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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Good Priest**

A Father Vincent Ross Mystery

Written by Gillian Galbraith

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GILLIAN GALBRAITH

THE  
GOOD  
PRIEST

A FATHER VINCENT ROSS MYSTERY

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## PROLOGUE

It did not look like the Book of Judgement. All three men were listed on its faded, blue-lined pages, their names written in an identical hand. Scratched out below each name was a litany of obsolete addresses, multi-coloured biro entries, and with only the current one left intact. Their crimes were described too. Someone had taken the trouble to track their movements for years and years, to follow their progress from county to county, country to country.

The one at the top of page 20 was a retired casino owner with a liking for Cuban cigars. In February 2013 he was murdered in his home, a tree-lined avenue in the prosperous Edinburgh suburb of Colinton. Page 26 recorded an impoverished widower, then living by the foam-flecked shores of the Forth with only his Bichon Frise for company. He met a similar end less than a month later. The third man, described on page 30, a habitu  of his local bowling club, bled to death on his bathroom floor to the lush sound of Ella Fitzgerald's 'That Old Black Magic'. All of the victims were pensioners, died from knife wounds, and their last words, which sounded like a prayer, incensed their killer. None of them knew each other, or their attacker. Despite their deaths, no one amended their entries, deleted their names from the book.



## CHAPTER ONE

This one he would not spit out either. If the man then attempting to focus his blue eyes on the bottle's label had ever been asked what his passion in life was, he would have replied 'fine wines'. He might have been tempted to say, 'fighting injustice', 'feeding the starving' or even 'wind-surfing'. Any one of those would have sounded, he considered, seemlier, worthier and less sybaritic. But, unfortunately, also untrue. Beekeeping was, genuinely, close to his heart, but hardly deserved to be described as a passion, in his estimation at least.

That evening, he was indulging himself by carrying out a little research into the wines of the Bordeaux region. His cat, Satan, lay on his lap. He sniffed the contents of the next glass, tipped it towards his lips and took a deep draught. What flavours were now swirling upon his tongue? Blackcurrant with a hint of saddle leather, or was it aniseed, perhaps, or liquorice or celery even? Rolling the last drops purposefully around his mouth, he savoured them and held them there for a few seconds, saturating his taste-buds.

Once, he mused, he really had possessed a nose for fine wines, could truthfully have called himself a connoisseur. But the gaining of such erudition was an expensive business, ill-fitted to those, like him, with shallow pockets. Nowadays, he had to make do. In his twenties, in the brief period when he had been a sharp-suited criminal

defence lawyer, only the best had passed his tonsils. Of course, in those far-off days his own nose was little more than a button, not the crooked protuberance which now dominated his face and made him blink every time he accidentally caught his own reflection in the mirror. And all thanks to the unexpected rebound of a hammer held in his own careless hand. Worse, of late, the misshapen thing seemed to have found its mission in life, betraying him by periodically flushing fiery-red like a beacon, as if to warn the world of his weakness for drink. But was weakness the right word? Fondness would be more accurate. Less Calvinistic, certainly, and that had to be a good thing. Whichever it was, he need not worry yet, he reassured himself, he had a long way to go before reaching the bottom. After all, neither Blue Nun nor Buckfast Tonic Wine had passed his lips so far.

Catching sight of the TV remote on the floor, he leaned forwards in his armchair to get it, forgetting about the cat and making it mew in surprise as, for a second, it was crushed between his chest and his lap. Stroking it by way of apology, he leaned back again, catching, out of the corner of his eye, sight of his desk. A pile of unanswered correspondence, bills and catalogues lay on top of his computer. They seemed like a rebuke. Deliberately averting his eyes, he pressed the 'on' button and the TV sprang to life. At this late hour, *QI* would probably be showing.

But it was not Stephen Fry's horse-like face that greeted him. On the screen two scantily clad black women were rotating their hips, shimmying together with their heads thrown back, dancing in unison to some silent beat.

Gazing at them, enchanted, he marvelled at their extraordinary beauty. They seemed like fit young panthers, sleek and lithe, each synchronised to the other as perfectly as a shadow. Once their routine had finished and they were taking their bows, he increased the volume and caught the audience's riotous applause, an occasional wolf-whistle cutting through the excited clapping.

Forgetting all about the quiz, still spellbound by the sight of the pair, he watched as the next contestant trooped shyly onto the stage. Liking the look of her, and to get the best possible view, he put the cat on the sofa beside him, perched on the edge of his seat and hastily clapped on his spectacles. She too appeared to manage without any unnecessary clothing, necessary clothing even, and must, from the look of her, surely be a professional dancer? No shop assistant could move like that. No one behind any of the counters in Kinross or Milnathort, more's the pity. But, if she truly was an amateur, then this time his vote might genuinely make a difference. It could 'change her life' as the commentator observed. No doubt it would cheer up her fiancé, allegedly bedbound at the moment – make him pick up his bed and walk, quite possibly.

Hurriedly, he looked on the nearby table for a pen, determined to note the number for her as soon as it appeared on the screen. As he was busily scribbling it down, his mobile rang, but he continued writing, trying to ignore it. After the first few rings each subsequent one seemed to penetrate his skull like a drill, maddening him and distracting him from his task. Finally, having missed the last two digits, he tossed his pen onto the table in frustration.



Ten calls in one evening? Surely to God, everyone, every single person without exception, was entitled to some time off, some time to themselves, to eat their food and digest it, if nothing else? Mobiles were a curse. No one should be perpetually on duty, and he had been on his feet for over fifteen hours already. Feeling drained, exhausted by the efforts of the day and his own anger, he looked back at the screen again, and, at that precise moment, the phone rang once more. This time he snatched it up, clamped it to his good ear and said through gritted teeth: ‘Father Vincent Ross.’

Unable to make out the faint-voiced reply above the thump-thumping beat of the dance music, he added, ‘One second, please.’ So saying, he turned the volume on the set down and started to speak again, already feeling calmer and more collected in the silence.

‘Now, what can I help you with?’

‘It’s me, Father, Mamie.’

He rolled his clear blue eyes heavenwards. She had already called twice earlier, that very evening. But he made an effort to keep the impatience he could feel rising within him from his voice and replied: ‘Good evening, Mamie. What seems to be the trouble now?’

His enquiry was met by an extended silence so, smiling, telling himself to put more warmth into his tone, he repeated the question. After a few further seconds of silence his effort was rewarded and his caller deigned to reply, ‘It’s John, Father.’

‘Yes?’

‘I’m having a problem. He’s pressing for Nevaeh again.’

‘Nevaeh?’

‘Heaven backwards. I ask you, what kind of name is that?’

‘Was it you calling a second ago, Mamie?’

‘Yes.’

‘I see. Well, we’ve spoken about this before, haven’t we? This very evening. About John, I mean.’

‘We have, Father . . .’ She hesitated, not completely impervious to the suggestion of annoyance that had leaked into his tone despite his best efforts. ‘We have. Yes. But he’ll still not come round.’

‘Well, it could be worse. He could be pushing for Lleh – Hell backwards – or Beyoncé or something. You’ve some weeks to the birth. He might yet settle for Bridget – or Uncumber, which is a saint’s name, as you are wanting . . .’

‘I know, I know.’ She hesitated. ‘Uncumber? But if you were to speak to him about it, Father?’

‘But I have, Mamie, too many times . . .’ For a second his attention lapsed, catching his breath at the sight of another dancer. Her boneless body was as sinuous as a snake’s, and she appeared to be simulating some kind of limbo dance. When, finally, the camera panned onto the grinning faces of the judges, the spell was broken and he managed to finish his sentence: ‘. . . and I’ve failed, I’m afraid. How do you know it’s a girl?’

‘A woman knows these things, Father.’

‘Was there anything else tonight, Mamie?’

This was her cue, and a torrent of words came tumbling out, disclosing the real reason for her call.

‘About the brass candlesticks, I don’t see why I should

do them again this Friday, or the big chandelier. I only done them on Tuesday last and then only because Ann-Marie . . . ?

‘I’ll stop you right there,’ said Vincent. ‘The candlesticks have nothing to do with me. You know that, Mamie. Speak to Veronica, she’s in charge of the Light Brigade. Now, if that’s all I’ll say goodnight to you . . .’

He paused for a split second, murmured ‘Goodnight’, waited for her echo and switched off his mobile. With her on their side the rebel angels would have triumphed, he thought, because she never gave up. He smiled, a vision of the pregnant woman in breastplate and armour brandishing an aerosol, flitting into his mind from nowhere. She would have to change her name though; Mamie did not really inspire awe in the same way as Lucifer, Azazel, Lilith, Moloch and the like did.

Switching channels, he saw the credits for *QI* scrolling upwards. Muttering to himself in his disappointment, he scooped the Siamese cat up from its nest on the sofa, climbed the stairs to his bedroom and plumped it down on the blue-and-white striped duvet which covered his bed.

There was little other furniture in the room. The only piece in it which actually belonged to him, as opposed to the parish, was the wardrobe. It was a heavy Victorian artefact, made of mahogany. Once it had belonged to his grandparents and, as a child, he had played hide and seek inside it. Now it housed his beekeeping suit with its integral veil, looking, he often thought, like the husk of a dead Cyberman. Every time he opened the heavy double doors the scent of honey billowed deliciously from it. Beside the

wardrobe was a chest of drawers, left by a predecessor, which he had painted navy blue. Catching sight of the framed photograph of his mother resting on it, his eyes were drawn to hers. He picked the frame up, murmuring to himself in a tone that he might have used to reassure an anxious spouse: 'I know, I know. Don't worry. I haven't forgotten.'

Then, his eyes heavy with exhaustion, he knelt down by the bed and began to read the night prayers from his black, leather-bound copy of *The Divine Office* regretting, as he was doing so, that he had not said the whole lot first thing in the morning in a oner. His batteries would not have been so flat before breakfast. Once he had finished, he glanced up from his kneeling posture and saw the ivory figure hanging on the cross, pinned halfway up the wall.

The crucifix was no longer perfectly perpendicular. He could not resist getting up to straighten it, shaking his head as he did so, as if Jesus had swung himself squint again, deliberately to annoy him. Dust from the pierced feet coated his fingertips.

Starting to undress, he placed his folded jacket on the back of his little armchair and made a mental note to take it to the cleaners the next morning. Black might not show up the dirt but his nose warned him that he could economise no longer. As he was unbuttoning his clerical shirt, his cigarette packet already extracted from the side pocket, the sound of hymn-singing drifted up through the floorboards of his bedroom and made him pause. He had forgotten all about the collection of ecumenical dafties below. Monday bloody Monday. There would be no sleep for him

now with them loose in the hall, with their tambourines, recorders and guitars, all fizzing with evangelical fervour like damp sherbet. Satan had destroyed his earplugs, and he would have to lock up the presbytery once they had vacated it. As he listened an unaccompanied off-key treble started up: ‘Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound . . .’

Not tonight, he thought, a sour sound tonight. Telling himself to be more charitable and relax, he climbed onto his bed and stretched out his full length, his small, square-toed feet nowhere near the end of it. Sighing loudly, he lit a cigarette and inhaled, watching the smoke curl upwards in the air as he breathed out, trying to force himself to calm down and enjoy their service.

Gradually, as the nicotine worked its way through his system, he began to feel less tense, less agitated. Head wedged in his pillow, he lay still while two further hymns were sung by the group. By the third, he was mouthing the words himself, joining in with the concert below. They were harmless enough, and would go soon. Listening to ‘The Lord of the Dance’ he closed his eyes and his breathing became deeper and more regular. Sleep did not feel too far away.

Suddenly, hearing a distinctive, nasal voice, he sat bolt upright. It was her! That *soi-disant* actress was up to her tricks again. Performing here! Ignoring his repeated plea that she refrain from such practices in his hall, in his home. And in front of him, to his very face and less than a fortnight ago, the petite charlatan had given him her word. She had had no charisma, no special gift from God. She was in complete control of all her faculties, which

was more than could now be said of him. How dare she gabble away in tongues, like a thing possessed, and on diocesan premises to boot! In the quiet of his bedroom, he listened intently, concentrating on her voice and making out one or two French words in amongst her babbling. Finally, catching the words ‘Veni, Vidi, Vici’, and laughing out loud at her audacity, he determined to end the charade, tipped Satan off his lap, snatched his trousers from the chair and began to zip up his fly. Came and saw, maybe, conquered, never!

Striding through her rapt audience, he reached the podium where she stood and tapped her lightly on the shoulder. Her eyes remained closed; she brushed her cardigan as if to dislodge a fly that had landed and murmured with renewed intensity something that sounded to his ears suspiciously like ‘Vorsprung durch Technik . . .’

‘It’s very late, Rhona. So, we’d better close up for the night,’ he said, patting her shoulder again and whispering in her ear, ‘unless you want a full-blown exorcism performed on you.’

Like someone coming to from a trance, she blinked rapidly, shook her head and favoured her followers with a weak but radiant smile which, eventually, she turned on him. Then, apparently drained by her communings with the spirit, she sank into the nearest red plastic seat, clutching her tambourine tight against her breast. While the rest of the chairs were being stacked by the faithful, she remained there, head down and motionless.

‘Well?’ he said, squatting on his haunches down to her level.

‘Well?’ she replied, favouring him with a slightly sheepish, sidelong glance.

‘We’d agreed, hadn’t we? There was to be no more of your phoney glossolalia in this hall,’ he began, but a whisper cut him short.

‘Don’t worry, Father, my work is done. I’m off to Loughborough in two days’ time. I’ve got a job in telesales.’

‘Good luck to you, then,’ he said, unable to resist adding, ‘. . . and I hope they’re fluent in double-Dutch there.’

Locking the hall door behind them, he returned to his room. Now wide awake, he leaned on one elbow and gazed out of his bedroom window, over the road and across the bowling green. Beyond it, through the bare trees flanking its eastern boundary, moonlight shimmered on Loch Leven and, in the far distance, a dusting of late snow lay on the Lomond hills, highlighting the deep creases etched into them. In the still air, the joyous sounds of a ceilidh drifted from the nearby Green Hotel, clapping interspersed periodically by a whoop as the reels speeded up. Everything about the scene in front of him pleased him. He lit another cigarette, inhaled deeply, and looked down the High Street towards the town centre, tapping the window sill with his fingers in time to the music.

Along it, a couple of giggling pedestrians were returning home from the pub, The Salutation, their arms linked companionably at the elbow, just managing to dodge the lamp posts that punctuated their route and remain, mostly, on the pavement. He knew and liked them both. High above his head, the full, white moon looked down from the sky, illuminating their path, and everything around,

including the parklands of Kinross House, the ancient clock tower of the town hall and the glassy waters of the loch. Magically, it had turned the War memorial opposite the county buildings to silver. Some of the names inscribed on it were those of businesses still flourishing in the town: Anderson, Beveridge, Drysdale, Stark and Wilson. Beyond the black-and-white nineteenth-century frontage of the Green Hotel, in The Muirs, the descendants of a few of them lived in substantial stone villas behind high privet or lonicera hedges, as far from the only industry left in the town as they could make it. At the Bottom End, quarter of a mile away, the woollen mill's high chimneys puffed away, steam from them sometimes drifting lazily across the waters of the loch like an early morning mist.

From his second floor eyrie, Father Vincent was conscious that he could see, at a glance, much of his domain. The prosperous county town of Kinross stretched out in front of him, and its smallness did not trouble him. On the contrary, it comforted him, reassured him, because in the sparsely populated little place, he felt he was someone. No better respected than the local bank manager, doctor or lawyer, perhaps, but a recognisable face nonetheless, a well-kent one even.

Thinking about it, nowadays 'respect' might not be the word that first came to mind at the mention of those professions. Bankers and priests were routinely reviled, pariahs both, and any respect for those practising the law, in his experience, bordered too often on fear. There were other differences too. Dr Hume, the only untainted one of the quartet, genuinely did cater for all ages, cradle to grave



and everything in between, whereas most of his own flock had lost their teeth. At least three-quarters of them were old enough to remember the words of the Latin Mass and were uneasy eating anything but fish on Fridays. They still thought of him as young, despite his four-plus decades on the earth. His roots in the place went deep, had mingled, become inextricably linked to all those Andersons, Beveridges, Drysdales and the rest of them. Having no close family left apart from a rarely seen brother, they were the nearest thing he had to one.

Hearing the town clock striking eleven, he tossed his cigarette butt out of the window and shut his thick blue curtains. The cat lay occupying the very centre of the duvet, its long, creamy body stretched to its full length as he basked in the warmth of the electric blanket. Its master, now in a T-shirt and striped pyjama trousers, climbed onto the bed, snuggled under the cover and, careful not to disturb the drowsy animal, spooned his body around its tiny form. Taking one hand out from beneath the cover, he stroked its burnt umber-coloured ears, listening to the low rumble of its purr in the silence of the room. As he did so he smiled in the dark, imagining the sneer on his own youthful lips at such a picture, at the thought that any human being could be so reliant on the company of a clawed, whiskered creature. Still less that he should one day turn into such a one.

Yawning, he settled himself more cosily round the cat, adjusting the pillow beneath his head to make himself more comfortable. Tonight, for some reason or none, he felt oddly anxious, ill at ease. Maybe it was the weather, or

something he had eaten, like Barbara Duncan's Stilton and broccoli soup. Or that second black coffee. Or the antics of the fork-tongued actress? She had brought his blood to boiling point. Whatever it was, it had robbed him of his equilibrium and left him instead with some vague feeling of dread. A premonition that some unwelcome change was in the offing, was in the air. Something that he would be powerless to resist, and would be malign in its effect. The feeling reminded him of how he had felt as a young trainee lawyer, waiting to appear before a crusty sheriff, knowing little about the case he had been allocated and praying that decree would be granted with no more than a nod. Yes, dread was not too strong a word to describe it.

As sleep begins to overtake the priest, a young man, quiet as a cat, pushes open the door of a familiar sitting-room and looks inside. The place is lit only by candles. Lying on the sofa, unaware of his presence, is the person he has come to meet. He has his eyes closed, headphones on, and is smiling, not at the Chopin nocturne which is working its usual calming magic, but at the thought of this very visitor. Seeing him, the young man advances on tiptoes across the brown carpet until he is standing inches away from the man's head, which, as he studies it, suddenly seems fragile as an eggshell. He looks back towards the doorway and signals for his companion to join him. But the only response is an emphatic shake of the head. Unmoved, he shrugs his shoulders and turns his attention back to the figure on the bed. In the silence, he can hear the man breathe: in and out, in and out. As he stands there,

transfixed by the steady rise and fall of the man's chest, he becomes aware, with a strange, unexpected intensity, of his own physicality, his own flesh; his heart seems to have abandoned its customary rhythm, now forcing the blood into his arteries as if to burst them, making his temples throb and his hands tremble. This excitement is better, more energising, than any drug he has ever taken and, in the half-light, he exults in himself, in his power. He could do anything; needs no help from anybody. Clutching the claw-hammer in both hands, he raises it above his head and then smashes it down onto the man's upright, flexed kneecap.