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The Vatican Outfit  
by Laura Resnick  
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    \_In September of 1978, Pope John Paul I died only thirty-three days after his election to the papacy. At the time of his death, he had already decided on startling changes which would affect the doctrine, hierarchy, and finances of the Church. Too many powerful and ruthless men (including certain underworld figures) had a great deal to lose under the papacy of John Paul I, and it is widely believed that he was murdered.\_

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Everyone needs friends. Hey, it's the way God made the world. A man without friends had better start digging a six foot hole in a real peaceful spot, if you catch my drift. And not just any friends, either. Special friends. When I was a boy in Sicily, we called such friends men of respect, or men of honor. Or, if we was being real careful, we called them the friends of the friends -- gli amici degli amici.

    When Albino Luciani, His Holiness Pope John Paul I, took his place in the Apostolic Palace in Vatican City in August of 1978, it didn't take no genius to realize that he lacked the one thing that any man needs to survive past sundown: the right kind of friends. Unfortunately, being a naive polenta-eating priest from Venice, he just didn't understand these things. I mean no disrespect to the Holy Father; it's just the way those northerners are.

    Well, we -- my associates and I -- watched the situation very closely for about a month. Everyone we talked to had only kind things to say about Papa Luciani. He was soft-spoken, intelligent, educated, modest, and even celibate. But, everyone admitted, he possessed two unfortunate character traits that were sure to get him into serious trouble, particularly in a joint like the Vatican; he was honest and principled.

    All right, all right, so maybe that's not such a terrible thing. Sure, you wonder how a guy like that becomes the Pope, the capo di tutti capi, and you have doubts about his ability to run a big outfit like the Church; but, in the end, you take the material you're given to work with, and you do the best you can. Am I right? Okay, so he was a strange choice for the job, and who the hell knows what those boys in the conclave were thinking of when they made him boss, but I've seen crazier things. Just take a good look at the boss we got in the White House right now.

    Anyhow, the real problem with Papa Luciani, you see, was that the guy didn't know how to keep his opinions to himself. I mean he just could not keep his trap shut. It was like he thought that being Pope made him untouchable, or like he believed that a few Swiss pansies in silly suits could really protect

him from the hit he was just begging for. I gotta tell you, by late September, we was pretty worried. The poor \_schlemiel\_ (that's a Jewish word I learned from Meyer Lansky, may he rest in peace) was going after \_everybody\_: Licio Gelli, Michele Sindona, Roberto Calvi, cardinals, bishops, P2, the Vatican Bank... Well, it was starting to look like Paul VI, may he rest in peace, was the only Vatican guy who wasn't gonna be excommunicated by the time the smoke cleared.

My esteemed employer Mr. Corvino -- who, I'm pleased to say, beat that white slavery rap and isn't gonna be deported after all -- has always had a keen eye for business opportunities. After a couple of stressful years of doing business with certain Colombian families, Mr. Corvino felt a strong desire to return to his roots (figuratively speaking, of course, since no person in his right mind would want to move back to Corleone) and do business only with Italians. If the Pope wanted to sever certain business connections, it only made sense that he'd also be interested in establishing new ones. And, since some business connections are a little more difficult to sever than others, Mr. Corvino figured that Papa Luciani could probably use the help of an experienced businessman like myself.

That's how I wound up in Vatican City on September 28, 1978.

Mr. Corvino pulled a few strings, and of course, we had help on the inside. My sister's youngest son, Angelo Costello, was working for Papa Luciani's outfit. Yeah, right there in the Vatican. The kid got his button about five years before Luciani became Pope. No, no, not \_that\_ kind of button. Angelo was -- whaddya call it -- \_ordained\_, right here in New York City. I can't say I was completely in favor of it at the time, because I had a real good job lined up for the kid. But he wasn't interested in my perfectly legitimate business concerns, and so he became a priest. What are you gonna do with the younger generation?

Anyhow, maybe Angie made the right choice. I was worried at first, because the Church isn't family; hell, they ain't even all Italians. But, I could see after a while that they wasn't so different from us after all, and that made me feel better. Angie was working his way up through the ranks almost as fast as he would have if he'd stayed in the Corvino family. He was a real stand-up guy, and his bosses could see that. So, when the opportunity came, they sent him off to Rome. I guess his people wanted someone on the inside, too, huh?

"Uncle Vito, you look well," Angelo said, greeting me in my guest room at the Vatican just a few minutes after I arrived.

"Can't say the same about you, kid. Your face is all green. Did you eat some bad fish?"

He looked over his shoulder, like he was expecting to see someone watching us from the doorway. "Please don't call me 'kid,' Uncle Vito."

"What -- I'm gonna call my own nephew 'Father?'" I slapped him on the back and pinched his cheek. "Get outta here."

"What are you doing here?"

"Why are you whispering?"

A priest walked past the doorway, and I thought Angie was gonna jump out of his skin. "What are you doing here?" he whispered again.

I caught on. The kid was obviously afraid we was being watched, maybe even bugged. But whispering wasn't gonna help. I was glad I'd arrived in time to teach him a few things. "This room's a little stuffy, don't you think?" I said real casually. "Let's take a walk."

"In public? Where people can see us \_together\_?" He looked like he was gonna faint.

"Hey, that's the best place to be right now." I put on my coat and hat, took him by the elbow, and led him down the hallway and out of the building. We took a little stroll in St. Peter's Square. "You afraid of being whacked out, kid? Is that why you're sweating like a bride on her wedding night?"

"Whacked out?" he bleated.

"Hey, relax. We're as safe out here as we'll ever be. Look at all these

tourists. No one's gonna clip us in front of all these people, trust me. Whenever you know someone's gunning for you, it's those private, isolated places that you want to avoid. Stay out of your room, the confessional, and dark restaurants. Speaking as an expert, if I was gonna whack someone, that's where I'd do it," I told him.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!"

"Yeah, brightly lit public places, lotsa people, plenty of witnesses. That's the kind of background you need to make you feel safe. And, if someone is dumb enough to try to clip you in public, chances are that they'll clip a perfect stranger by accident and you'll get away without a scratch."

"\_What?\_"

"So you just listen to your Uncle Vito, and everything's gonna be all right."

"What are you -- "

"Another thing -- and this is very important: don't ever talk inside, and don't ever talk on the phone. You got that? You wanna talk, go outside. And don't go nowhere without me." I patted his cheek. "I'm gonna take good care of you and your boss, kid."

"My boss?"

"Yeah. Because my boss is very worried." I looked around, because you can never be too careful. Sure enough, some blond broad was standing a little too close to us. "Beat it, sister!"

Angie turned red. "Uncle Vito, you can't -- "

"Listen, kid. This is serious. Are you paying attention?" He nodded. "We're pretty sure there's a hit out on your boss, and we think it may go down tonight."

"A hit? On my boss?" He was talking real slow, like English was a problem for him or something. "Whoa, hang on a minute, Uncle Vito. I think you're confusing me with my brother."

"Well, not that you asked, but Joey's doing fine. In fact, he's up for parole next month. And your mother would like to know why you don't call her more often."

"The FBI wiretap just sort of took all the joy out of family phone calls." He sounded a little pissed off.

"Here," I said, remembering the wad in my pocket. "Your father asked me to give you this." I stuck a few grand in his hand.

"Vito! I can't accept this!"

"Go on, kid, take it. Your old man had a good year, and he knows that this outfit don't pay you much."

"The Roman Catholic Church is not an out -- "

"And may the Blessed Virgin forgive me, but that's all the time I got for family business. I need to see your boss right away."

"The Pope? You expect me to introduce you to the Holy Father?"

"Hey, I know this goes against protocol. If I want to offer a temporary alliance to help stop a takeover, I should approach his consigliere first. Problem is, Angie, I think the consigliere's in on it."

"The consigliere..." Angie's jaw dropped. "Are you trying to tell me that Carmine Corvino sent you here because he believes that the Vatican Secretary of State is involved in a plot to assassinate the Pope?"

"We ain't pointing no fingers at nobody. All I'm saying is that there's gonna be a hit on the Pope, and except for you and me, nobody in this outfit is above suspicion."

"That's impossible!"

"Yeah, and I'll bet that's just what Joe Bonnano said before the Banana War started and he had to go into hiding."

Angelo's forehead got all wrinkly while he thought it over. He was always a quick kid; one hour later we was having a sit-down with the Pope.

"Your Holiness," Angelo said, as we walked around some fancy little garden, "I would never presume to interrupt your busy schedule like this if I didn't believe this were truly a life-and-death emergency."

I was looking around, kind of nervous about being in such an isolated spot. Frankie (the Noodle) Barone bought it in a place just like that garden.

"Carmine Corvino may be a racketeer, an extortionist, a narcotics dealer, and a murderer, but he's no fool," Angie went on.

"Mr. Corvino is a perfectly legitimate businessman," I corrected. Vicious rumors start so easily.

"If Corvino says there's going to be an attempt on your life, Your Holiness, then I believe that there will be. If anyone could be considered an unimpeachable source of underworld information, it's my Uncle Vito's, um, associate."

"So, Albino," I said. "I can call you Albino, can't I? This is the situation. It's not just that we've gotta avoid the hit; we've also gotta take out the boys who are involved in it. All of them, Al, even if that means whacking your consigliere."

"Whacking?" the Pope said.

"Assassinating, Holy Father," Angie said. These college boys!

Well, Luciani looked pretty shocked. I could see it was time to lay out the deal for him.

"Al, come on, we're all men of the world here. Let's be frank," I said. "This is a very big outfit you got here, and you've had some very tough boys working for you over the centuries. But now, times have changed, and you've all grown a little soft. Your income is good, you hardly got any trouble with the feds, you got pretty good public relations, and you got soldiers like my nephew here joining up almost every day. You got a good thing here. But let's be honest, Al." I looked him right in the eye. "When war comes, and it is coming, it's usually the good who die young."

Luciani thought it over. "If I accept your assertion that I'm in danger of being assassinated -- "

"\_If?\_" \_ I said. "Al, you'd better not wait too long to start believing it, or you're gonna find yourself with a bullet between the eyes and a quick trip to the Pearly Gates. And then I'm gonna have to tell Mr. Corvino that Angie and I failed here. And Mr. Corvino don't like it when his boys fail."

"Wait a minute!" Angelo said. "I'm not -- "

"Quiet, kid," I ordered.

Well, Luciani was hard to convince, but the fear of death has a way of making any man reasonable. Particularly since that night, I figured out how they was planning to ice him.

Angie convinced him to let the two of us hide in his suite of rooms to protect him. Luciani had been pretty grumpy ever since our little conversation, but I had the feeling that he secretly liked me, so I was patient with him. After all, no boss likes to hear from a capo from some other outfit that he's gone soft.

So there we were, late at night, prowling around the Pope's bedroom, when I remembered something Mr. Corvino said after Crazy Vinny Vitelli's body was found decomposing in a perfume shop on West 56th Street: "If you want to whack someone without getting caught, learn his habits." You see, Vinny used to slip behind the counter at this shop to pinch the sales girls, and the Matera family, whose turf Vinny had violated, knew about this. I bet Vinny never even knew that the last ass he pinched before croaking belonged to a transvestite hit man from the West Coast who the Materas brought in special for that job.

When I saw the glass of medicine on the Pope's bedside table, I knew. "Al! Wait!" I hollered, just as he was lifting it to his lips. He paused long enough for me to grab it from him. "You take this stuff every night?" I asked.

"Yes. It was prescribed by my -- "

"This is how they planned to do it," I said, absolutely sure.

"Poison?" Angie asked.

"Sure. I should have thought of it before. It's so clean and simple. There wouldn't be any bullet holes to explain away." I nodded. Just to be sure, we gave a little of the medicine to the Pope's cat. The poor thing was

dead within seconds. I locked eyes with the Pope. "These guys ain't no dummies, Al."

"Which guys?" Luciani asked.

I wish you could've seen his face. He believed me now, all right. A near brush with death can change a man's whole outlook on life. I told him to get some sleep, since they wouldn't try twice in one night, and then we could talk about it in the morning.

"Sleep?" Angie howled. "Uncle Vito, how can you talk about sleep at a time like this?"

"Hey! This is wartime now, kid. We're going to the mattresses." I was a little tough with him. He had to grow up fast, like it or not. "You gotta look after your health, which means you gotta eat and sleep whenever you got the chance. You gotta be ready to move at a moment's notice. And you gotta keep the other side guessing. You understand what I'm saying?"

Well, I slept pretty good that night on a couch near the Pope's bed. Luciani tossed and turned all night, and Angie was still pacing when I woke up the next morning.

"You were pacing when I went to sleep," I said to him. "Didn't you even sit down once? Didn't you sleep at all?"

"Of course I didn't sleep!"

"What did I say to you last night? Huh? We're going to the matt -- "

"Excuse me, Vito. Perhaps we should eschew needless recriminations for the time being and decide upon our immediate course of action," Luciani interrupted.

"Yeah, maybe you're right," I admitted.

"While I appreciate your saving my life, I can't help feeling apprehensive about Mr. Corvino's interest in my well-being. I mean... He does have a certain reputation."

"Al, please, you're embarrassing me. Mr. Corvino is a good Catholic, and your enemies are his enemies. Of course, he sees that you're gonna have to do some serious housecleaning here. You got some boys placed pretty high up who can't be trusted no more, and your outfit has got its fingers in some pretty sticky pies."

"And once our house is clean and our fingers are unstuck?" Angie asked.

I smiled. "Well, you're gonna have a pretty big gap to fill. And Mr. Corvino is a pretty big guy who is prepared to fill that gap with his perfectly legitimate business interests, so that you and your boys can concentrate on... whatever it is that you like to concentrate on."

"But we would have to clean house Corvino's way, right?" said Angie.

"That's part of the deal. You wanna shake on it, Al?"

"I'm afraid that that's completely out of the question, Vito. I'm a priest. I am now the spiritual leader of the entire Roman Catholic world. I can't go around ordering assassinations of the Church's enemies. I must deal with these evil men and their institutions in a legal and Christian fashion."

"Al, that's gotta be just about the dumbest thing I ever heard in my whole life."

"Nevertheless, it is my decision."

Well, Mr. Corvino had figured on something like this happening, just like he figured that Luciani's enemies weren't gonna give up so easily. So I hung out at the Vatican for another couple of weeks, keeping Angelo's boss alive. He was one stubborn guy, let me tell you, and it wasn't until his private toilet was rigged with plastic explosives that he finally realized that we was gonna have to do things the old-fashioned way, like it or not.

"That's the fifth attempt on your life since I got here, Al," I said. "Are you ready to let Mr. Corvino help you?"

The poor guy had been dividing all his time between trying to waste his enemies in a "legal and Christian fashion" and trying not to get killed. It kept him so busy that he didn't have no time left over to comfort the poor, give a mass, or baptize no babies. And as for running his legitimate business concerns -- forget it! I could see the time was right to bring him into the

fold.

"What do I have to do?" Luciani asked.

We started by placing a phone call to Chicago, where a certain cardinal was giving Luciani a hard time. When the guy answered the phone, I reminded Luciani, "Just say exactly what I told you to say."

He nodded and said into the receiver, "This is Big Al Luciani." He frowned a second later and said, "You know -- the Pope... Yes, that Pope."

"He's stalling you, Al. Get on with it," I said.

Luciani cleared his throat. "So here's the scam, Johnny. I don't like the way you've been handling your branch of the outfit... The outfit... You know, the Holy Roman Church." He took a deep breath and got tough. "You ain't been following orders, Johnny, and that makes me mad. What's more, you've been ignoring all my messages, and that makes me hurt. I don't think you want me to be mad and hurt, Johnny, 'cause then I get mean. And do you know what happens when the boss of this outfit gets mean? People get whacked. I ain't saying it's gonna be you, Johnny, but then, I also ain't saying it ain't."

Well, that guy in Chicago was one stubborn idiot -- what is it about priests? -- but he finally saw reason. A perfectly legitimate associate of Mr. Corvino's, who's based in Chicago, reported that the cardinal took a small suitcase and five grand in cash and disappeared that very afternoon. Last I heard, he was flipping burgers at some roadside joint in Oklahoma.

Now, personally, I don't like violence. But, under certain circumstances, I'm all in favor of whacking. It's over quickly, and, more importantly, you don't have to worry about a guy squealing to the feds after he's been whacked. But, Big Al didn't want anyone to be clipped, and so we had a little disagreement when Roberto Calvi was found dead in London.

"Al, what are you so upset about? The cops called it suicide!"

"You were supposed to talk to him, Vito."

"And I did."

"What did you say that convinced him to jump off Blackfriars Bridge with a rope around his neck?" Luciani snapped.

However, these little disagreements aside, we got along very well. By the time Luciani called a sit-down with his consigliere and the head of the Vatican Bank, he hardly needed my help at all.

"Boys," he said. "My friends -- my real friends -- think I should have you whacked out."

"Whacked out?   " said the American one.

"Don't interrupt Mr. Luciani," I said.

"Now," Luciani continued, "I'm a perfectly legitimate priest, and I don't like violence. But, when I found a cobra in my bed last week, boys, I felt violent. Isn't that the truth, Vito? You remember how violent I felt?"

"Pretty violent, Mr. Luciani."

"Holy Father, surely you don't think -- "

"Don't interrupt His Holiness," Angie said.

"So I tell you what I'm gonna do," Luciani said. Angie and I pulled out our pieces. The priests started to look like they might wet their pants. Luciani placed some documents in front of each of them. "I'm gonna give you a both a chance to resign from office and enter lifelong service at a Catholic mission in rural Uruguay. You'll only miss electricity and plumbing for the first year or two. What do you boys say?"

"Holy Father, how could we possibly -- "

"Or," Luciani said, "I could leave you alone with Vito for twenty minutes and send your remains to the zoo. I gotta tell you, the second way would be easier for me, but I'm trying to be a nice guy here."

For a second there, I thought they might call his bluff. But then they must have remembered Calvi's suicide, and they caved in. When it came to wiseguys like Sindona and Gelli, it was so easy I almost felt embarrassed. Mr. Corvino knew where the bodies was buried, and so Mr. Luciani was able to hand them over to the cops on a silver platter.

We was so busy that time just flew by. Finally, it was a week before

Christmas, and as far as I could tell, the war was over.

"Big Al," I said, "it's time for me to go home. I got grandchildren, I got a wife. You know how it is."

"A man should be with his family at Christmas," Luciani agreed. "We'll be fine here. The worst is over. I had no idea that a dirty operation could be cleaned up so quickly."

"It's something to keep in mind for the next time you got trouble with your boys," I said.

"Yes," he said. "I'll certainly keep all this in mind."

Well, I should have paid more attention to the look in his eyes that night, because here we are, all these years later, going to the mattresses again. Angie became Luciani's \_consigliere\_, and then the two of them finally turned around and bit the hand that fed them. Four days ago, Mr. Corvino's oldest son, who's been running the Vatican Bank for over a dozen years, was plugged by a priest. Luciani's got some pretty tough boys in his outfit these days, and I don't kid myself that this is gonna be an easy war. Mr. Corvino says we both made the same mistake with Big Al Luciani; we taught him everything we know, and now he don't need us no more.

It's too bad, too, 'cause I kind of liked the guy. And it's gonna break my heart to clip my sister's son. But business is business. Those boys in the Church got greedy. They just don't wanna share no piece of their operation no more with perfectly legitimate businessmen like myself and Mr. Corvino.

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