Prologue

Whitebridge, October 1973

George Street was almost as old as the town to which it belonged. It was narrow and cobbled, and it climbed the steep hill with complete disregard for the old and frail lived along its route. The street was lined with terraced houses, their doors opening directly onto the pavement, and the large sash windows of the front parlours were stung with lace curtains, in order to give those who lived there a little privacy from those who merely passed by.

It was the lace curtains that the priest noticed as he toiled his way up the street – noticed them because each and every one of them twitched angrily as he passed it by.

The women lurking behind the netting – their eyes following every step of his reluctant progress – knew exactly where he was going, and exactly why he was going there, he thought. And though many of them were his own parishioners - and believed, as he did, in a merciful God – they did not approve of what he was doing.

The priest looked up at the autumnal sky. Black clouds hung there - as they had all morning - like the heavy drapes in an undertaker's parlour.

It was not a day that any man would *choose* to die on, Father O'Brien thought. But he had no doubt that, for the curtain twitchers of George Street, it was just one more sign that the Almighty shared with them their own feelings of righteous revulsion.

The priest felt the need to stop and catch his breath, and came to a halt in front of a house with chocolate brown door. His mouth was dry, and he was just wondering if he dared to lift the polished brass knocker and ask for a glass of water when the door opened – barely a chink – and he found himself staring into the blazing eyes of a tiny bent woman.

'Ah, good morning, Mrs Gilligan,' he said, in a voice which he was hoping would appear friendly and at ease, but came out as cracked and uncertain. 'I wonder if I might trouble you for …'

'So you're off to see *him*, then, are you, Father?' the old woman interrupted.

'I am, Mrs Gilligan,' the priest replied.

'Don't do it, Father,' the woman implored him.

'I have to,' O'Brien told her.

And even the words left his mouth, he knew that they were the *wrong* ones, knew that a priest should not sound so *defensive* - so *ashamed* of what he was doing.

'You weren't in this parish when Lilly Dawson was killed, were you?' Mrs Gilligan demanded.

'No, I wasn't,' O'Brien admitted.

Of course he hadn't been there! The girl had been dead for *twenty-two* years! Generations had been born – and died – in the time since Lilly Dawson left this life. But for Mrs Gilligan – and no doubt for all the other women who lived on this street – it seemed as if no time had passed at all.

'She was a lovely little kid. Very quiet – maybe a bit sad – but lovely,' the old woman said.

'I'm sure she was,' O'Brien agreed

'And she never even got to see her fourteenth birthday, did she?' the old woman asked.

'When you think of her, you should not dwell on how she died,' the priest said uncomfortably. 'Instead, you should rejoice that is now reaping her reward in heaven.'

'You do realise what he did to her *before* he killed her, don't you?' the old woman asked, as if he had never spoken.

'I … I know that he interfered with her.'

'He *defiled* her,' the old woman said. 'That's what he did to her – he *defiled* her.' Mrs Gilligan paused to draw breath. 'Don't go and see him, Father. Let him die alone. It's all he deserves.'

'I have to go and see him,' O'Brien said. 'It's my duty.'

'But you'd rather not – if you had the choice?' the woman asked.

She was offering him an escape route, he realised. Giving him the chance to admit that he felt just like she did – to express a loathing as deep as her own. And, for a moment, he was tempted to take it, because, as a man, he wanted to be well thought of. Then he reminded himself that he was a priest – that when he put on his cassock that morning he had ceased to be a man at all, and had become God's vicar.

'I'll see you in church, Mrs Gilligan,' he said.

'Maybe you will – and maybe you won't,' the woman replied ominously.

And then she closed the door – like a voice of conscience which had given up him.

As Father O'Brien pressed on up the hill, he found his mind wandering back to another time – to his childhood in rural Ireland.

Back then, things had seemed so much simpler, he thought. No, he corrected himself, not just *seemed* simpler - had *been* simpler. The life of the village and the life of the church had been at one with each other. And, even more importantly, there had been a certainty to everything which was never questioned - because how *could you* question certainty?

He wished he had never been posted to this parish, where the people were as alien to his own experience as beings from outer space would have been – where, once the familiar ritual within the church was completed, he felt he had nothing in common with his parishioners.

'You're a very bad priest,' he mumbled to himself.

And there was no mock-humility in the statement, he decided.

No, on that charge, at least, he was not guilty - for a *good* priest would never have questioned God's wisdom in sending him to Whitebridge.

He had reached his destination, and – with a heavy heart - knocked on the door.

The woman who opened the door was in her late thirties. He saw her nearly every day in church, and when he studied her thin pinched face as she knelt in prayer, he had never been quite sure whether she was expressing her devotion *to* God or her anger *at* Him. Perhaps, he had finally decided, it was both.

'You came,' she said – as if she had suspected that he might not.

'It was my duty, Elizabeth,' O'Brien said, rather woodenly. 'Where is he? Upstairs?'

'Of course he's upstairs,' Elizabeth Eccles said, with a harshness entering her voice which could almost have been contempt. 'Where else *would* he be? The poor man can hardly move.'

'Of course,' the priest agreed, and tried to sound understanding.

Elizabeth looked over his shoulder, out onto the street.

'Have you seen enough?' she screamed, her hands defiantly on her hips. 'Have you all had your fill?'

'Please, Elizabeth, show a little decorum in this house of sickness,' the priest said.

'There's sickness, all right, but it's out there!' the woman retorted, now angry with the priest as well as with her neighbours. 'Do you know how hard it's been for me, since my father came to live with me?'

‘I’m sure it must have been very …’ the priest began.

‘You wouldn’t believe the things they’ve done,’ the woman interrupted him. 'You wouldn’t believe the kinds of things they’ve posted through my letterbox.’

‘It must have been almost as hard on them as it has been on you,’ the priest said. ‘You must learn to understand them, and forgive them.’

'And will they forgive him?’ Elizabeth asked, jerking her finger towards the upstairs bedroom.

‘They must,’ O'Brien said solemnly.

‘Well, they needn’t bother!’ Elizabeth told him. ‘My father doesn’t *need* their forgiveness.’

They were still standing on the doorstep, and the priest shivered as a chill breeze suddenly blew down the street.

‘You’d better come in,’ Elizabeth said. ‘He’s been waiting for you.’

‘I’m sure he has,’ the priest agreed.

‘He’s been *hanging on* for you,’ Elizabeth said, in case he had missed the point.

And O’Brien was sure of that, too – for no man wanted to face his maker with the weight that must be pressing down on Fred Howerd’s soul.

The priest followed the women up the stairs which led off the hallway, and, even half-way up them, his nostrils were already filled with stink of death and desperation.

From the narrow landing, they looked in on the bedroom. The dying man was lying on an old-fashioned oak bed. A large crucifix had been nailed above the bed, and on the wall opposite it was a painting of the Sacred Heart.

O’Brien stepped into the room, and the woman followed him.

‘You must leave us now, Elizabeth,’ the priest said.

‘I want to stay,’ the woman told him.

‘You can’t.’

‘He needs me by his side,’ Elizabeth protested. ‘What little strength he has left, he draws from me.’

'It's not possible,' Father O'Brien said – and for once, it seemed to him, God had deemed him worthy of that tone of authority which seemed to come naturally to most other priests. 'You cannot be here during the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.'

For a moment, it seemed as if the woman would defy him, then she stepped back onto the landing and closed the door behind her.

Father O'Brien looked down at the sick man. Howerd had once been a powerful figure, he'd been told, but his illness had eaten away at him, and now he was little more than a husk.

And he looked in pain – he looked in *so much* pain.

'It was good of you to come, Father,' the dying man said the merest rasp of a voice.

And O'Brien, who wanted to say more – he knew he *should* say more – could only manage to repeat, 'It's my duty.'

Fred Howerd nodded – though it was hardly a nod at all – as if that was all he had expected.

'I was in prison for twenty-two years, Father,' he said, with effort.

'I know.'

'I'd still have been there now, if I hadn't been dying.'

'Yes.'

'You can't imagine what hell I've been through for the last twenty-two years, Father. You can't imagine what the other prisoners did to me.'

'And didn't you deserve it?' an unwelcome voice at the back of O'Brien's mind screamed. 'After what you did, could *any* punishment be enough?'

But that was the *man* in him talking.

The *priest* in him said, 'Do you wish to confess your sins, my son?'

'I do, Father,' the dying man said.

The priest knelt down beside the bed. 'Let us begin.'

'Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,' Fred Howerd said. 'It has been twenty-two years since my last confession.'

'And now, in his final moments, he wants to get it all off his chest,' the priest thought. 'Wants to confess to the terrible things he did to that poor innocent girl and obtain absolution for his monstrous acts. And I – God help me – will guide him along that path.'

'You start with your worst sin, don't you?' the dying man asked.

'You do.'

'Then I confess to having committed a mortal sin.'

'Go on,' the priest said encouragingly.

'I lied,' the dying man said. 'I took an oath before God to tell the truth - and I lied.'

'Your worst sin first,' the priest said firmly.

'That's it,' the dying man told him.

'But Lilly Dawson …' the priest gasped.

'*That's* who I lied about,' Howerd said. 'I swore under oath that I killed her – but I didn't.'

'Am I going mad?' the priest wondered. 'Am I *dreaming* this?'

'You … you didn't kill her?' he asked, almost chocking.

'No, Father.'

'Then why did you …?'

'They sent two policemen up from London to investigate her murder,' Howerd said. 'They had to arrest *somebody* – and they chose me.'

'But if you were innocent, as you claim, then why did you …?'

'Have you ever been interrogated by the police, Father?' the dying man asked, and there was contempt in his tone, as there had been contempt in his daughter's – and in Mrs Gilligan's.

'No,' the priest admitted weakly. 'No, I haven't.'

He saw the harsh realities of life every day, he thought, but his cloth protected from actually touching them, so it was as if he were viewing them through a steamed-up window.

'I'm a very bad priest,' he told himself, for perhaps the fifth time that morning.

'If you've never been put through an interrogation, then you've no idea what it's like,' the dying man croaked. 'After a few hours of it, you'll say anything they want you to – just to make them stop. So when they handed me the confession, I signed it.'

'But couldn't you have recanted later?' the priest asked.

'They said that would only make it worse for me,' Fred Howerd told him. 'They said I'd be convicted whatever happened, and if I fought them they'd see to it that things were worse for me once I was inside.'

He coughed, and a drop of blood spattered onto the edge of the clean white sheet he was gripping.

'As if it *could* have been any worse,' he added.

'Is there anything you wish to add?' the priest asked, still shaken by what he'd heard.

'No.'

O'Brien made an effort to compose himself. 'God the father of mercies,' he intoned, 'through the death and resurrection of his Son, has reconciled the world to Himself and …'

He heard the door click open behind him, and, turning round, saw Elizabeth Eccles standing there with a tray in her hands.

'Not yet!' he said.

'I didn't notice the time, God forgive me,' the woman said, clearly on the verge of hysterics. 'Father has to have his medicine. He has to have it *now.*'

'Two minutes!' the priest pleaded. 'Just give me two minutes.'

'My medicine,' the dying man moaned. 'I want my medicine.'

He could cut the Absolution short, O'Brien told himself. At times like these, he was *allowed* to cut it short.

'I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,' he said, trying, even now, not to rush the sacred words.

The daughter, licking her lips with concentration, was beginning to fill the syringe with morphine. The father, wracked with pain, was watching her with an intensity that was almost frightening.

'They don't even know I'm still here,' the priest thought, as an all-to-familiar feeling of inadequacy swept over him.

The sick man and his ministering angel – locked together in a world of pain and dying – did not even look up when O'Brien turned and left room. As the priest walked heavily down the stairs he was aware of the fact that though Howerd had craved spiritual relief, it did not hold a candle to the relief that his daughter was about to deliver to him.

The dark clouds had finally opened, and the rain was lashing down as O'Brien stepped out onto the pavement.

The priest watched as the rainwater rushed down the hill, carrying the filth from the street with it - and found himself wishing all filth was so easy to wash away.

He had not wanted to come to this house of death, he told himself. There had part of him, at least, which had hoped he would arrive too late to give absolution - because there was a part of him which had hoped that Fred Howerd would burn in hell for all eternity.

But Fred Howerd's fate had not been his to decide – and in merely holding to that hope he had failed – not for the first time - to carry out the task that God had entrusted him with.

'But I will not fail again,' he promised, as he felt the rain trickling down his neck. 'I will see that justice is done – here on earth – for Fred Howerd.'