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EXTREME UNCTION

by Dave Guilford

Guadeloupe

Start the breathing.

Stop the bleeding.

Protect the wound.

Treat for shock.

It all comes rushing back to you.

It's been eleven years since I've killed a man, and already today I've killed two. It's a lot like I remember. Everything moves in slow motion, and every sound is amplified.

A woman screaming in pain.

A baby crying.

Waves slapping against the hull of the boat as she rides at anchor.

I need to focus.

The woman is on her way out. Her pain is subsiding, and I can tell that she's figured out that this is a very bad sign. She doesn't know me; she's never seen me before today. But she's begging me to save her. What was agonized howling a few moments ago has now been reduced to the desperate pleading of a hopeless case. "Please please please please please..." she moans, and fixes her terrified gaze on me thinking it will help me grasp the urgency of her situation.

She's in shock now, and she isn't the only one. The difference is, hers will be over in a few minutes and mine will last the rest of my life. How long that ends up being depends entirely on what I do next.

Her grip on my hand, her grip on life itself, grows slack. She isn't looking at me any longer. She's staring at the ceiling, but her eyes are out of focus. The only sound she makes now is a faint gurgling, like that of an asthmatic child sleeping. Perhaps she's praying; I hope the angels are there to carry her home.

I look at the dead man ten feet away. His gear is full tactical government issue and it isn't cheap. He used a Sig Sauer P226R on the woman, so I figure him for a ex-SEAL. Lightweight body armor, tanto knives, satellite comlink; these guys came ready to party.

I'm way out of my league.

Antigua

On an island where the local Catholics demand at least a 45-minute sermon every Sunday, Father Dan Fitzpatrick acknowledged that the time he spent in an empty confessional could be put to better use than a Sudoku puzzle. Still, it paid to keep a nimble mind. He was startled when he heard someone close the door on the other side of the screen.

"Bless me Father, for I have sinned."

The priest snatched his breath when he recognized the voice. "You...you can't be here."

"I need your help, Father."

"I can't help you, Jack. My God, what were you thinking coming here?"

"What have you heard?"

"That you murdered a family and their crew, and then stole their boat. It's all over the television. You have to get out of here, or I'll call the police."

"If you really believed that, Daniel, the police would already be here. You knew I'd come."

I could see his shoulders slump through the screen and he rubbed his eyes. After a long moment he asked, "So you didn't kill anyone?"

I wanted so badly to tell him what he wanted to hear. But that's not what confession is for.

"Yes, I'm afraid I did. Two men, mercenaries, were sent to kill the family. They weren't crew members, they were pros. They killed the man and the woman in cold blood before I got the drop on them. That's why I'm here. I surprised them before they could hurt the child. I have her, and I need you to take her for me."

The priest drew in a breath and deliberated a moment before speaking.

"That's kidnapping, Jack. What do you know about the girl? How old is she?"

"She's six or eight months old. No papers, like most of my cargo. We've been calling her Hope."

"Why's that?"

"Because the boat's name is Pandora and she's all that's left."

"That's not what I heard, Jack."

Now it was my turn to take a moment before replying.

"Are you asking me to tithe, Father?"

"Don't make a mockery of the sacrament, Jack. They're going to come for you, especially if what I've heard about that ship's cargo is true."

"They've already come for me, Father. I need you to take Hope and find her family, or find her a new one. She can't come with us. Things are going to get very bad for awhile. What you heard is true. There's almost twenty million in gold bullion on board. It's what they were really after. I just showed up too early. I was supposed to pick up the boat two days after they were gone. Presumably, the boat would have been empty like all the others I've grabbed for them."

"You're implying that the government hired mercenaries to kill a family and steal millions in gold bullion. Why would they do that? It's an inconsequential amount to them."

"The owner of the boat was the banker for the exiles, and the boat was the bank. Twenty million is nothing to the U.S. government, but it's just about everything to those guys."

"Then they'll come for you, too, Jack."

"They won't have to. I'm one of them now, by default. The minute I killed two government agents, I went to the other side."

"What about your crew?"

"I gave them the option and they chose to stay. You know they're not exactly law-abiding taxpayers, Daniel."

"Thieves and murderers, as I recall."

"It's hard to find good help these days. We can't all be priests."

My old friend sighed at the irony of the remark and replied, "What on Earth happened to you, Jack?"

I hung my head on reflex and answered, "I went another way, Father. I went another way. Will you help me with the child?"

"Of course. But after you finish your confession."

As I knelt in the confessional and bared my soul, I could not have known at that moment how heavy a penance I was about to pay. I did, however, notice the six-foot two-inch white guy doing his best to blend into the crowd at the market across from the church as I left.

Puerto Rico

The Colonel leaned back in his chair and flipped through the file in his lap. Across his mahogany desk sat the man he'd summoned for the task at hand. At 31 years old, Greg Fletcher amassed an impressive record with the company. He carried himself with a swagger and the air of someone outwardly unimpressed with the management of the firm, and this gave the Colonel pause.

Fletcher glanced at his watch and then around the office. The bookshelves held all the usual suspects: Sun Tzu, von Clausewitz, Bonaparte; a library uniquely suited to fighting 16th century enemies with 19th century tactics. The photos on the wall showed the Colonel posed with various dignitaries. The brass oak leaf on his collar in the earlier photos confirmed the rumors that his promotion to Colonel was self-awarded. Outside, palm trees swayed in the Puerto Rican

tradewinds. Fletcher glanced at his watch again.

"Am I keeping you from something, Mr. Fletcher?" The Colonel made no attempt to conceal the ire in his voice.

"No sir."

"What can you tell me about Jack MacNamara?"

Fletcher measured his response, trying not to reveal his impatience with a line of questioning that was providing his quarry more time to go to ground.

"He used to be a Mississippi river boat pilot, but he left the States when he got into some tax trouble. Now my intel suggests that he's pretty much gone to seed. He works asset forfeiture jobs for Customs from time to time as an independent contractor. He's a small time smuggler on the side. Two years ago, he sailed into a hurricane to lose a Coast Guard cutter when he was running a load of quinine to a Cuban fishing village during a malaria outbreak. Pretty much your garden variety jerkoff."

"He has Special Forces training."

"Not exactly, Colonel," Fletcher said dismissively. "He was a chaplain with the 3rd Ranger Battalion a million years ago."

"That chaplain killed two of your best, Mr. Fletcher. Imagine if he weren't such a devout Christian."

Fletcher bristled at the sarcasm. "He'll be repaid in kind, Colonel."

The Colonel chuckled at Fletcher's arrogance and leaned forward in his leather chair to appraise the young man. Fletcher had no military experience; he'd joined the firm right out of college as an intel analyst. He had a gift for computers and he was a natural born sadist, so when he volunteered for the firm's tactical training his application was approved. He'd distinguished himself in a number of field exercises and even had three confirmed kills. He'd shown some leadership ability and, when he was made a team leader, he managed to recruit a group of the firm's biggest damage cases.

The Colonel knew that Fletcher motivated his crew of misfits with the promise of wholesale violence and off-the-books plunder. Management looked the other way as long as things didn't get out of hand. But what worried the Colonel most was Fletcher's lack of combat experience in a situation where his team didn't hold an overwhelming tactical advantage. The firm didn't know much about Jack MacNamara, but the Colonel had a feeling the man knew how to level a playing field.

"What do you know about his crew?"

"Three men. Two older guys with criminal records, a Palestinian kid who did some time for computer hacking and identity theft. None of them pose much of a threat, sir."

"We want that ship and its cargo, Mr. Fletcher. Your team blew a simple pop and drop. Our contract is up for renewal and DoD is not happy right now. I don't have to explain to you what happens to the firm if we lose that contract, do I?"

"No sir."

"It took us the better part of two months to locate that vessel. It seems the exiles have managed to engineer a masking device that gives them the ability to make that 80-foot catamaran look like a 9-foot dinghy to military radar, so they know where all of our ships are but we can't identify theirs. The government wants that device, Mr. Fletcher. How do you propose to find the ship?"

"It's already done, sir. MacNamara has a relationship with an American priest on Antigua. The priest agreed to take the child. We're on the priest, he'll lead us to MacNamara and the boat."

"Yes, well, about the child..."

"It's done, sir."

"It just wouldn't do to have that sort of loose end out there, Mr. Fletcher."

"I understand, sir. If there's nothing else..."

"Go, Mr. Fletcher. The jet is fueled and waiting on the tarmac. You should be on the ground in Antigua in 90 minutes. I expect regular updates."

Montserrat

The first time I saw Pandora, riding at anchor in that hidden cove, I thought she looked more like some high-tech aircraft than any boat I'd ever been contracted to steal. Her hulls were jade green and she had a jet-black mainmast, which I could only guess was carbon fiber. Her stainless steel rigging had undergone gun-metal bluing, so sunlight wouldn't glint off the shrouds. Her mainsail appeared white while rolled inside the boom, but I recognized that it would be opaque when hoisted and nearly transparent. I was certain the furled headsail was the same. At any distance greater than a kilometer, she'd be all but invisible on the water. And her modest freeboard suggested she was built more for speed than for comfort.

Like every beautiful woman, she was full of surprises. I found the baby slung in a hammock in the master stateroom. There was more gold than I'd ever seen in the open vault just aft of the pinnacle on the port side. I walked past a well-stocked armory adjacent to the main salon on my way to the starboard engine room. A glance inside the navigation station revealed a bevy of bleeding-edge electronics, some of which I couldn't even identify. In the supply room next to the nav station I found the anchor chain I was looking for.

My mind raced in a thousand directions, but my body was on autopilot. I dragged the four bodies up on deck. I loaded the man and woman into the sailing dinghy I'd borrowed to get out to the boat in the first place, and set the sail to land them on the beach where they'd be found in a matter of hours. I chained the other two together and pushed them overboard, confident that they'd be found as well, but not before the crabs had a fair go at them.

On my way out of the cove, I radioed my crew on the other side of the island and told them to meet me at our rendezvous point on Montserrat sixty nautical miles to the northwest. Pandora made the trip in just over four hours, my fastest time ever through the Guadeloupe Passage. She was a technological marvel. A yacht her size would normally require at least 3 crewmen, but she was rigged for singlehanding.

I dropped anchor in the shadow of the Soufriere volcano, well inside the uninhabited Exclusion Zone. The baby slept through most of the passage, and I fed her shortly after we arrived on Montserrat. I knew I had a few hours before my crew arrived, so I set about cleaning up the ghastly mess in the salon.

Three hours later the radio interrupted my housekeeping.

"Pandora, this is Desperado. We're almost on site, but we've got a problem. We've got company. The radar is picking up a 34-foot cabin cruiser in our spot. Please advise."

That didn't make any sense; I hadn't seen another boat since arriving. I came up on deck to investigate.

"Pete, this is Jack. There's no other boat here but me."

"Boss, I'm telling you I'm looking right at the screen. It's showing a 34-foot Meridian named Whiplash."

"Pete, there has to be a problem with the equipment. I'm the only one here. Come on in."

"Roger that. But the equipment is fine. It identified three different ships and we passed them all on the way here. There's nothing wrong with our radar."

It didn't make sense until they rafted up next to Pandora, wide eyed. They were tying off to an 80-foot catamaran that the radar was insisting was a 34-foot motor boat.

Pete scrambled over the lifelines first, followed by Sid Colsen and finally by Sami, our electronics whiz kid and the youngest member of the crew. I grabbed Sami and headed for the nav station. Sami whistled in shock when he entered the room.

"What is all this stuff, kid?"

He moved from corner to corner, brushing his hands over the various screens and gadgets like a teenager with a hot rod.

"There's no GPS on board, is there Jack?"

It was odd, but it was one of the first things I'd noticed. Every boat I'd grabbed over the past 15 years had a GPS on it but, for some reason, Pandora did not.

"No, Sami, there isn't. Why is that?"

"Addressable," he explained. When I raised my eyebrows, he realized he needed to elaborate. "GPS systems are addressable devices. When you turn one on and it finds a couple of satellites, it registers with those satellites and then it is possible to track the device itself, sort of like GPS in reverse. All the electronics on this boat are designed to make it impossible to track. There's no way she'd have a GPS on board."

"So there's something on board that's tricking our radar into thinking she's something that she's not." I said, almost to myself.

"Exactly. That's top notch stuff, Jack. You'd have to be hacked into the Coast Guard's mainframe to

override a vessel's physical radar signature. Even then, I didn't think it could be done. They're gonna want this boat, Boss."

"You don't know the half of it, kid." I replied, thinking about the gold in the vault.

I spent the next hour bringing them up to speed and filling them in on my plan. I let them know what we were up against, and I asked if anyone wanted out. No takers.

Saving the child was the priority; if we could get away with the boat and the gold, all the better. The next morning before sunrise, Sami and I untied Desperado and headed up the coast to Marguerita Bay where he would drop the baby off at the only hospital on the island and I would catch a WinAir flight to Antigua. I felt a sudden compulsion to make my confession.

Antigua

Pandora ghosted past Fort Berkley into English Harbour and dropped anchor at Galleon Beach in the waning summer daylight. Nelson's Dockyard and the moorings around it were nearly full, so there was no way a ship like Pandora would go unnoticed. The two men aboard made their final preparations, then dinghyed over to the Dockyard and ordered a couple Wadadli's at the Galley Bar.

Pete and Sid said nothing as they watched more and more people take notice of Pandora. They finished their beers and paid the tab, confident that the news of her arrival would be all over the island in less than an hour. They loaded their duffel bags into the trunk of a cab and headed over the hill to St. John's.

I checked into a room at the Heritage Hotel near the cruise ship terminal after leaving Father Dan. There was a knock on the door, and Pete and Sid looked startled when I opened it.

"What's the matter with you two?" I asked. "Haven't you ever seen me dressed for a party?"

"Just not what we expected, Boss. The boat's ready for any uninvited guests." Pete said. At that, he opened the duffel bags to reveal a myriad of weapons from Pandora's armory. "We brought everything we thought we might need."

They certainly had.

Father Dan entered the cemetery leading up to St. John's Cathedral and paused to catch his breath. The twin towers of the cathedral rose a hundred feet above the cemetery gates and were even more imposing at night. He would've preferred a more open and well-lit place to exchange the child.

He threaded his way through the headstones and crypts, some of them more than two hundred years old, and he didn't notice the three men watching his every move from outside the gates. The Anglican bishop left the church unlocked as a favor to Father Dan after receiving his nervous phone call. The three men slipped inside the cemetery as Father Dan reached the entry to the cathedral.

He opened the door and stepped inside the dimly lit church. As the door shut behind him, he heard something move to his left side. Before he could react, a massive hand closed over his mouth and he was pulled off his feet and into the shadows.

"Don't make a sound, Father." Pete whispered, and then let him go.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness and he recognized me standing before him.

In a Roman collar.

"What...what's going on, Jack?"

"There's no child, Daniel. I had to get these guys out in the open. You'll find the baby at the hospital on Montserrat. They're holding her there for you. Right now, I need you to go upstairs with Sid and don't make a sound, no matter what happens."

Sid called down from the upper level of the church, "I've got three of them approaching, Boss. One at the south entrance and two from the west."

I looked at Pete. It was showtime.

The interior of the church is pitch pine, and the lack of light worked in our favor. I made my way to the altar and Pete followed behind me, a bundle of automatic pistols and an mp3 player of a baby crying swaddled in his arms.

"Good evening, Father." Fletcher called out as he entered the church with one of his men. The south entrance flew open and the other stepped inside, weapon drawn.

Pete had his back to them, and the sounds of the baby crying were ringing through the church. The three men started up the aisle to the altar.

"How can I help you, my son?" I called back.

"Oh, I think you know, Father." Fletcher replied, and drew his own weapon. He still wasn't close enough to recognize me.

I gave Pete a signal and he slowly pivoted until he was facing them. When he was sure he had the shot, he squeezed off three rounds through the blanket in his arms, striking one of Fletcher's men in the head. Before they could react, a shot came from the balcony and the other one dropped.

I got to see the look of horrified recognition in Fletcher's eyes before he squeezed off a few shots and dove into a pew for cover. I only got to enjoy it for a second, though, as a wave of pain and nausea brought me to my knees. Pete looked at me in panic and I managed to pull it together enough to nod to him, indicating he should finish what we started.

Pete went pew to pew with Sid firing a shot from his vantage point every few seconds to drive Fletcher into the open. Eventually, Pete found him cowering in the confessional and dragged him out. He put Fletcher on his knees and pressed a 9mm to his head.

"My men are going to come for me..." Fletcher stammered.

"You mean the men you sent to secure Pandora?" Pete asked and Fletcher nodded. Pete looked at him in disgust and said, "They're dead."

"H-how?"

"When they came aboard, they tripped a mercury switch I wired to release homemade nerve gas into the air conditioning system. After that, I suspect the carbon monoxide I vented into the cabin from the generator's exhaust finished them off. They've probably been dead a half hour now."

Fletcher actually smiled, astonished to have been so roundly defeated by the likes of men he considered so unworthy. "Your man's not going to make it." he said with all the spite he could muster.

"Maybe not, asshole, but you're definitely finished." With that, Pete squeezed the trigger and sent Fletcher to hell.

Father Dan was at my side on the altar. I was cold and sleepy, and it didn't hurt much any more. I held my old friend's hand as he prayed over me. I heard sirens in the distance.

"Daniel," I rasped. "Make sure they know what happened here. It's the only way to save the girl..."

"I will, Jack. I will. It'll be in all the papers. They won't get away with this."

I smiled.

"Your friendship has meant everything to me, Daniel. I knew I could count on you."

"Well, Jack, I'd have never survived the seminary if you didn't slip me the answers to the canon law final." he joked. His voice grew softer and more serious. "Don't die, Jack. Not now."

I managed a weak laugh.

"I'm so tired now, Daniel. I'm going to sleep for awhile..."

The paramedics arrived just before I closed my eyes.