

Prologue

1959



It had been raining for days when Charlie Dugan first appeared in Damascus, North Carolina. Streams tore out of the mountains into the Creek River, lapping the grass of a great meadow where Andrew Jackson once raced, and wagered on, horses. Some would say what happened to Charlie Dugan was kind of a wager, too.

Dugan, driving the tent truck for an itinerant preacher, peered through the downpour at the textile and furniture mills as he rolled by, at the large churches and obvious prosperity, and knew the preacher had made a mistake. They should have headed back to Texas or Oklahoma, where the word of God could race over the prairies free as the sunlight. Out there, he'd seen a lean hunger for absolution, but here he sensed no such appetite; he was certain that the message, the revival itself, would be smothered by the conviction of the people of Damascus that they were already tasting the fruits of God's blessing.

Not even the rural areas surrounding the town, with their brick ranch houses and occasional small businesses sprouting in what once were pastures and cornfields, looked inviting. The landscape didn't feel smug or even hostile, just uninterested.

Dugan had been with the preacher almost a year. Though never much

of a churchgoer after he entered his teens, he'd grown up with the Bible and appreciated what a hair shirt was. He was twenty-nine years old, and the wreckage of one life already lay behind him. He knew that to wrestle alone with one's conscience and convictions, to endure that kind of loneliness, was a great trial.

Like a fallen dove, the evangelist's tent materialized the next morning on a vacant lot on North Charlotte Street, a startling white mass within sight of the city hospital. A banner sagging in the rain between two poles proclaimed, "Revival." There hadn't been a tent preacher within the city limits since before World War II.

Contrary to what they might have done a generation or two earlier, the local clergy paid no attention. Their churches were full, and there was plenty of work and money. If a theme other than illegal whiskey were needed for a sermon, the threat of communism and labor unions would do.

The tent held three hundred people, but in Damascus, a town of over twenty-five thousand, the most under it at any one time was perhaps fifty, including several local drunks looking for a dry place and free entertainment. The preacher kept saying God would bring the sun to shine on those who came to Christ in Damascus, but it went on raining.

On the third night, Dugan was on the podium singing with the other workers when he saw a man duck under the flap behind the very last row, take a seat, cross his legs and stretch his arms across the back of the chairs on either side of him. The man was in a raincoat, the kind a yachtsman might wear, about calf-length and yellow, and smart in design. He also wore khakis and penny loafers and a white dress shirt unbuttoned at the collar. His hair was black, and with a day's growth on his cheeks, his skin looked especially pale. His eyes, but his mouth in particular—the lips holding a fixed curl that was almost a smile—impressed Dugan, for they conveyed not only a keen intelligence but amusement, too, though not of a generous sort. The man's ease, casual and possessive—as though he could go anywhere and do anything, invited or not—galled Dugan.

Dugan glanced around at the rest of the congregation sitting out there in front of the podium with its pulpit and electric piano and saw a musty, familiar collection of tired-looking men and women. Their faces expressed a need and desperation that ordinary people would have been loath to

reveal. But he knew these people were beyond caring for appearances; like himself, everyone there was floundering in some fashion. He believed desperation more than religion was their bond and knew that he was probably the only one present who would admit that. The tent had often felt to him like a wide, lonely river, its human wreckage bobbing along beyond the reach of earthly solace. Yet he also knew that solace was there—the poor had each other, if nothing else. He could smell their poverty.

When it came time to take the collection, Dugan went toward where the man in the yellow raincoat sat. Even in those early days, there was already something in Dugan's bearing that made people notice him. They did now, turning their heads as they sang. Dugan approached the back row holding the wooden plate the preacher had pulled from the wreckage of some country church in Mississippi. Sidestepping between chairs, he thrust the plate and its assortment of crumpled bills and coins under the outsider's nose.

The man, whose thoughts had been elsewhere, looked up, startled. Dugan nodded to him in an encouraging way. In the man's bewilderment, his look of disdain vanished, and for a moment Dugan thought he'd made a terrible mistake. But then the man's mouth worked into a wide smile of recognition. Reaching under the raincoat into his back pocket, he withdrew a black leather wallet—a nice one, Dugan saw. He pulled out a fresh dollar bill and, watching Dugan, let it float into the plate.

The congregation and piano fell silent.

Unaware of the sudden hush, Dugan stared at the bill, then at the man. Then he heard the rain splash in from the darkness beyond the half-rolled walls. "You can do better than that, mister," he said, not loudly but, now fully conscious of the silence and an expectation, loud enough for his audience. He'd never done anything quite like this before, not in front of a group of people, and he was surprised to discover that he didn't mind. His initial flush of self-consciousness gave way, as did his anger and resentment, to an extraordinary clear-headedness. He was even calm; he hadn't been wrong about the man. "That's cheap for the entertainment," he said.

"I'm just here to learn about Jesus," the man replied in a soft, refined drawl.

"No," Dugan countered, "I don't think so. I don't think that's true,"

and as he spoke and the color rushed into the man's face, Dugan realized he was enjoying himself. *In another time*, he thought, *we'd fight a duel over this, for sure.*

The preacher's wife, who had always held Dugan's motives for being with them suspect, threw up her hands and launched the congregation into another hymn, the singers at once wholehearted in the effort. But the preacher, a gaunt, pitiless-looking man whose entire appearance, including the brown suit he wore, bespoke a life of poverty far deeper than just his pocketbook, continued to watch the scene at the back of the tent as though he'd forgotten where he was.

"You are something else, my friend," the man in the raincoat said, his voice barely audible over the singing. He'd regained his composure with such remarkable speed that Dugan realized he wasn't alone in his excitement. *He thinks it's a game*, he concluded with a touch of bitterness.

Once more withdrawing his wallet, the man, still holding Dugan's gaze, pulled out another bill, dropped it in the plate, then stood and walked leisurely into the night.

Dugan, looking down at the scraped varnish and torn felt, saw the first hundred-dollar bill he'd ever laid eyes on—and knew that the man in the raincoat had been certain it would be.

After the service, still in the grip of his recent confrontation, feeling restive and abashed, Dugan grabbed a broom, hoping to be left alone to sort things out. He wasn't ready to find another job, not yet. As he thrust the broom with barely disguised ferocity between the rows of wooden chairs, he became aware that the preacher and his wife were standing next to the pulpit watching him. He could feel the woman's gaze especially, timidity and fear roiling her instinctive hostility.

"I say, Brother Dugan!" the preacher called out in a clipped and commanding way. To Dugan's astonishment, he sounded cheerful.

He looked around. "Sir?"

"I do believe that was the Spirit working in you tonight, brother." Dugan suspected that the preacher wanted to laugh. "I think we should be making better use of you, maybe right up here. What do you say?" The preacher thumped the pulpit, smiling over the head of his cringing wife.

Dugan found himself smiling in return, but it was a smile with an edge the preacher couldn't have fathomed. Confidently, the preacher seized his

wife's hand and waved as he led her out. "We'll talk more about this!" he called.

"Guess they think you're some kind of hero."

Dugan took a deep breath before he turned. The man in the yellow raincoat was standing not far from the seat he'd vacated, only now his hair hung dripping and his pants were soaked from the knees down.

"You don't seem at all like the religious type to me," the man continued with open curiosity. "Not meek nor mild, nor particularly crazy, like you might expect in an outfit like this. But, my friend, you certainly do have charisma and the balls to go with it. That's what the preacher meant, even if he didn't say it."

Dugan stared.

"You don't even know what I'm talking about, do you?" The man laughed. "Anyhow, I can't remember the last time I got called out like that, but I guess you never know what's going to happen when you mess with Jesus."

The irreverence offended Dugan. This man would argue with God.

Then the man put out his hand. He was almost Dugan's height but slender and athletic; there was something almost feminine about him, Dugan decided.

"I'm Martin Pemberton, a surgeon at the hospital." He indicated the lighted windows through the rain. "I'm between operations and needed to unwind. I was curious, too, I admit, and I apologize if I intruded in a way that upset you."

At first, Dugan was surprised by the firm, confident grip, then realized he shouldn't be—the man was a surgeon. He imagined such hands had to be like steel. And of course, in a pinch, a surgeon had only himself to rely on, not God. But somehow the words felt insincere.

"I had a patient with a gunshot wound before I came over here, a severed femoral artery. All over a pregnant girl of sixteen. Man's lucky to be alive."

Dugan let him speak. It was clear just in the way he held himself the doctor didn't really give a damn what Dugan or probably anyone thought.

"I'm just a general surgeon," he added. That, too, sounded disingenuous. "You have to go to Charlotte for the specialists. If it's really bad and I

think they can survive the ride, that's where I send them."

So why are you telling me this? Dugan wondered. Yet Martin Pemberton was stirring his curiosity. "You see a lot of gunshot wounds?" he asked.

"You haven't been in Blackstone County long, Mr. . . ."

"Dugan." Dugan turned his gaze to the soggy blackness beyond the tent, letting the tension between them ease. "This town seems very well-to-do."

"I was born and raised here. There's enough prosperity for a lot of people to do all right, and enough for others to get a real hunger for what they'll never have." He laughed then.

Dugan felt his anger boil up again; the doctor was being candid, telling him the truth. He was talking to Charlie Dugan like that because he knew who Charlie Dugan was and where Charlie Dugan belonged.

"How long have you been with this preacher?" Pemberton seemed unaware of any ill feeling.

Dugan didn't answer.

After a few moments, Pemberton gave a shrug, pulled up a sleeve of his raincoat and checked his watch. It glittered gold in the dim light, the alligator-hide band all shiny. "Somehow I appear to have offended you again, Mr. Dugan. My apologies. I certainly didn't mean to. But now I have to get back to my patients."

Pemberton paused at the edge of the tent. "By the way, I won't be back to pad your preacher's pockets anymore. I've never liked preachers. But I'd be pleased to buy you supper tomorrow, before services, of course. If you could shake free, say, the main desk at the hospital about five?"

"I'll be there," Dugan heard himself reply, startled by the sound of his voice and the rapidity of his answer. Suddenly he was quite sure he wanted to go to dinner with this man, but he didn't know why. He wasn't intimidated, that he knew.

"Good." Pemberton started under the flap, one hand pushing up the canvas, then stopped and smiled and said, "By the way, you might tell the preacher that according to the weatherman, not God, it's going to keep on raining. There's nothing but sinners here in Damascus."