daughters. The last one slammed the hatch shut and dogged it down.

"YOU HAVE THIRTY SECONDS TO THROW DOWN YOUR WEAPONS AND SURRENDER!" roared the police bullhorn.

"WE HAVE FOUR HOSTAGES ABOARD, INCLUDING SENATOR MEYERS." The blonde had a bullhorn, too. "IF YOU TRY TO STOP US, WE WILL SHOOT HER FIRST."

Sam patted my head. "Lucky lady."

They bellowed threats back and forth for what seemed like an eternity, but finally the police allowed the plane to take off. With us in it. There were four police helicopters, and they trailed after us as our

plane lifted off the roof, swiveled its engines to their horizontal position, and began climbing into the dark night sky. The plane was much faster than the choppers; their lights dwindled behind us, then got lost altogether in the clouds.

"The Peacekeepers must be tracking us by radar,"

Sam assured me. "Probably got satellite sensors watching us, too. Jet fighters out there someplace, I bet."

And then I realized he was speaking to Josella, not me.

We rode for hours in that plane, Sam jabbering across the aisle to Josella while I sat beside him, staring out the window and fuming. Greg sat on the window seat beside Josella, but as I could see from their reflections in the glass, Sam and Josella had eyes only for each other. I went beyond fuming; I would have slugged Sam if we weren't in so much trouble already.

Two of the Daughters sat at the rear of the cabin, guns in their laps. Their leader and the other one sat up front. Who was in the cockpit I never knew.

Beneath my anger at Sam I was pretty scared. These Daughters of the Mother looked like religious fanatics to me, the kind who were willing to die for their cause—and therefore perfectly willing to kill anybody else for their cause. They were out to get Sam, and they had grabbed me and the other two as well. We were hostages. Bargaining chips for the inevitable moment when the Peacekeepers came at them with everything in their arsenal.

And Sam was spending his time talking to Josella, trying to ease her fears, trying to impress her with his own courage.

"Don't worry," he told her. "It's me they want. They'll let you and the others loose as soon as they turn me over to their leader, whoever that might be."

And the others. I seethed. As far as Sam was concerned, I was just one of the others. Josella was the one he was interested in, tall and willowy and elegant. I was just a sawed-off runt with as much glamour as a fire hydrant, and pretty much the same figure.

Dawn was just starting to tinge the sky when we started to descend. I had been watching out the window during the flight, trying to puzzle out where we were heading from the position of the Moon and the few stars I could see. Eastward, I was pretty certain. East and south. That was the best I could determine.

As the plane slowed down for its vertical landing, I mentally checked out the possibilities. East and south for six hours or so could put us somewhere in the Mediterranean. Italy, Spain—or North Africa.

"Where in the world have they taken us?" I half whispered, more to myself than anyone who might answer me.

"Transylvania," Sam answered.

I gave him a killer stare. "This is no time to be funny."

"Look at my wristwatch," he whispered back at me, totally serious.

Its face showed latitude and longitude coordinates in digital readout. Sam pressed one of the studs on the watch's outer rim, and the readout spelled RUMANIA. Another touch of the stud: TRANSYLVANIA. Another: NEAREST MAJOR CITY, VARSAG.

I showed him my wristwatch. "It's got an ultrahigh-frequency transponder in it. The Peacekeepers have been tracking us ever since we left The Hague. I hope."

Sam nodded glumly. "These Mother-lovers aren't afraid of the Peacekeepers as long as they've got you for a hostage."

"There's going to be a showdown, sooner or later," I said.

Just then the plane touched down with a thump. "Welcome," said Sam, in a Hollywood vampire accent, "to Castle Dracula."

It wasn't a castle that they took us to. It was a mine shaft.

Lord knows how long it had been abandoned. The elevator didn't work; we had to climb down, single file, on rickety wooden steps that creaked and shook with every step we took. And it was dark down there. And cold, the kind of damp cold that chills you to the bone. I kept glancing up at the dwindling little slice of blue sky as the Daughters coaxed us with their gun muzzles down those groaning,

shuddering stairs all the way to the very bottom.

There were some dim lanterns hanging from the rough stone ceiling of the bottom gallery. We walked along in gloomy silence until we came to a steel door. It took two of the Daughters to swing it open.

The bright light made my eyes water. They pushed us into a chamber that had been turned into a rough-hewn office, of sorts. At least it was warm. A big, beefy red-headed woman sat scowling at us from behind a steel desk.

"You can take their wristwatches from them now," she said to the blonde. Then she smiled at the surprise on my face. "Yes, Senator Meyers, we know all about your transponders and positioning indicators. We're not fools."

Sam stepped forward. "All right, you're a bunch of geniuses. You've captured the most wanted man on Earth—me. Now you can let the others go and the Peacekeepers won't bother you."

"You think not?" the redhead asked, suspiciously.

"Of course not!" Sam smiled his sincerest smile. "Their job is to protect Senator Meyers, who's a judge on the World Court. They don't give a damn about me."

"You're the blasphemer, Sam Gunn?"

"I've done a lot of things in a long and eventful life," Sam said, still smiling, "but blasphemy isn't one of them."

"You don't think that what you've done is blasphemy?" The redhead's voice rose ominously. I realized that her temper was just as fiery as her hair.

"I've always treated God with respect," Sam insisted. "I respect Her so much that I expect Her to honor her debts. Unfortunately, the man in the Vatican who claims to be Her special representative doesn't think She has any sense of responsibility."

"The man in the Vatican." The redhead's lips curled into a sneer. "What does he know of the Mother?"

"That's what I say," Sam agreed fervently. "That's why I'm suing him, really."

For a moment the redhead almost bought it. She looked at Sam with eyes that were almost admiring. Then her expression hardened. "You are a conniving little sneak, aren't you?"

Sam frowned at her. "Little. Is everybody in the world worried about my height?"

"And fast with your tongue, too," the redhead went on. "I think that's the first part of you that we'll cut off." Then she smiled viciously. "But only the first part."

Sam swallowed hard, but recovered his wits almost immediately. "Okay, okay. But let the others go. They can't hurt you, and if you let them go, the Peacekeepers will get out of your hair."

"Liar."

"Me?" Sam protested.

The redhead got to her feet. She was huge, built like a football player. She started to say something but the words froze in her throat. Her gaze shifted from Sam to the door, behind us.

I turned my head and saw half a dozen men in khaki uniforms, laser rifles in their hands. The Peacekeepers, I thought, then instantly realized that their uniforms weren't right.

"Thank you so much for bringing this devil's spawn to our hands," said one of the men. He was tall and slim, with a trim moustache and an olive complexion.

"Who in hell are you?" the redhead demanded.

"We are the Warriors of the Faith, and we have come to take this son of a dog to his just reward."

"Gee, I'm so popular," Sam said.

"He's ours!" bellowed the redhead. "We snatched him from The Hague."

"And we are taking him from you. It is our holy mission to attend to this pig."

"You can't!" the redhead insisted. "I won't let you!"

"We'll send you a videotape of his execution," said the leader of the Warriors.

"No, no! We've got to kill him!"

"I am so sorry to disagree, but it is our sacred duty to execute him. If we must kill you also, that is the will of God."

They argued for half an hour or more, but the Warriors outnumbered and outgunned the Daughters.

So we were marched out of that underground office, down the mine gallery, and through another set of steel doors that looked an awful lot like the hatches of airlocks.

The underground corridors we walked through didn't look like parts of a mine anymore. The walls were smoothly finished and lined with modern doors that had numbers on them, like a hotel's rooms.

Sam nodded knowingly as we tramped along under the watchful eyes of the six Warriors.

"This is the old shelter complex for the top Rumanian government officials," he told me as we walked. "From back in the Cold War days, when they were afraid of nuclear attack."

"But that was almost a century ago," Josella said.

Sam answered, "Yeah, but the president of Rumania and his cronies kept the complex going for years afterward. Sort of an underground pleasure dome for the big shots in the government. Wasn't discovered by their taxpayers until one of the bureaucrats fell in love with one of the call girls and spilled the beans to the media so he could run off with her."

"How do you know?" I asked him.

"The happy couple works for me up in Selene City. He's my chief bookkeeper now, and she supervises guest services at the hotel."

"What kind of hotel are you running up there in Selene?" Greg asked.

Sam answered his question with a grin. Then he turned back to me, and said, "This complex has several exits, all connected to old mine shafts."

Lowering my voice, I asked, "Can we get away from these Warriors and get out of here?"

Sam made a small shrug. "There's six of them and they've all got guns. All we've got is trickery and deceit."

"So what—"

"When I say 'beans,' " Sam whispered, "shut your eyes tight, stop walking, and count to ten slowly."

"Why?"

"Tell Greg," he said. Then he edged away from me to whisper in Josella's ear. I felt my face burning.

"What are you saying?" one of the Warriors demanded.

Sam put on a leering grin. "I'm asking her if she's willing to grant the condemned man his last request."

The Warrior laughed. "We have requests to make also."

"Fool!" their leader snapped. "We are consecrated to the Faith. We have foresworn the comforts of women."

"Only until we have executed the dog."

"Yes," chimed another Warrior. "Once the pig is slain, we are free of our vows."

A third added, "Then we can have the prisoners." He smiled at Greg.

"Now wait," Sam said. He stopped walking. "Let me get one thing straight. Am I supposed to be a pig or a dog?"

The leader stepped up to him. "You are a pig, a dog, and a piece of camel shit."

The man loomed a good foot over Sam's stubby form. Sam shrugged good-naturedly, and said, "I guess you're entitled to your opinion."

"Now walk," said the leader.

"Why should I?" Sam stuffed his hands into the pockets of his slacks.

A slow smile wormed across the leader's lean face. "Because if you don't walk, I will break every bone in your face."

They were all gathered around us now, all grinning, all waiting for the chance to start beating up on Sam. I realized we were only a few feet away from another airlock hatch.

"You just don't know beans about me, do you?" Sam asked sweetly.

I squeezed my eyes shut, but the glare still burned through my closed lids so brightly that I thought I'd go blind. I remembered to count . . . six, seven . . .

"Come on!" Sam grabbed at my arm. "Let's get going!"

I opened my eyes and still saw a burning afterimage, as if I had stared directly into the sun. The six Warriors were down on their knees, whimpering, pawing madly at their eyes, their rifles strewn across the floor.

Sam had Josella by the wrist with one hand. With the other he was pulling me along.

"Let's move!" he commanded. "They won't be down for more than a few minutes."

Greg stooped down and took one of the laser rifles. "Do you know how to use that?" Sam asked.

Greg shook his head. "I feel better with it, though." We raced to the hatch, pushed it open, squeezed through it, then swung it shut again. Sam spun the control wheel as tightly as he could.

"That won't hold them for more than a minute," he muttered.

We ran. Of the four of us I was the slowest. Josella sprinted ahead on her long legs, with Greg not far behind. Sam stayed back with me, puffing almost as badly as I was.

"We're both out of shape," he panted.

"We're both too old for this kind of thing," I said. He looked surprised, as if the idea of getting old had never occurred to him.

"What did you do back there?" I asked, as we staggered down the corridor.

"Miniaturized high-intensity flash lamp," Sam said, puffing. "For priming minilasers."

"You just happened . . ." I was gasping. ". . . to have one . . . on you?"

"Been carrying a few," he wheezed, "ever since the fanatics started making threats."

"Good thinking."

We found a shaft and climbed up into the sweet, clean air of a pine forest. It was cold; there was a dusting of snow on the ground. Our feet got thoroughly soaked, and we were shivering as Sam pushed us through the woods.

"Clearing," he kept telling us. "We gotta get to a clearing."

We found a clearing at last, and the thin sunshine filtering through the gray clouds felt good after the chill shadows of the forest. Sam made us close our eyes again and he set off another of his flashbulbs.

"Surveillance satellites oughtta see that," he said. "Now it's just a matter of time to see who gets us first, the Peacekeepers or the dog-pig guys."

It was the Peacekeepers, thank goodness. Two of their helicopters came clattering and whooshing down on that little clearing while a pair of jump jets flew cover high overhead. I was never so happy to see that big blue-and-white symbol in my life.

The Peacekeepers had mounted a full search-and-rescue operation. Their helicopter was spacious, comfortable, and even soundproofed a little. They thought of everything. While Sam filled in one of their officers on the layout of the Rumanian shelter complex, two enlisted personnel brought us steaming-hot coffee and sandwiches. It made me realize that we hadn't eaten or slept in close to twenty-four hours.

I was starting to drowse when I heard Sam ask, over the muted roar of the 'copter's turbines, "Who were those guys?"

The Peacekeeper officer, in her sky-blue uniform, shook her head. "Neither the Daughters of the Mother nor the Warriors of God are listed in our computer files."

"Terrorists," Greg Molina said. "Religious fanatics."

"Amateurs," said Josella Ecks, with a disdainful curl of her lip.

That startled me. The way she said it. But the need for sleep was overpowering my critical faculties. I cranked my seat back and closed my eyes. The last thing I saw was Sam holding Josella's hand and staring longingly into her deep, dark, beautifully lashed eyes.

I wanted to murder her, but I was too tired.

Sam went to Selene the next day and, sure enough, Josella went with him. Greg Molina returned to Quito, dropping in at my office just before he left.

"Will the trial be held in The Hague or at Selene?" he asked.

"Wherever," I groused, seething at the thought of Sam and Josella together a quarter million miles away.

"I assume there will be a trial, since there was no agreement at the pretrial hearing," he said.

Grimly, I answered, "It certainly looks that way."

Looking slightly worried, he asked, "If it's on the Moon, will I have to go there? Or can I participate electronically?"

"It would be better if you were there in person."

"I've never been in space," he admitted.

"There's nothing to it," I said. "It's like flying in an airplane."

"But the lack of gravity ..."

"You'll get used to it in a day or so. You'll enjoy it," I assured him.

He looked unconvinced.

It took me a whole day of fussing and fuming before I bit the bullet and rocketed to the Moon after Sam. And Josella. Pride is one thing, but I just couldn't stand the thought of Sam chasing that willowy young thing—and catching her. Josella Ecks might think she was smart and cool enough to avoid Sam's clutches, but she didn't know our sawed-off Lothario as well as I did.

And it would be just like Sam to try to get the other side's lawyer to fall for him. Even if he wasn't bonkers about Josella, he'd want to sabotage her ability to represent his adversary in court.

So I told myself I was doing my job as a judge of the International Court of Justice as I flew to Selene.

I hadn't been to the Moon in nearly five years, and I was impressed with how much bigger and more luxurious the underground city had grown.

Selene's main plaza had been mostly empty the last time I'd seen it, an immense domed structure of bare lunar concrete rumbling with the echoes of bulldozers and construction crews. Now the plaza—big enough to hold half a dozen football fields—was filled with green trees and flowering shrubbery. On one side stood the gracefully curved acoustical shell of an open-air theater. Small shops and restaurants were spotted along the pleasant winding walk that led through the plaza, all of them decked out with Christmas ornaments. The trees along the walk twinkled with lights.

There were hundreds of people strolling about, tourists walking awkwardly, carefully, in their weighted boots to keep them from stumbling in the one-sixth gravity. A handful of fliers soared high up near the curving dome, using colorful rented plastic wings and their own muscle power to fly like birds. For years Sam had said that tourism would become a major industry in space, and at last his prediction was coming true. Christmas on the Moon: the ultimate holiday trip.

The lobby of the Selene Hotel was marvelous, floored with basalt from Mare Nubium polished to a mirror finish. The living quarters were deeper underground than the lobby level, of course. There were no stairs, though; too easy for newcomers unaccustomed to the low gravity to trip and fall. I walked down a wide rampway, admiring the sheets of water cascading noiselessly down tilted panes of lunar glass on either side of the central rampway into spacious fish ponds at the bottom level. Freely flowing water was still a rare sight on the Moon, even though aquaculture provided more of the protein for lunar meals than agriculture did.

Soft music wafted through hidden speakers, and tourists tossed chunks of bread to the fish in the pools, not realizing that sooner or later the fish would be feeding them. I saw that others had thrown coins into the water and laughed to myself, picturing Sam wading in there every night to collect the loose change.

I hadn't told Sam I was coming, but he must have found out when I booked a suite at the hotel. There were real flowers and Swiss chocolates waiting for me when I checked in. I admired the flowers and gave the chocolates to the concierge to distribute to the hotel's staff. Let them have the calories.

Even before I unpacked my meager travel bag I put in a call to Sam's office. Surprisingly, he answered it himself.

"Hi, there!" Sam said brightly, his larger-than-life face grinning at me from the electronic window that covered one whole wall of my sitting room. "What brings you to Selene?"

I smiled for him. "I got lonesome, Sam."

"Really?"

"And I thought that I'd better make certain you're not suborning an officer of the court."

"Oh, you mean Josella?"

"Don't put on your innocent face for me, Sam Gunn," I said. "You know damned well I mean Josella."

His expression went serious. "You don't have to worry about her. She's got more defenses than a

porcupine. Her arms are a lot longer than mine, I found out."

He actually looked sad. I felt sorry for him, but I didn't want him to know it. Not yet. Sam had a way of using your emotions to get what he wanted.

So I said, "I presume you're free for dinner."

He sighed. "Dinner, lunch, breakfast, you call it."

"Dinner. Seven o'clock in the hotel's restaurant." All the lunar facilities kept Greenwich Mean Time, which was only an hour off from The Hague.

I had expected Sam to be downcast. I'd seen him that way before, moping like a teenaged Romeo when the object of his desire wouldn't go along with him. Usually his pining and sighing only lasted until he found a new object of desire; I think twenty-four hours was the longest he'd ever gone, in the past. Like a minor viral infection.

But when I got to the restaurant Sam was practically bouncing with excitement. As the maitre d' led me to the table, Sam jumped to his feet so hard that he rose clear above the table and soared over it, landing on his toes right in front of me like a star ballet dancer. People stared from their tables.

Gracefully, Sam took my hand and bent his lips to it. His lips were curved into a tremendously self-satisfied smile.

Alarm bells went off in my head. Either he's finally scored with Josella, or he's found a new love. I knew he couldn't possibly be this happy just to see me again.

Sam shooed the maitre d' away and helped me into my chair. Then he chugged around the table and sat down, folded his hands, rested his chin on them, and grinned at me as if he was a cat who'd just cornered the canary market.

I saw that there was a chilled bottle of French champagne in a silver bucket next to the table. A waiter immediately brought a dish of caviar and placed it in the center of the table.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Sam cocked an eyebrow at me. "Going on? What do you mean?"

"The champagne and caviar. The grin on your face."

"Couldn't that be just because I'm so happy to see you?"

"No it couldn't," I said. "Come on, Sam, we've known each other too long for this kind of runaround."

He laughed softly and leaned closer toward me. "He's coming here."

"Who's coming here?"

"Il Papa himself," Sam whispered.

"The Pope?" My voice squeaked like a surprised mouse.

His head bobbing up and down, Sam said, "William I. The bishop of Rome. Vicar of Christ. Successor to the prince of the Apostles. Supreme pontiff of the universal church. Patriarch of the west, primate of Italy, archbishop and metropolitan of the Roman province, sovereign of the state of Vatican City, servant of the servants of God."

He took a breath. "That one."

"The Pope is coming here? To the Moon? To Selene?"

"Just got the word from Cardinal Hagerty himself. Pope Bill is coming here to deal with me personally."

I felt as if I was in free fall, everything inside me sinking. "Oh my God," I said.

"Nope," said Sam. "Just His representative."

It was supposed to be very hush-hush. No news reporters. No leaks. The Pope came incognito, slipping out of Rome in plain clothes and riding to the Moon in a private rocket furnished by Rockledge Industries and paid for by Frank Banner's insurance consortium.

For once in his life Sam kept a secret that wasn't his own. He bubbled and jittered through the two days it took for the Pope to arrive at Selene. Instead of putting him up in the hotel, where he might be recognized, Sam ensconced Pope William, Cardinal Hagerty, and their retinue of guards and servants—all male—in a new wing of Selene's living quarters that hadn't been opened yet for occupancy.

Their quarters were a little rough, a little unfinished. Walls nothing but bare stone. Some of the electrical fixtures hadn't been installed yet. But there was comfortable furniture and plenty of room for them.

Suddenly I was a World Court judge in charge of a pretrial hearing again. I set up the meeting in the Pope's suite, after a half day of phone discussions with Sam and Cardinal Hagerty. Greg Molina reluctantly came up from Quito; Sam provided him with a special high-energy boost so he could get to us within twenty-four hours.

So there we were: Sam, the Pope, Cardinal Hagerty, Greg, Josella, and me, sitting around a circular table made of lunar plastic. Of the six of us, only Sam and I seemed truly at ease. The others looked slightly queasy from the low gravity. Cardinal Hagerty, in particular, gripped the arms of his chair as if he was afraid he'd be sucked up to the bare stone ceiling if he let go.

I was surprised at Josella's uneasiness. She was seated next to me—I made certain to place myself between her and Sam. She had always seemed so cool and self-possessed that I felt almost pained for her.

While Greg went through the formality of reading the precis of Sam's suit against the Vatican, I leaned over, and whispered to Josella, "Are you having trouble adjusting to the gravity?"

She looked surprised, almost shocked. Then she tried to smile. "It's . . . not that. It's this room. I feel . . . it must be something like claustrophobia."

I wondered that she hadn't been bothered before, but then I figured that the other rooms of the hotel had big electronic window walls and green plants and decorations that tricked the eye into forgetting that you were buried deep underground. This conference room's walls were bare, which made its ceiling seem low. Like a monk's cell, I thought.

Halfway through Greg's reading of the precis, Cardinal Hagerty cleared his throat noisily, and asked, "If there's nothing new in this travesty, could we be dispensing with the rest of this reading?"

Hagerty was by far the oldest person in the group. His face was lined and leathery; his hair thin and white. He looked frail and cranky, and his voice was as creaky as a rusted door hinge.

Sam nodded agreement, as did Josella. Greg tapped his hand-sized computer and looked up from its screen.

"Now then," said the Pope, folding his hands on the tabletop, "let's get down to the nitty-gritty."

He was smiling at us. Pope William looked even younger in person than on TV. And even more dynamic and handsome. A rugged and vigorous man with steel gray hair and steel gray eyes. He looked more like a successful corporate executive or a lawyer than a man of God. Even in his white Papal robes, it was hard for me to think of him as a priest. And a celibate.

He had the knack of making you feel that he was concentrating all his attention on you, even when he wasn't looking directly at you. And when his eyes did catch mine, I got goose bumps, so help me. Dynamic? He was dynamite.

Of course, he didn't affect Sam the way he hit me.

"You want the nitty-gritty?" Sam replied, with no hint of awe at speaking face-to-face with the Pope. "Okay. God owes me half a billion dollars."

"Ridiculous," Cardinal Hagerty croaked.

"Not according to the insurance industry," Sam countered. He jabbed a finger toward Josella. "Tell 'em, kid."

Josella looked startled. "Tell them what?"

"Your employers claim that the accidents that've almost wrecked Ecuador National Space Systems were acts of God. Right?"

"Yes," Josella answered warily.

Sam spread his hands. "See? They're the ones who put the blame on God, not me. All I'm trying to do is collect what's owed me."

Pope William turned his megawatt smile on Sam. "Surely you don't expect the Church to pay you for industrial accidents."

"Don't call me Shirley," Sam mumbled.

"What?"

Barely suppressing his glee, Sam said, "We've been through all this. The insurance industry says God's responsible. You claim to be God's representative on Earth. So you owe Ecuador National Space Systems half a billion dollars."

Pope William's smile darkened just a bit. "And what will you do if we refuse to pay—assuming, that is, that the World Court should decide in your favor."

"Which is ridiculous," said Hagerty.

Sam was unperturbed. "If the World Court really is an International Court of Justice, as it claims to be"—he gave me the eye—"then it has to decide in my favor."

"I doubt that," said the Pope.

"Ridiculous," uttered Cardinal Hagerty. It seemed to be his favorite word.

"Think about it," Sam went on, sitting up straighter in his chair. "Think of the reaction in the Moslem nations if the World Court seems to treat the Vatican differently from other nations. Or India or China."

Pope William's brows knit slightly. Hagerty's expression could have soured milk.

"Another thing," Sam added. "You guys have been working for a century or so to heal the rifts among other Christians. Imagine how the Protestants will feel if they see the Vatican getting special treatment from the World Court."

"Finding the Vatican innocent of responsibility for your industrial accidents is hardly special treatment," said Pope William.

"Maybe you think so, but how will the Swedes feel about it? Or the Orthodox Catholics in Greece and Russia and so on? Or the Southern Baptists?"

The Pope said nothing.

"Think about the publicity," Sam said, leaning back easily in his chair. "Remember what an American writer once said: 'There is no character, howsoever good and fine, but can be destroyed by ridicule.'"

"'By ridicule, howsoever poor and witless,'" the Pope finished the citation. "Mark Twain."

"That's right," said Sam.

Cardinal Hagerty burst out, "You can't hold the Vatican responsible for acts of the Lord! You can't expect the Church to pay every time some daft golfer gets struck by lightning because he didn't have sense enough to come in out of the rain!"

"Hey, you're the guys who claim you're God's middleman. You spent several centuries establishing that point, too, from what I hear."

"All right," said Pope William, smiling again, "let's grant for the sake of argument that the World Court decides against the Vatican. We, of course, will refuse to pay. It would be impossible for us to pay such a sum, in fact. Even if we could, we'd have to take the money away from the poor and the starving in order to give it to you."

"To the nation of Ecuador," Sam corrected.

"To Ecuador National Space Systems," grumbled Cardinal Hagerty.

"Which is you," said the Pope.

Sam shrugged.

Pope William turned to me. "What would happen if we refused to pay?"

I felt flustered. My face got hot. "I . . . uh—the only legal alternative would be for the Court to ask the Peacekeepers to enforce its decision."

"So the Peacekeepers will invade the Vatican?" Cardinal Hagerty sneered. "What will they do, cart away the Pieta? Hack off the roof of the Sistine Chapel and sell it at auction?"

"No," I admitted. "I don't see anything like that happening."

"Lemme tell you what'll happen," Sam said. "The world will see that your claim to be God's special spokesman is phony. The world will see that you hold yourselves above the law. Your position as a moral leader will go down the toilet. The next time you ask the nations to work for peace and unity the whole world will laugh in your face."

Cardinal Hagerty went white with anger. He sputtered, but no words came past his lips. I thought he was going to have a stroke, right there at our conference table.

But the Pope touched him on the shoulder, and the Cardinal took a deep, shuddering breath and seemed to relax somewhat.

Pope William's smile was gone. He focused those steel gray eyes on Sam, and said, "You are a dangerous man, Mr. Gunn."

Sam stared right back at him. "I've been called lots of things in my time, but never dangerous."

"You would extort half a billion dollars out of the mouths of the world's neediest people?"

"And use it to create jobs so that they wouldn't be needy anymore. So they won't have to depend on you or anybody else. So they can stand on their own feet and live in dignity."

Sam was getting worked up. For the first time in my life, I saw Sam becoming really angry.

"You go around the world telling people to accept what God sends them. You'll help them. Sure you will. You'll help them to stay poor, to stay miserable, to be dependent on Big Daddy from Rome."

"Sam!" I admonished.

"I've read the Gospels. Christ went among the poor and shared what he had with them. He told a rich guy to sell everything he had and give it to the poor if he wanted to make it into heaven. I don't see anybody selling off the Papal jewels. I see Cardinals jet-setting around the world. I see the Pope telling the poor that they're God's chosen people—from the balconies of posh hotels."

Greg Molina smiled grimly. He must be a Catholic who's turned against the Church, I thought.

Sam kept on. "All my life I've seen the same old story: big government or big religion or big corporations telling the little guys to stay in their places and be grateful for whatever miserable crumbs they get. And they stay in their places and take what you deign to give them. And their children grow up poor and hungry and miserable and listen to the same sad song and make more children who grow up just as poor and hungry and miserable."

"That's not his fault," I said.

"Isn't it?" Sam was trembling with rage. "They're all the same, whether it's government or corporate or religion. As long as you stay poor and miserable they'll help you. And all they do is help you to stay dependent on them."

Pope William's expression was grim. But he said, "You're entirely right."

Sam's mouth opened, then clicked shut. Then he managed to utter, "Huh?"

"You are entirely right," the Pope repeated. He smiled again, but now it was almost sad, from the heart. "Oh, maybe not entirely, but right enough. Holy Mother Church has struggled to help the world's poor for centuries, but today we have more poor people than ever before. It is clear that our methods are not successful."

Sam's eyes narrowed warily, sensing a trap ahead. Cardinal Hagerty grumbled something too low for me to hear.

"For centuries we have ridden on the horns of a dilemma, a paradox, if you will," the Pope continued. "The goal of Holy Mother Church—the task given to Peter by Christ—was to save souls, not bodies. The Church's eyes have always been turned toward Heaven. Everything we have done has been done to bring souls to salvation, regardless of the suffering those souls must endure on Earth."

Before Sam could object, the Pope added, "Or so we have told ourselves."

Cardinal Hagerty let out his breath in what might have been a sigh. Or a hiss.

Pope William smiled at the old man, then continued, "The news media have hinted at . . . frictions between myself and the Curia—the bureaucracy that actually runs the Vatican."

"I've heard such rumors," I said.

Clasping his hands together, the Pope said, "The differences between myself and the Curia are based on the assessment that you have just made, Mr. Gunn. The Church has indeed told its faithful to ignore the needs of this world in order to prepare for the next. I believe that such an attitude has served us poorly. I believe the Church must change its position on many things. We can't save souls who have given themselves to despair, to crime and drugs and all kinds of immorality. We must give our people hope."

"Amen to that," Sam muttered.

"Hope for a better life here on Earth."

Ordinarily Sam would have quipped that we weren't on Earth at the moment. But he remained quiet.

"So you see," Pope William said, "we are not so far apart as you thought."

Sam shook himself, like a man trying to break loose from a hypnotic spell. "I still want my half bill," he said.

Pope William smiled at him. "We don't have it, and even if we did, we wouldn't give it to you."

"Then you're going to go down the tubes, just like I said."

"And the changes I am trying to make within the Vatican will go down the tubes with me," Pope William replied.

Sam thought a moment, then said, "Yeah, I guess they will."

Leaning toward Sam, Pope William pleaded, "But don't you understand? If you press your case, all the reforms that the Church needs will never be made. Even if you don't win, the case will be so infamous that I'll be blocked at every turn by the Curia."

"That's your problem," Sam replied, so low I could barely hear him.

"Why do you think I came up here?" the Pope continued. "I wanted to make a personal appeal to you to be reasonable. I need your help!"

Sam said nothing.

Cardinal Hagerty recovered his voice. "I thought from the beginning that this trip was a waste of precious time."

Pope William pushed his chair back from the table. "I'm afraid you were right all along," he said to the Cardinal.

"So we'll have a trial," Sam said, getting to his feet.

"We will," said the Pope. He was nearly six feet tall; he towered over Sam.

"You'll lose," Sam warned.

The Pope's smile returned, but it was only a pale imitation of the earlier version. "You're forgetting one thing, Mr. Gunn. God is on our side."

Sam gave him a rueful grin. "That's okay. I'm used to working against the big guys."

Sam and I walked slowly along the corridor that led from the Pope's quarters to the main living section of Selene. Josella trudged along on Sam's other side; Greg was a few steps ahead of us.

"Sam," I said, "I'm going to recommend against a trial."

He didn't look surprised.

"You can't do this," I said. "It's not right."

Sam seemed subdued, but he still replied, "You can recommend all you want to, Jill. The Court will still have to hear the case. The law's on my side."

"Then the law is an ass!"

He grinned at me. "Old gray-eyes got to you, didn't he? Sexy guy, for a Pope."

I glared at him. There's nothing so infuriating as a man who thinks he knows what's going on inside your head. Especially when he's right.

Josella said, "I'll have to report this meeting to my superiors back in Hartford."

"How about having supper with me?" Sam asked her. Right in front of me.

Josella glanced at me. "I don't think so, Sam. It might be seen as a conflict of interest."

Sam laughed. "We'll bring the judge along. We'll discuss the case. Hey, Greg," he called up the corridor, "you wanna have dinner with the rest of us?"

So the four of us met at the hotel's restaurant after freshening up in our individual rooms. I made certain to follow Sam to his suite, down the corridor from Josella's, before going to my own.

"Bodyguarding me?" he asked mischievously.

"Protecting my interest," I said. Then I added loftily, "In the integrity of the World Court and the international legal system."

Sam gave me a wry smile.

"I don't want you tampering with the opposition's lawyer," I said.

"Tamper? Me? The thought never entered my mind."

"I know what's in your mind, Sam. You can't fool me."

"Have I ever tried to?" he asked.

And I had to admit to myself that he never had. To the rest of the world Sam might be a devious womanizing rogue, a sly underhanded con man, even an extortionist, but he'd always been up-front with me. Damn him!

The restaurant was crowded, but Sam got us a quiet table in a corner. He and Greg were already there when I arrived. Shortly after me, Josella swept in, looking like an African princess in a long, clinging gold-mesh sheath. Sam's eyes went wide. He had barely flickered at my Paris original, but I didn't have Josella's figure or long legs.

Sam sat Josella on one side of him, me on the other. Greg was across the table from him. I think he was enjoying having two women next to him. I only hoped he couldn't see how jealous I was of Josella.

Trying to hide that jealousy, I turned to Greg. I was curious about him. Over predinner cocktails, I asked him, "You're a Catholic, aren't you? How do you feel about all this?"

Greg looked down into his drink as he stirred it with his straw. "I am a Catholic, but not the kind you may think. There are many of us in Latin America who recognized ages ago that the bishops and cardinals and all the 'official' Church hierarchy were in the service of the big landlords, the government, the tyrants."

"Greg was a revolutionary," Sam said, with a smirk.

"I still am," he told us. "But now I work from inside the system. I learned that from Sam. Now I help to create jobs for the poor, to educate them and help them break free of poverty."

"And free of the Church?" Josella asked.

Greg said, "Most of us remain Catholics, but we do not support the hierarchy. We have worker priests among us, men of the people."

"Isn't that what Pope William wants to encourage?" I asked.

"Perhaps so," Greg said. "His words sound good. But words are not deeds."

"You're really going to insist on a trial?" I asked Sam. He didn't look happy about it, but he said softly, "Got to. Ecuador National is close to bankruptcy. We need that money."

Greg nodded. I believed him, not Sam.

Dinner was uncomfortable, to say the least. Pope William had gotten to all of us, even Sam.

But by the time dessert was being served, at least Sam had brightened up a bit. He turned his attention to Josella. "Is your last name Dutch?" he asked her.

She smiled a little. "Actually, its derivation is Greek, I believe."

"You don't look Greek."

"Looks can be deceiving, Mr. Gunn."

"Call me Sam."

Josella seemed to consider the proposition for a few moments, then decided. "All right—Sam."

"Did you call your bosses in Hartford, Josie?" he asked her.

"Did I! Old man Banner himself got on the screen. Is he pissed with you!"

Sam laughed. "Good. He's the sonofabitch who shifted the blame to God."

"That's a standard clause in every policy, Sam."

"Yeah, but I asked him personally to reconsider in my case, and he laughed in my face."

"He said if you took this case to trial, he'd personally break your neck," Josella said, very seriously.

"He used a lot of adjectives to describe you, your neck, and how much he'd enjoy doing it."

"Great!" Sam grinned. "Did you make a copy of the conversation?"

Josella gave him a slow, delicious smile. "I did not. I even erased the core memory of it in my computer. You won't be subpoenaing my boss's heated words, Mr. Gunn."

Sam feigned crushing disappointment.

"This Mr. Banner hates Sam so much?" Greg asked.

"I think he truly does," said Josella.

"Perhaps he is the one who sent the assassins after Sam," Greg suggested. "At least one set of them."

"Mr. Banner?" she looked shocked.

A thought struck me. "You said the assassins were amateurs, Josella. Have you had much experience with terrorists?"

"Only what I read in the news media," she answered smoothly. "It seems to me that real terrorists blow you away as soon as they get the chance. They don't drag you across the landscape and gloat at you."

"Then let's be glad they were amateurs," Sam said.

"Professionals would have killed us all, right there in your office," Josella said to me. Flatly. As if she knew exactly how it was done.

"Without worrying about getting caught?" Greg asked.

"Considering the response time of the Dutch security people," Josella said, "they could have iced the four of us and made it out of the building with no trouble. If they had been professionals."

"Pleasant thought," Sam said.

There was plenty of night life in Selene, but as we left the restaurant Sam told us that he was tired and going to his quarters. It sounded completely phony to me.

Then Josella said she was retiring for the night, too. Greg looked a little surprised.

"I understand there's a gaming casino in the hotel," he said. "I think I'll try my luck."

We said good night to Greg and headed for the elevator to take us down to the level where our rooms were. On Earth, the higher your floor, the more prestigious and expensive. On the Moon, where the surface is pelted with micrometeors and bathed in hard radiation, prestige and expense increase with your distance downward.

Sam made a great show of saying good night to Josella. She even let him kiss her hand before she closed her door. I walked with him as far as the door to my own suite.

"Want to come in for a nightcap?" I asked.

Sam shook his head. "I'm really pretty pooped, kid. This business with the Pope's hit me harder than I thought it would."

But his eyes kept sliding toward Josella's door, down the corridor.

"Okay, Sam," I said, trying to make it sound sweet and unsuspecting. "Good night."

He pecked me on the cheek. A brotherly kiss. I hadn't expected more, but I still wanted something romantic or at least warm.

I closed my door and leaned against it. Suddenly I felt really weary, tired of the whole mess. Tired of chasing Sam, who was interested in every female in the solar system except me. Tired of this legal tangle with the Vatican. And scared of the effect that Pope William had on me. I wondered if one of the changes he wanted to make in the Church was to allow priests to marry. Wow!

I honestly tried to sleep. But I just tossed and fussed until I finally admitted that I was wide awake. I told the phone beside the bed to get Sam for me.

It got his answering routine. "I'm either sleeping or doing something else important. Leave your name, and I'll get back to you, promise."

Sleeping or doing something else important. I knew what "something else" was. I pulled on a set of coveralls and tramped down the corridor to Sam's door. I knocked.

No answer. Knocked harder. Still no answer. Pounded on it. He wasn't there.

I knew where he was. Steaming with rage, I stomped down the corridor to Josella's door and banged on it with both fists. I even kicked it.

"I know you're in there, Sam!" I shouted, not giving a damn who in the hotel could hear me. "Open up this goddamned door!"

Josella opened it. She was wearing nothing but the sheerest of nightgowns. And she had a pistol in her hand. "Senator Meyers," she said, with a sad kind of resignation in her voice. "I had hoped to avoid this." Puzzled, I pushed past her and into her room. Sam was sitting on the bed, buck naked, a sheet wrapped around his middle.

"Aw, shit, Jill," he said, frowning. "Now she's got you, too."

It hit me at last. Turning to Josella, I said, "You're an assassin!"

She nodded, her face very serious.

"She wants to waste me," Sam said gloomily, not moving from the bed.

"But why?" I blurted.

Josella kept the pistol rock-steady in her hand. "Because the ayatollahs are unanimous in their decision that this unbeliever must die."

"You're a Moslem?"

She smiled tightly. "Not all Moslem women wear veils and chadors, Senator Meyers."

"But why would the Moslems want to kill Sam? He's suing the Pope, not Islam."

"He is making a travesty of all religions. He is mocking God. The Church of Rome has yet to see the light of true revelation, but we slaves of Allah can't allow this blasphemy to continue."

"It's Islam's contribution to global religious solidarity," Sam said, disgust dripping from his words.

"I had wanted to do it cleanly, professionally," Josella said, "without any complications."

"That's why you let Sam into your room," I said.

"Yes," she said. "To give the condemned man his last wish. Although Sam didn't know he was condemned when I granted his wish."

"So you made it with her, after all," I said to Sam, angrily.

He made a sour face. "She screwed me, all right."

"And now what?" I asked Josella. "You kill us both?"

"I'm afraid so."

"And how do you get away?"

She shrugged. Inside that sheer nightgown it looked delicious, even to me. "There's a shuttle leaving for Earth orbit at midnight. Passage on it has already been booked for a young man named Shankar. By the time your bodies are discovered I will be Mr. Shankar, complete with moustache and beard."

"It'll have to be a damned good disguise," Sam groused. Almost smiling, Josella said, "It will be. Even my fingerprints will be different."

"You said you're a professional." I stalled for time. "You mean you've done this kind of thing before?"

Josella nodded slowly. "For six years. My job has been to assassinate policyholders whose estates would go to Islamic causes."

"You've worked for insurance companies, and they never knew?"

"Of course not."

"She's a lawyer, for Chrissake," Sam snapped. "She's trained to lie."

The phone rang. We heard Josella's taped voice say sweetly, "I am not able to answer your call right now. Please leave your name, and I'll call you back as soon as I possibly can."

"Josella?" I recognized that bombastic voice. It was Frank Banner. "This is Banner. Haven't been able to sleep for the past two nights. This damned business with Sam Gunn is driving me nuts. He's actually going ahead with his suit in the World Court, is he? Damned little pissant jerk! We can't let him drag the Pope through the mud the way he wants to. We just can't! Tell him we'll settle with him. Not his damned half billion, that's outrageous. But tell him we'll work out something reasonable if he'll drop this damned lawsuit."

I felt my mouth drop open. I looked at Sam, and he was grinning as if he'd been expecting this all along.

"And tell him that if I ever see him in the same room with me, I'll break every bone in his scrawny goddamned neck! Tell him that, too!"

The phone connection clicked dead. Sam flopped back on the bed and whooped triumphantly.

"I knew it!" he yelled. "I knew that Francis Xavier Banner couldn't let the Pope come to trial. I knew the tightfisted sonofabitch would finally break down and offer to settle my insurance claims!" He laughed wildly, kicking his bare hairy legs in the air and pounding the mattress with his fists.

I just stood there, dumbfounded. Had this whole complex procedure been nothing more than an elaborate scheme by Sam to get his insurance carrier to accept his accident claims? Yes, I realized. That was Sam Gunn at his wildest: threaten the Pope to get what he considered he was owed.

The gun in Josella's hand wavered, then she let her arm drop to her side.

"You don't have to kill Sam now," I said. "There's not going to be a court case after all."

"No," she said. "The blasphemer must still die."

Sam got to his bare feet, clutching the bedsheet around his middle like a Roman senator who didn't quite know how to drape his toga properly.

"You're a fraud," Sam said.

Josella's dark eyes snapped at him. "Fraud?"

"You're about as professional a killer as that fat blond Daughter."

"You think so?" Josella's voice went hard and cold, like an ice pick. She still had the gun in her hand.

"You said professionals do the job without hesitation," Sam said. "No talk, just boom, you're dead."

Josella nodded.

"So you're an amateur," Sam said, grinning at her. "You did a lot more than talk before you hauled out your gun."

"I did that with all the others, too," Josella said. It was a flat statement, neither a boast nor an excuse. "It's my trademark. Two of the older men I didn't even have to kill; they died of natural causes."

"Bullshit all the others. You've never killed anybody, and we both know it."

"You're wrong—"

"Yeah, sure. I'm going to start believing what a lawyer tells me, at my advanced age."

Josella looked confused. I know I was.

But Sam knew exactly what he was doing. "Put your gun back wherever the hell you were hiding it and get out of here," he told her. "Get on the midnight shuttle and don't come back."

"I can't do that," said Josella. "My mission is to kill you—or die. If I let you go, they'll kill me."

"Oh shit," Sam muttered.

"You mean that your own people will murder you if you don't kill Sam?"

Josella nodded. "I must succeed or die. That is what I promised them."

With a disgusted frown, Sam clutched his bedsheet a little tighter and reached for the phone with his free hand. "Don't!" Josella warned, raising her gun.

"I'm not calling security."

"Then who . . . ?"

Sam called Pope William. The Pope looked shocked, even on the tiny screen of the Picturephone, and even more surprised when Sam told him what his call was about.

"Sanctuary," he said. "This lady here needs your protection."

Blinking sleep from his steely eyes, Pope William said, "Maybe you'd better come over here to explain this to me."

It was almost comical watching Sam and Josella get dressed while she still tried to keep her pistol on us. Then the three of us trotted down the nearly empty corridors, back to the Pope's quarters. Two of his own security men, Swiss guards in plain coveralls, were waiting for us.

They brought us to a kind of sitting room, a bare little cell with four chairs grouped around a coffee table. Nothing else in the room: not a decoration or any refreshments or even a carpet on the stone floor. Josella sat down warily, put her pistol on her lap.

Pope William entered the room a few moments after we did. He was wearing a white sweatshirt and an old pair of Levis, and he still filled the room with a warm brilliance.

It was long past midnight before Sam got the whole thing explained to the Pope. Josella didn't help, insisting that she wanted no help from unbelievers.

"I won't try to convert you," William said, smiling at her. "But I can offer you protection and help you create a new persona for yourself."

"A kind of witness protection plan," Sam said, trying to encourage her. "See, we're bringing the Vatican into the twenty-first century."

Me? I was stewing. The two of them were falling all over themselves trying to help Josella and ignoring me altogether.

Josella was starting to nod, seeing that maybe there was a way out of the blind corner she'd trapped herself in. She took the gun from her lap, popped open its magazine, and laid the pieces on the coffee table.

"All right," she said. "I'll go along with you."

"But what about those other killings?" I heard myself blurt out. "She's admitted to murdering God knows how many men!"

Sam glowered at me.

Pope William smiled. "How do we know, Senator Meyers, that this entire episode—Sam's lawsuit, my coming to the Moon, the various assassination attempts—how do we know that all of this hasn't been God's way of bringing this one woman to repentance and salvation?"

"I won't convert," Josella snapped. "I'm a Moslem."

"Of course," said the Pope. "I only want you to change your life, not your religion."

"All this," I heard the disbelief in my own voice, "just for her?"

"There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who's redeemed than there is over one of the faithful," Pope William said.

Even God was concentrating on Josella, I thought, ashamed of my jealousy but feeling it seething inside me nonetheless.

Sam grinned at him. "So you think this whole thing has been an act of God, huh?"

"Everything is an act of God," said Pope William. "Isn't that right, Josella?"

She nodded silently.

Sam and I left Josella with the Pope. As we walked back along the corridors I tried to stop feeling so damned jealous. But the thought of her with Pope William just plain boiled me. All of a sudden it struck me that Josella might be more of a threat to William than she was to Sam. His soul, that is; not his body.

I started to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Sam asked.

"Nothing," I said. "It's just—everything's turned upside down and inside out."

"Nope," Sam said. "Everything worked out just the way I thought it would. Ol' Francis X. was an altar boy, y'know. Went to Notre Dame and almost became a priest, before he found out how much he enjoyed making money."

"You knew that all along?"

"I was counting on it," Sam answered cheerfully.

We were at my door. I realized I was very weary, drained physically and emotionally. Sam looked as chipper as a sparrow, despite the hour.

"Tomorrow's Christmas Eve," he said.

I tapped my wristwatch. "You mean today; it's well past midnight."

"Right. I gotta get a high-gee boost direct to Rome set up for Billy Boy if he's gonna say Christmas Eve mass in St. Peter's. Even then it's gonna be awful close. See ya!"

He hustled down the corridor to his own suite, whistling shrilly off-key. And that's the last I saw of Sam until Christmas.

Pope William was overjoyed, of course. He invited me to breakfast that morning, just before his high-boost shuttle was set to take off. Even Cardinal Hagerty managed to smile, although it looked as if the effort might shatter his stony face. Josella was nowhere in sight, though.

"My prayers have been answered," the Pope told me.

"The Lord certainly moves in mysterious ways," I said.

"Indeed She does," said the Pope, with a mischievous wink.

More mysterious than either of us realized at the time. Sam set up a direct high-gee flight to Rome for the Papal visitors, so that Pope William could get back in time for his Christmas Eve mass in St. Peter's. But all of a sudden an intense solar flare erupted and raised radiation levels in cislunar space so high that all flights between the Earth and the Moon had to be canceled. All work on the lunar surface stopped and everybody had to stay underground for forty-eight hours. It was as if God was forcing all of Selene's residents and visitors to observe the Christmas holiday.

Which is how William I became the first Pope to celebrate a public mass on the Moon. On Christmas Eve, in Selene's main plaza. The whole population turned out, even Sam.

"I figure about five percent of this crowd is Roman Catholic," Sam said, looking over the throng. We

were seated up on the stage of the theater shell, behind the makeshift altar. Several thousand people jammed the theater's tiers of seats and spilled out onto the grass of the plaza's greenway.

"That doesn't matter," I said. "For one hour, we're all united."

Sam grinned. The Pope didn't have his best ceremonial robes with him; he offered the mass in a plain white outfit.

"They're doing The Nutcracker this evening," Sam whispered to me. "Wanna see it?"

Low-gravity ballet. Once I had dreams of becoming a dancer on the Moon. "I wouldn't miss it."

"Good," said Sam.

We watched the elaborate ritual of the mass, and the thousands of transfixed men and women and children standing out on the plaza, their eyes on the Pope. I spotted a slim, dark-skinned young man in a trim moustache and beard who looked awfully familiar.

"Y' know," Sam whispered, "maybe I've been wrong about this all along."

I nodded.

"I mean," he went on, "if a guy really wants to make a fortune, he ought to start a religion."

I turned and stared at him. "You wouldn't!"

"Maybe that's what I ought to do."

"Oh Sam, you devil! Start a religion? You?"

"Who knows."

I tried to glare at him but couldn't.

"And another thing," he whispered. "If we ever do get married, you'll have to live here on the Moon with me. I'm not going back to Earth; it's too dangerous down there."

My heart skipped a couple of beats. That was the first time Sam had ever admitted there was any kind of chance he'd marry me.

He shrugged good-naturedly. "Merry Christmas, Jill."

"Merry Christmas," I replied, thinking that it might turn out to be a very interesting new year indeed.