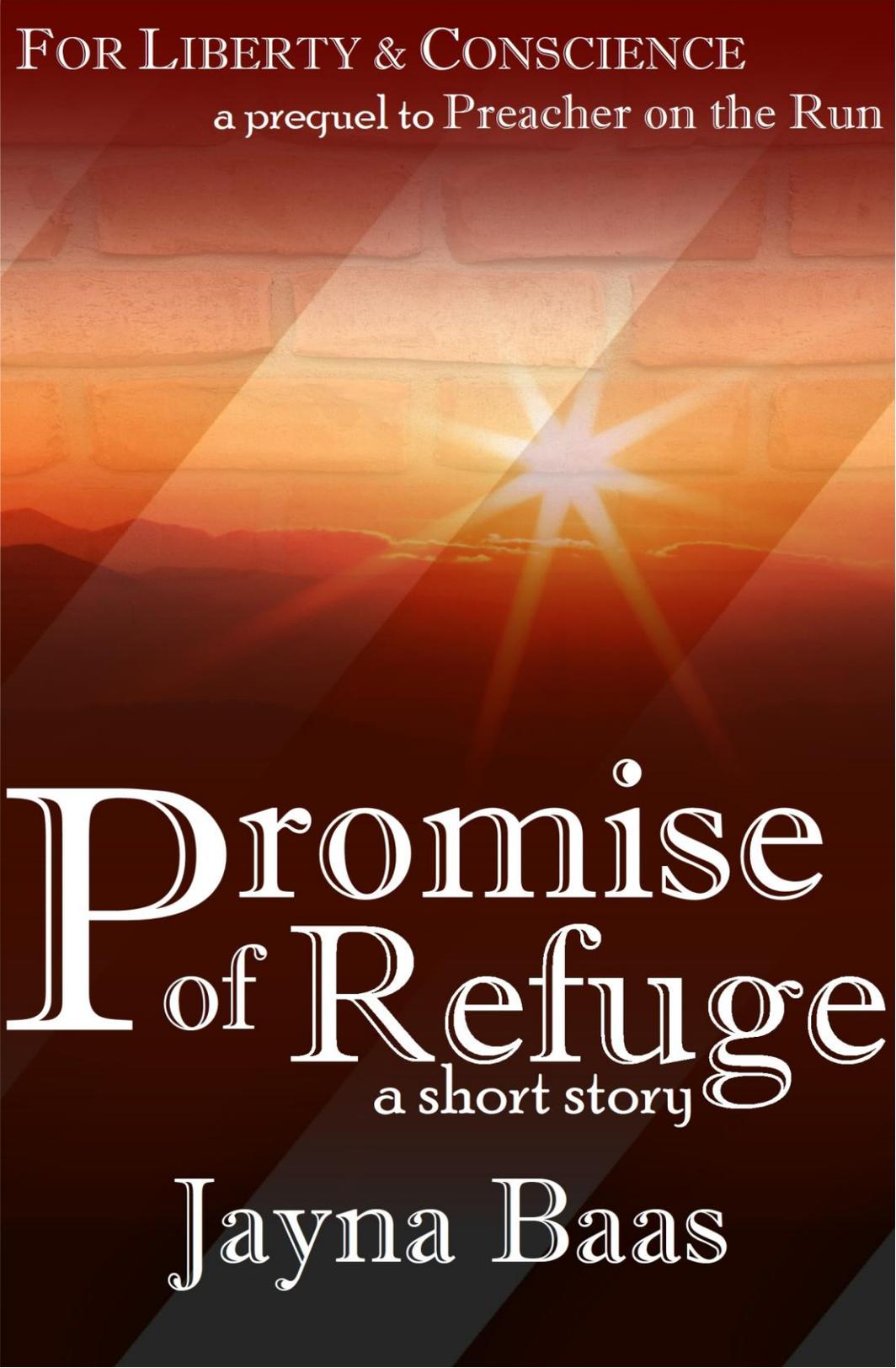


FOR LIBERTY & CONSCIENCE

a prequel to Preacher on the Run

The background of the cover features a warm sunset scene. In the foreground, there is a brick wall. The sun is setting behind the wall, creating a bright starburst effect with rays of light. The sky transitions from a deep orange near the horizon to a lighter yellow at the top. The overall mood is serene and hopeful.

Promise
of Refuge
a short story

Jayna Baas

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—
“The eternal God is thy refuge,
and underneath are the everlasting arms.”
Deuteronomy 33:27
—

Craven County, North Carolina, 1759

I.

Robert Boothe had been a lot of places and had seen a lot of things. He'd faced down angry officials and angry settlers and angry churchmen. But this was the first time he'd done it in the flatlands of the east, surrounded by rolling tobacco fields and a coming thunderstorm. And it was the first time he'd had his younger brother to look out for.

Mitchell shifted in the saddle and muttered, “Haven't they ever seen a circuit rider before?”

“I reckon they have, and mayhap that's the trouble.”

Mitchell snorted. Robert didn't want to be here any more than Mitchell did. But Pa's last request had been for them to find his old circuit-riding partner. Word had come that the man was ailing, and Robert knew it was more than likely that Brother Latimer had already crossed over. Robert had been on his own preaching circuit long enough to know what circuit riding did to a man. Wore him out before his time, made him easy prey to a fever like the one that had taken Pa. The long journey clear across the colony should have dulled the pain. But it hadn't.

Now a passel of men blocked the way, and Robert had a feeling he knew why. “What do you want?”

“You were at my tavern this forenoon, asking about Peyton Latimer,” the foremost man said.

“Yessir, I was. What's wrong with that?”

“Nothing, unless you count that any man who's taking

up with Latimer is up to no good. One preacher's more than enough. We don't need two more."

Mitchell muttered, "I'm not a preacher. Why does everybody think I'm a preacher?"

Robert didn't respond. Mitchell probably didn't expect him to. Barely nineteen, tall and lanky with tousled hair a shade darker than Robert's, Mitchell had an exuberance that made Robert feel old for twenty-four. Pa's death hadn't dimmed the fire for long, but it had made Mitchell downright touchy about folks who thought he should follow in his father's circuit-riding footsteps.

"We didn't come here to cause trouble," Robert said evenly. The first raindrops spattered against his face. Maybe the rain would drive the men off. "We don't even know if Latimer's alive or dead. And once we know, we'll be on our way out of town."

"All right, then." The tavernkeeper crossed his arms. "He's dead. Satisfied?"

The man was lying like a schoolboy. "No. I'm not."

"If he's not dead, he ought to be," someone called from the middle of the pack. Robert had thought Craven County, civilized eastern settlement that it was, would be a bit more subtle about running preachers out of town. But then, there had been plenty of times in the Bible when influential citizens used the local rabble to do their dirty work.

"Nobody knows where he is," the tavernkeeper said. "And nobody cares."

"If nobody cares, you shouldn't mind our asking," Mitchell retorted.

"Maybe I should have said that nobody cares, and if you know what's good for you, you won't care either. Do you so much as have a license to preach in these parts?"

"I need no license from anybody but the Almighty," Robert answered.

The words came easy. He'd said them often enough. But his heart wasn't in it. His heart was in the Blue Ridge.

The men moved in. A rock skimmed past Robert's ear.

Mitchell whispered, "Do we try to take 'em?"

Robert scanned the landscape through the steadily increasing rain. Ahead on the right, a narrow trail cut through a field and off into thick trees. On the other side of the road, large tobacco plants ran in neat rows. A scattered cluster of buildings stood on the far side of the field.

"We split up," Robert said out of the side of his mouth. "Take that side trail up yonder. Meet you at the ford. Go!"

Mitchell was already streaking for the side trail. Robert spurred his gelding and charged past the tavernkeeper, aiming for the open road.

Hands caught the gelding's bridle, dragged the horse to a halt. The gelding bucked and shied in one direction as Robert lurched the other. He managed to get free of the stirrups just in time to land on his feet instead of being dragged through the mud. He looked the tavernkeeper in the eye and prayed Mitchell would have the good sense to get away and stay away.

"Well," the tavernkeeper said. "Looks like we've got you where we want you."

"I reckon so." Robert kept his drawl soft. Partly because the Bible said a soft answer would turn away wrath, and partly because Mitchell had told him he never sounded so dangerous as when he kept his voice down. "But look, you're going to answer for this. Not to me, maybe. But God's got His eye on you."

He didn't even see the fist that snapped his head back. All he knew was that he was down in the mud with blood on his face and splitting pain in his jaw. A boot landed in his ribs. He sucked in a shallow breath and played possum.

The tavernkeeper had to raise his voice above the driving rain. "We're taking your horse with us. If you're wise, you'll start walking. And if you find Latimer, tell him to stay lost."

The boots and voices faded, soft sounds in the rain. Robert gingerly pulled himself to his feet and touched his jaw. Swelling had already begun under the rough growth of

stubble. He peered through the rows of tobacco. The distant structures looked like outbuildings. Perhaps he could find shelter in or behind one until it was safe to meet Mitchell.

In the distance, voices suddenly pitched louder over a growl of thunder. Robert couldn't hear much, but it sounded like the men were arguing. About him.

They were coming back. And the rain was coming harder. Robert wheeled and took to the tobacco field.

The nearest building was a long, low barn, swept clean but for a few dry bits of tobacco. Rough benches were stacked neatly along the wall, as if the space was used for gatherings during the summer months. Surely no one would mind if he took a moment to rest.

He wrestled a bench from the stack, shoved it against the wall, sat down, and leaned his head back. He didn't have a horse. And his brother was likely wandering the banks of the ford north of town, wondering where Robert was.

Thunder still rumbled in the distance, but the rain had stopped. Dimly Robert became aware of voices on the other side of the wall. One masculine, one feminine, discussing the coming tobacco harvest. Mayhap they were going on past. No use trying to hide, considering the mud he'd tracked across the floor. The door cracked open, and Robert glimpsed a bronze-haired woman, young and petite, clad in a sodden blue dress.

Lord have mercy. She was coming in.

II.

Magdalen Davies was not a timid woman. So when she stepped through the door of her father's empty tobacco barn and saw a man on a bench by the opposite wall, she refused to let him see how startled she was.

Gracious, but he was a sight. A great lump on his jaw, mud on his face, dark hair standing hither and yon. He held up his hands and said, "Don't be alarmed. I don't mean any trouble."

It was too late for that. She locked her eyes back on the stranger's. He didn't flinch or look away. Magdalen raised her voice. "Papa, there's a man in here."

"I only wanted to get out of the rain."

The stranger's voice was deep and unhurried, like Brother Latimer's. Was this one of the men who had been in town looking for the preacher?

Papa's shadow blotted out the gray light behind her. He strode into the room and grasped the stranger by the shoulder. Magdalen stepped aside as Papa hauled the man out the door. The stranger wasn't a small man, but Papa dwarfed him. Alexander Davies dwarfed every man Magdalen knew. If her newly declared faith didn't scare off her suitors, Papa did.

"Now," Davies said. "Explain yourself."

"My name's Robert Boothe." The man spoke to Davies, but his eyes kept straying to Magdalen. "My brother and I

came looking for a friend of my father's. A passel of men accosted us on the road and took my horse. It started to rain, and—" Boothe shrugged. Then he winced.

Davies nodded at the blood and dirt and said, "The men who caught you did that?"

"Yessir."

"Ames, the tavernkeeper?"

"Yessir."

"Well, Mr. Boothe, I am Alexander Davies. This is my plantation, as you have no doubt surmised, and this is my daughter, Magdalen. For whom were you looking?"

Boothe hesitated. "Peyton Latimer. A preacher."

"I know who he is," Davies said shortly. "Where's your brother?"

"I told him to run, that I'd meet him at the ford. He's likely there now."

Davies blew out a breath. "Come up to the house. I'll send one of my men after your brother."

Boothe spoke with Davies most of the way to the house, recounting the confrontation with the tavernkeeper and describing his brother. Davies led the way into the detached kitchen building, gave brief orders, and left to tell Gunning about the stranger's brother. Gunning had been born on the plantation. He was barely into his teens, but he was wise in the trails and rivers that surrounded the plantation. If anyone could track a man down, it was Gunning.

Magdalen held a basin of hot water while Nelda, the cook, unceremoniously tossed the man's buckskin jacket aside and began dabbing at the blood on his face. Boothe clenched his bruised jaw, which caused another wince. Magdalen said, "Nelda, ease up a bit."

"There's dirt in here and it ain't gonna get clean if I ease up," Nelda said. "You oughta get talking and give him something else to think about."

Magdalen offered Boothe a hesitant smile. "I don't know what I have to talk about, but I'll try."

"I've got something in mind." Boothe lifted his eyes to

hers. Those eyes were like molasses. Dark and deep. They should have warned her what he was about to say. "Why did my asking about Brother Latimer cause such a stir?"

Nelda flicked Magdalen a glance. Magdalen looked down at the basin she held. A thin swirl of crimson colored the water. "People don't like the things he preaches."

"Things like repentance and faith and the authority of God's Word?"

"That's it exactly."

He waited out another grimace as Nelda smeared ointment on his cheek. Then he said, "And what about you?"

"Me?"

"You. What do you think about the things Latimer was preaching?"

Magdalen felt an odd sense of relief. So few men—or women—even knew what things like repentance and faith truly meant, much less talked about them in such a natural way. "He led both Mama and me to Christ three years ago." Before the summer sickness that had taken Mama, as well as Brother Latimer's wife. Had it really been that long?

"What of your father?"

"He's not . . . open about his faith. But after my mother died, he said he found his peace in the merit of Christ. I can't ask for more than that. He didn't object when Brother Latimer baptized me last summer."

"That took a lot of courage."

"Not as much as you think. I'm the daughter of Alexander Davies. No one spoke to me about it."

"And she does mean no one spoke to her," Nelda said meaningfully.

"Nelda." If Magdalen wasn't careful, Nelda would be going on about the lack of suitors ever since Magdalen's public break with the Church of England.

"She had four fine lads after her, and not a one of them stood by her," Nelda said.

Magdalen sighed. There was no stopping Nelda.

"Then they weren't fine lads, Nelda," Boothe said

matter-of-factly.

Magdalen stole a glance at him. Not a hint of either mockery or pity. Well, that was a nice change.

"So people didn't like Latimer," Boothe went on. "And when he took sick, some of them thought he'd be better off dead. But he didn't die, did he?"

"No."

Boothe nodded. "Which brings me back to where I started. Where is he?"

Magdalen took the rag Nelda handed her and carried the basin over to the butcher block. "It's better if you don't know that, Mr. Boothe."

"I'm not trying to cause any trouble for —"

"I know. But some people are. For him, and for us."

Robert had never met a woman like Magdalen Davies. She couldn't have been more than seventeen, he decided. And her petite size certainly hadn't come from her father. But a woman who would lose four suitors to break with the Church of England was a rarity indeed. "Miss Davies."

She turned from the butcher block and looked him in the eye. Her bronze-colored ringlets had slipped their pins, and her dress, blue as her eyes, was draggled with mud. But if she was nervous, she wasn't showing it. Robert was struck by a sudden thought that came to him wholly unbidden.

Religious convictions aside, the lads of Craven County were boneheads for ignoring this woman.

"Beg your pardon if I spoke out of turn," he said. "I just want to know where Latimer is, and I reckon you might have something to do with it."

"There are things he was helping me with," she said quietly. "And I think that's all I should tell you, Mr. Boothe."

Magdalen spoke with utter composure. But Robert could tell she had said as much as she was going to say. "Fair enough. We can speak of other things."

"Nelda's finished with your injury."

"I know." But that didn't mean he wanted to stop

talking. Which was downright strange. Mitch was usually the one running on at the mouth.

Magdalen said suddenly, "You aren't from these parts, are you?"

"No. I'm from the mountain country. I have a preaching circuit there."

Her eyes lit. "Tell me about it."

Robert told her how he'd felt the call of God in a meeting four years earlier, how he'd joined up with another young preacher and started taking the gospel to the settlers of the Blue Ridge, how he'd been arrested for disturbing the peace a few months before. When he finally looked up, Alexander Davies stood in the doorway with an inscrutable look on his face.

Robert hastily came to his feet. "Sir. I didn't see you."

"I see that." Davies strode into the room. The floorboards fairly shook. "We looked for your brother at the ford, but we didn't find him. Or your horse."

Robert prayed Mitch hadn't stumbled across the tavernkeeper. Although Mitch could hold his own, man to man. "Reckon I should go out there and look myself, then."

"I wouldn't, if I were you. Ames is still on the warpath. He thinks you know something he doesn't, and he just might be right."

Robert was tired of secrets. "Sir," he said bluntly, "all I know is that Brother Latimer is out there somewhere, and he's been helping your daughter with something, and she won't tell me any more than that because it could hurt somebody somehow. Now would you like to clear some of that up?"

Davies stared at him. "Everything you just told my daughter – that was all true?"

"Every bit of it, sir."

"I don't know where Latimer is. And that's the truth. Magdalen does. But it's hers to tell, and I'll not have you or any other man forcing her to tell it, do you hear me?"

"I wouldn't think of it, sir."

"See that you don't." Davies let that hang in the air for a long minute. Then he said, "Stay here till your brother turns up. One of my young lads is looking for him. There's no use in you both running in circles."

"I'm much obliged, sir."

"Don't mention it," Davies said shortly. "Just keep your mouth shut."

III.

Mitchell sat on a wet log under a wet sweet gum tree and listened to the river flow from two streams into one. Robert had said they'd meet at the forks, hadn't he? But after waiting through recurring spats of rain all night and most of the next day, Mitchell began to wonder if he'd ever see Rob again. Or dry out.

"Lord," Mitchell said, "if I needed one more reason to *not* be a preacher, this would be it."

He pulled a piece of jerked bear meat from his saddlebags and ate it while he tried to pray. God knew where Rob was. And He knew what Mitchell was supposed to do. If only He would tell Mitchell.

When in doubt, wait.

Pa's advice came to him like an old friend. The jerky stuck in Mitchell's throat. He'd always known Pa would die someday. But the knowing was different now that it had happened.

Mitchell couldn't sit and wait anymore. It hurt too much. Time to get busy and find Rob.

He rode back along the trail to the open road, knowing all the while it was a stupid thing to do. But he didn't particularly care. He left his horse in a thicket and walked into the tavern.

The place was quiet, evening business not yet begun. The tavernkeeper was behind the bar, polishing a pile of

copper gills. Mitchell strode over, leaned on the bar, and said quietly, "Where's my brother?"

The tavernkeeper set down his cup and scouring cloth. "You have a nerve, walking in here like that."

"You had a nerve out there on the road yesterday. Where is he?"

"Do you think I would tell you?"

"Reckon you would if'n you knew what was good for you."

The tavernkeeper rounded the counter. "And now you're threatening me? Fine talk for a preacher."

"Aye, well, I'm not a preacher."

"Then you should know better than to keep company with one. The only good preacher is a dead one."

The ache hit Mitchell like a living thing. Pa was gone. If Rob was gone, too —

"*Where is my brother?*" he said, and he didn't realize he was in the tavernkeeper's face until the man shoved him back a step. Mitchell hit the bar. A copper gill clanged to the floor along with Mitchell's usual easygoing nature. He pushed the tavernkeeper away. "What's a preacher ever done to you?"

"Do you think I *care* where your brother is?" the tavernkeeper retorted. "It's Latimer I'm after. He's been stirring up trouble ever since he came to these parts."

"Taking business away from you, is that it?"

Mitchell saw it coming. He ducked just as the mug grazed his head. The tavernkeeper said, "All I can say is, if your brother's mixed up with Latimer, he'd better get out while he still can. And so had you."

Mitchell sucked in a deep breath. He wasn't a preacher. But he was a child of God. And God expected him to act like it, which meant not throwing the tavernkeeper wrong side up over his own bar. Mitchell turned on his heel and strode outside before he did something he'd regret.

The anger held him up until he got back to the road. Then his chest clenched up so tight he thought he'd stop

breathing. It shouldn't hurt this much. Shouldn't be this hard. He had every earthly reason to do what folks expected and pick up where Pa had left off. He'd seen the gospel lived out in front of him, had seen the dedication of men who took that gospel to others.

Maybe that was the problem. If he couldn't even hold his temper with a surly tavernkeeper, he'd never make it when real persecution came. How did preachers do it? Take that kind of abuse and not give back as good as they got?

He rode back to the forks of the river and sat down under the sweet gum tree. "Show me what to do, Lord. I've tried and I've messed it up. So I'm going to sit here until Rob shows up or You show me what comes next."

He leaned back and closed his eyes. Next thing he knew, a noise woke him to the last shades of twilight. Footsteps through the brush. The soft squelch of mud. It had to be Rob; surely no one else would be wandering around the forks at this hour. Mitchell pulled himself upright. "Over here!"

The footsteps stopped for so long Mitchell thought he'd dreamed them. Then they began again, but moving in the wrong direction. Mitchell sprang to his feet and started after the sound. "Rob? I'm over here."

The footsteps stopped abruptly. Mitchell ran headlong into someone. Not Rob. "Who are you?"

A long hesitation. "You're Mitchell Boothe?"

Mitchell couldn't see more than a dim outline in the waning light. "Aye, and who wants to know?"

"I'm Gunning, sir. Your brother's been looking for you. Sorry to run; I just – wasn't reckoning on finding you here."

The cadence of Gunning's speech formed a picture in Mitchell's mind. A young African lad, well younger than Mitchell. "Is Rob all right?"

"Far as I know, sir. He's up to the house, talking with Miss Maggie and her father."

Rob talking to a girl? Mitchell knew he was dreaming now. He went back to the sweet gum to untether his horse,

then followed Gunning through the woods, across a road, and into a field of plants that stood as tall as Mitchell. The damp wind lifted the heavy scent of tobacco.

"Are you sure about this?" Mitchell asked.

"Just a little farther. And don't talk too loud. Sometimes Ames is out of a night."

"Who's Ames?"

"The tavernkeeper."

"Oh. I'll be quiet."

Gunning led the way past clusters of outbuildings, stopping at a stable where Mitchell left his horse. A well-kept path led to a towering brick house. As they mounted the steps, Mitchell saw a tightly wrapped bundle under the young man's arm and wondered what it was. But he didn't have time to ask before Gunning held the paneled door for him. Mitchell stepped into a large central hall and was suddenly very aware of his unshaven face and rank buckskins.

Maybe another run-in with Ames didn't sound so bad after all.

"What do you think of Craven County, Mr. Boothe?"

Robert shifted his position to look at Alexander Davies. For the last half hour, Robert had talked with Magdalen while her father sat in his armchair with the *North-Carolina Gazette* and a pipeful of his own tobacco. Every now and then, the man inserted a question, but Robert gathered he was more content to listen than to talk. "Well, sir, it's not much like home, but it's some fine country to look at."

"I suppose the war with the French and Indians troubles the frontier more than it does the coastal regions."

"It's brought a heap of trouble on the backcountry," Robert admitted. "When I'm not riding my circuit—and sometimes when I am—I scout for one of the officers out there, trying to keep ahead of trouble from the Cherokee and Catawba. It's been bad this year. Folks crowd the forts, and then somebody takes sick, and it spreads like wildfire." He fixed his gaze on the bookshelves lining the far wall, but

he didn't really see the books. "Pa went to help the settlers, and I reckon that's why . . ."

Why he died, he meant to say, and couldn't.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Boothe." Magdalen sounded like she meant it. "There's trouble everywhere, isn't there? Here it's the summer ague and slave uprisings."

Robert pulled his attention from the bookshelves and the Blue Ridge. "It doesn't seem right, does it? That folks live in fear of things they've brought on themselves?"

Magdalen tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know how it is here. But in the mountains – if folks would treat the Indians the way they'd like to be treated themselves, it'd do away with a powerful lot of trouble. Not all of it, but a good bit."

"And if no Africans were enslaved, there would be no fear of revolt, is that it?" Davies lowered his pipe. "I suspect you're right, Mr. Boothe. But to achieve that, one would have to turn back time. The law forbids the freeing of slaves, save in cases of 'meritorious services.' Even then the courts must approve it."

"And any slave who's freed must leave the colony within six months," Magdalen added quietly. "Most have precious little training to make their own way."

"I'm sorry to be blunt, but that's wrong."

"It's not the worst of it," Davies said. "The law also says it's not murder to kill a slave if he's a runaway and resists capture. I ask you, Mr. Boothe, what is a man to do?"

"I don't know, sir."

"No more do I. All I can do is give them no reason to run." Davies shrugged. "One cannot expect change overnight."

It still didn't set right with Robert. But he was a guest in the man's home. He had no right to dictate how Davies should answer the predicament. "I reckon you do the best you can, sir."

A rap came at the study door. Davies said, "Enter."

The door swung open. Robert came to his feet. "Mitch?"

Mitchell gaped openly at the handsome furnishings of the study. "Rob, what are you doing here?"

Robert made the necessary introductions. Davies said, "And you've met Gunning, I see."

Mitchell nodded at the lanky young man beside him. "He found me sitting under a tree by the forks."

"Why were you at the forks?" Robert asked.

"Isn't that where you said we'd meet?"

"I said the *ford*."

"Oh. Well, that explains why you didn't find me sooner."

Robert shook his head. Mitch would be Mitch, even hundreds of miles from home. "I'm glad you're here."

"I didn't see your horse in the stable," Mitchell said.

"Ames and his cronies made off with him. Likely long gone, with that storm we had. He's always been nervish about thunder."

Davies got to his feet. "I'm sure I've an extra mount."

"I appreciate it, sir, but I can't afford a horse and I won't be beholden."

"Tobacco harvest is coming up." Davies extinguished his pipe. "I could use some extra hands."

"Labor in exchange for a mount?" Robert calculated swiftly. "What do you think, Mitch?"

Mitchell shrugged. "I already have a horse."

"Sounds as if you'll get my labor while Mitch lives easy, sir."

"Here, now," Mitchell said. "I'll help."

"A bargain, then," Davies said.

Robert didn't miss the swift glance Magdalen cast at her father. Davies must not have missed it, either, for he added, "On the condition that you refrain from beleaguering my daughter with any questions."

In other words, no asking about Brother Latimer. "Yessir."

Davies extended his hand. "You can start tomorrow."

IV.

Early the next morning, Robert and Mitchell headed out to the fields to pick tobacco hornworms. Robert had lain awake much of the night, wondering at the logic of staying in Davies's guestroom while working off a debt to the man. But Davies hadn't taken no for an answer. And despite her moment of uncertainty, Magdalen hadn't seemed to mind, either. She and Robert had discussed everything from theology to possum stew before the political discussion Mitchell had interrupted. But for all their talking, Magdalen hadn't given him any hints as to Brother Latimer's whereabouts. Or any hints as to why she wouldn't talk about it. There must be a reason. . . .

Mitchell flicked a fat worm at him. "Pay attention."

"What?"

"You're standing there staring at that tobacco plant like you've never seen one before."

"I'm looking for worms."

"Right." Mitchell flipped a lock of damp hair out of his eyes. The day was already stifling. "How long are we working here?"

"A few weeks should do it."

"You sure?"

"I reckon so. Why?"

"I thought maybe you were planning on working seven years or so."

It took Robert a minute to catch Mitchell's meaning. Once the Old Testament love story came to mind, he flicked the writhing green pest right back at Mitchell. "There's no Jacob and Rachel going on here, Mitch."

"Right," Mitchell said again.

"Either way, we can't leave until we find out where Brother Latimer is. Which just got a powerful lot harder."

"About that." Mitchell straightened up. "You think he's hiding someplace nearby."

"It's all I can figure."

"Because Gunning said he'd been looking for me. But when he found me, he *hadn't* been looking for me. He was right surprised to see me. And he had a sack of something with him. Now why would Gunning be roaming around by the forks with a sack of something if he wasn't looking for me?"

"You're saying he was taking something to Brother Latimer?"

Mitchell shrugged. "Could be, don't you think? He'd have to have a pass to get off the plantation."

"I don't know, Mitch. I've tried asking . . ." Robert trailed off.

"What's wrong?"

"I thought I saw somebody over yonder."

Mitchell twisted his head around. "I don't see anybody. And I sure don't see Miss Davies, if that's who you're looking for."

"Hush up and pick hornworms, Mitch."

The sweltering days stretched into a sweltering week, then two. Alexander Davies eyed the weather and the fields and predicted an early harvest. Robert and Mitchell stopped picking hornworms and started cutting tobacco. Robert prayed while he worked. His best attempts to uncover a sign of Brother Latimer had come to no avail. A bit of subtle investigation among the field hands had yielded no results. A quick survey of the premises was equally unsuccessful. Every now and then, while he and Mitchell worked, Robert thought he saw someone at the edge of the property. But

when he looked, no one was there but Davies's field hands.

By the middle of the first day of harvest, great gaps had opened in the fields. Toward evening, Robert helped haul the wilted leaves away and string them up in the tobacco barn. The neat stacks of benches were gone.

When the long day's work was done, Robert was glad to stretch out and rest his aching back. Mitchell went to snoring right away, but Robert stared at the dark and prayed. He wasn't sure what he was praying for, except that every time he prayed about Brother Latimer, Magdalen Davies wasn't far behind. She had begun to make a habit of bidding the brothers good morning on their way outside, and Robert had begun to miss her on the days she didn't.

Somewhere in the house, a board creaked. A tiny rustle slid through the hall. Robert lifted his head.

Another creak.

Rustle.

Apparently somebody else couldn't sleep, either.

Downstairs, voices murmured.

A woman's voice. Not the cook.

What was Magdalen doing about at this hour?

A door shut softly. Robert slid out of bed and went to the window.

Moonlight shimmered over the shorn tobacco fields. A pair of figures slipped between the mounded rows. One in wide skirts, the other tall and lanky.

Magdalen and – Gunning?

Robert watched as they walked toward the road. On the other side of that road was the river where Gunning had found Mitchell. Robert had a feeling Mitchell had been right. Brother Latimer must be near that river.

Then a third shadow appeared from the uncut side of the field. Right where Robert had thought he'd seen a man, early in the day. The thickset frame wasn't hard to identify.

Ames.

Robert spun from the window and grabbed his boots. Mitchell grunted. "Rob?"

“Get up and get Mr. Davies.” Robert had no idea where in this massive house the man might be. He belted his hunting jacket and dashed from the room, soundless as a Cherokee warrior on the hunt. He slipped through the hall and down the stairs, let himself out the door, and ran.

The tavernkeeper trailed a hundred feet behind Magdalen and Gunning. Robert’s ire rose with every step. But Ames had the lead by a wide margin. Robert quickened his stride as Magdalen and Gunning neared the road and Ames closed the gap.

At the edge of the road, Magdalen turned. Robert saw her eyes go wide. She gripped the bundle she held like a shield, but she held her ground as she glanced past Ames and locked her eyes on Robert’s. Ames swung around. With an oath, the man dodged behind Magdalen and dragged her in front of him.

So he was a scoundrel *and* a coward. A sour trace of applejack hung on the humid air. Ames had been sampling his own wares. He slurred slightly as he said, “Let me be. You’re a preacher, remember.”

“I am. And a peaceable man.” Robert didn’t break stride. “But if you’ve never met a backcountry circuit rider, you’re in for a rude surprise.”

He drew Magdalen to the side with one hand and drove the other into Ames’s jaw. The man crumpled. Magdalen gave a little gasp. Robert said, “Sorry, Miss Davies, that’s how it’s done in the Blue Ridge.”

V.

Magdalen drew a long and steadying breath and told her heart to slow down. It had all happened so fast. She had had to get food to Brother Latimer, and she had thought she could ask him what to do. Was it too late for that now?

Gunning looked stricken. "I never even saw him, Miss Maggie."

"I know, Gunning." She drew another breath. Robert let his arm drop from her shoulders, but he didn't move away. She didn't either. "Thank you, Mr. Boothe."

"Your father's on his way. Mitch was fetching him. He'll know what to do with Ames."

Magdalen glanced at the unconscious tavernkeeper. "I suppose you'll want to know what I was doing out here."

"I think I know." He waited until she was looking at him again before he went on. "But I'm not going to ask. Your secrets are yours to tell or keep as you see fit."

Tears threatened. Whether over what had just happened or over his patient words, she didn't know. "May I—pray about it first?"

He smiled. "I'd expect nothing less, Miss Davies."

Mitchell dashed up, clothing and hair all awry. Davies was behind him. "Magdalen! Are you all right?"

"I'm all right. Mr. Boothe was just in time."

"Aye, I saw that last bit." Davies gathered Magdalen in close. "If I had thought for a moment that anyone would see

you —”

“I thought I saw somebody hanging about your fields, but I hadn’t any idea it was Ames,” Robert said.

Mitchell frowned. “He must have seen us out there and thought we’d lead him to Latimer.”

Robert nudged Ames with the toe of one boot. “What shall I do with him?”

“We’ll secure him in the cellar and call for the sheriff in the morning. I don’t know how to thank you, Mr. Boothe.”

“No need, sir.” Robert loosed his hunting belt and pulled Ames’s hands together. “Lend a hand, Mitch.”

Mitchell bent to help. Together he and Robert hauled Ames away, following Gunning toward the house. Magdalen fell into step beside her father and tightened her grip on her bundle of foodstuffs. “I’m glad you’re here, Papa.”

“I ought to have been here to begin with. I should have told you to be more careful, now that the fields are open.”

Magdalen paused and turned to face him. “Do you think that’s the only cause for care, Papa?”

Davies met her eyes. “Robert Boothe is a good man, Magdalen. Whatever you decide, remember that.”

Magdalen knew her father was right. But one decision could lead the wrong people to ask the wrong questions. Davies was a leader in the community, a voice of reason in tidewater politics, and he’d already jeopardized his position by letting her associate with Latimer. If any of Latimer’s enemies found the preacher, Papa would be pulled into the thick of it. And tobacco harvest was upon them, requiring his full attention. One decision could hurt the people she loved most. She didn’t want that kind of responsibility.

From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

She had a rock, a refuge. The decision was hers. But the results belonged to God.

Robert and Mitchell had returned from the cellar and were waiting when Magdalen and Davies entered the house. Robert’s eyes met Magdalen’s, and she was struck

again by the depth of them. There was strength there, strength he was offering her as clearly as if he'd spoken it. Not his own strength, but the strength of his Father.

Maybe Brother Latimer needed that strength as much as she did.

Magdalen took a deep breath. *Lord, let this be of You.*

Robert said gently, "You all right, Miss Davies?"

She straightened her shoulders. "Brother Latimer has been staying in a cave by the river."

"Told you so," Mitchell said.

Robert didn't even glance at his brother. "Go on."

"He was not at all well, earlier in the year. He's been resting, regaining his strength. And he says—he wants to go home. I thought at first he meant heaven, but he meant the backcountry."

Robert's lips quirked. "Next best thing."

"But . . . isn't it dangerous?"

"Yes. It is. The mountains can break your heart." His gaze turned faraway. "Or give it wings. Sometimes both at once."

"I don't know what to do," Magdalen said quietly. "He couldn't—or wouldn't—stay here at the house. That cave is aggravating his cough. But he can't get about like he used to, and he's not strong enough to travel all that way alone."

"He has a son near Shallow Ford." Robert leaned against the wall, his buckskin jacket stretching taut across his shoulders. "That's the first place we looked for him. And it's the first place we'll go on our way back. If he can ride—or even if he can't—we can get him there."

Davies cleared his throat. "Bring him here tonight, while Ames is out of the way. We'll put Latimer in the guestroom. No one need know."

Relief washed through Magdalen. It might have been her decision, but she wanted Papa behind her. "We can go right away."

Then it hit her. When Robert's business was completed, he and his brother would take Brother Latimer and ride

back to the Blue Ridge and she would likely never see them again. She didn't know how she felt about that, except that everything in her rose up against it.

My heart is overwhelmed, Lord. Lead me to the Rock.

The river crossing was dark and damp, as was the steep bank on the other side. But Peyton Latimer's smile was a light all its own when he came to the entry of the cave. "Well, if it isn't the Boothe boys! Maggie, where'd you run across these fine young fellows?"

Maggie. It suited her, Robert thought.

"We rather ran across each other," Magdalen said.

"I haven't seen these boys in a coon's age." A dry cough shook the old preacher. Peyton Latimer had aged, same as Pa. Silver threaded his hair and short beard, and lines spread from the corners of his eyes. But he was very much alive. "What brings you lads clear out here?"

"We weren't just sure at first, sir." Robert hadn't expected it to hurt this much, seeing a man who reminded him so much of Pa. But the pain felt . . . cleansing, somehow. "Now I reckon we came to bring you home."

VI.

Latimer spent the rest of the night and much of the morning in Alexander Davies's guestroom, while the sheriff hauled Ames away on charges of trespassing and assaulting a woman. And horse theft. The sheriff had found Robert's gelding in the tavern stables. Mitchell joined Robert in the courtyard to examine the gelding and asked, "What about all that work we did for Davies?"

"He's providing a horse for Brother Latimer."

"Reckon that's the end of your seven years, then."

Robert rolled him a look and headed for the house.

They all gathered in the dining room for a belated morning meal. Magdalen said quietly, "I suppose you'll be leaving soon, then?"

Robert laid down his fork. "There are a few things I'd like to know first, Miss Davies. Mayhap it doesn't make much difference now. But you said there were things Latimer was helping you with. I got the notion you were the reason he was hiding."

"She wasn't the reason," Latimer said. "Ames was."

Magdalen sighed. "I was teaching Papa's field hands to read."

It wasn't illegal. But it was the next thing to it. Robert's respect for this woman increased tenfold. "And Ames found out?"

"We took Brother Latimer in when he first took sick,"

Magdalen explained. "Mr. Ames started trying to catch Brother Latimer in some wrongdoing. Prowling about that way, he was bound to see something, and he did. I don't think he knew I was teaching folks to read, but he saw them meeting, and that was trouble enough. Brother Latimer started fearing for me. He said he was drawing too much attention to me. But he wasn't well yet, and he couldn't get out of town without someone catching him."

"Hence the cave." Robert sat back. "Well, that does explain a few things."

"Once Latimer was off the grounds, Ames backed off," Davies said. "And though I didn't forbid Magdalen to help Latimer, I did all I could to stay out of it. May God forgive me."

"He already has," Latimer said. "As have I."

"But I don't understand . . ." Mitchell began.

"As I've said, there are folks in this county who are scared stiff of a slave revolt," Davies said. "Some even think a slave who is baptized into the Church of England becomes a free man. It's not true, but it makes men leery of religion among the slaves."

"But—" Mitchell said.

Robert knew all too well what fear could do to a man's freedom to worship God. Anger knotted the muscles in his neck. "And heaven forbid folks should learn to read for themselves, because then they might *think* for themselves, is that it?"

"Exactly." Magdalen sounded relieved that Robert had so readily understood. "Incidentally, we were meeting in that tobacco barn where I first found you."

"Little wonder your father hauled me out of there like the place was on fire," Robert said. "I didn't know why—"

"Just a minute," Latimer said quietly. "Looks like Mitch has something on his mind."

Robert looked at his brother. Mitch did look a mite put out that they'd all been talking over him. "What?"

"Nothing," Mitchell said.

Robert cocked an eyebrow. "I don't believe you."

"It's nothing, it's just—" Mitchell shrugged. "How do you preachers do it? Rob gets beat up and Brother Latimer hides out in a cave and Pa—Pa wears himself out and the fever takes him."

Silence. Finally Robert said, "Well, I reckon once you know God's called you . . ."

"Right. Once you know." Faint bitterness laced Mitchell's usually carefree voice. "Look, I'm sorry. Never mind. It's just been a long night. I'd be obliged if you all would excuse me."

Mitchell sat on the top step of the porch, staring at nothing. He knew Robert sat down next to him because the step creaked and he smelled buckskin.

The silence stretched for a long time before Mitchell could get the words out. "I can't believe Pa is gone."

"I know."

"Everybody thinks I should know what to do, being as you're a preacher and Pa is—was—a preacher. But I don't. I don't know. I don't know if I could stick it out. I mean, look at you. You were in jail last spring. I'd go plumb crazy if I was in jail."

He stole a glance at his brother. Robert was staring off at nothing, too, like he was reliving his arrest near the Yadkin River. "That's why I said that once you know God's called you—"

"But I don't." There, it was out. "I'm scared to death of being a preacher, maybe, but I'm scared worse to think of being one if God *hasn't* called me. And I don't know if He has or not."

A voice behind them said, "You don't have to."

Mitchell lifted his head. "I don't?"

"No." Latimer lowered himself to the step on Mitchell's other side. "Plenty of times I haven't known what God wanted me to do."

"But—what do I do if I don't know?"

"You wait," Latimer said simply. "When it's time for

you to do something, you'll know."

Mitchell let out a long, hard breath. "And the rest of it? When the going gets tough?"

Latimer chuckled. "Already has, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, I hadn't thought of it like that, sir." A tiny glimmer of light worked its way through the ache in his chest. "There's been grace for it, I reckon."

"And there will be more grace when you need it. That's the promise, you know."

"I wanted to tell you that God is enough for those times," Robert said slowly. "He'll be your hiding place. But maybe it's time we both started living like it. Pa's gone, Mitch. But God is still enough."

He stopped talking, like it hurt him to keep going. Mitchell's throat burned. But Rob was right. God was enough. A refuge and strength, an ever present help in time of trouble.

Latimer clapped Mitchell on the shoulder and got up. "Hang on to the promises, lad. Sometimes they're all you've got. But when you're in a storm, they're all you need."

Mitchell swiped at his eyes and pulled himself to his feet. He still didn't know what he was supposed to do. But somehow that was all right.

"Take care of yourself, Magdalen."

Robert heard the name come out of his mouth and held his breath. But Magdalen didn't seem to mind the familiarity. "And you the same, Mr. Boothe."

He took the warm, fragrant parcel she handed him and tucked it into a saddlebag. "That's not going to last past our first stop, you know."

"I hope not. Nelda wouldn't forgive you otherwise."

Mitchell cleared his throat. "Let's get moving, Rob."

Alexander Davies extended his hand. "Glad to have met you, Boothe. Both of you. We're all better for it."

Robert returned the hearty grip. "The whole county will be better for it if Ames leaves town as rumor has it."

"Aye, horse theft is a bad choice to make if a man's in the tavernkeeping business."

"We'll pray for him," Latimer said quietly.

It could have been Pa, saying that. Reminding his boys what really mattered. "Just as soon as we're out of his reach."

"If you ever come 'round these parts again, you'll be welcome," Magdalen said shyly.

"I thank you kindly, Miss Davies."

"Rob."

"I'm coming, Mitch."

Robert lifted his hat to Magdalen, swung into the saddle, and turned the gelding toward the Blue Ridge.

SIX WEEKS LATER

Magdalen felt the smothering heat as soon as she stepped outside with the jug Nelda had prepared. Papa was in the tobacco barn, checking the piles of leaves that lay sweating on the floor, ready to be sorted. No one would know that the long building had held Magdalen's reading classes only a few months before.

The fields were brown and empty under the September sun. Someone had left a pair of horses tethered in the shade of an oak near the tobacco barn. Magdalen walked past, then stopped and turned back. A dapple-gray gelding and a brown mare. Where had she seen a dapple-gray gelding and a brown mare?

"Good morning, Miss Davies."

Magdalen spun at the sound of her name. Robert Boothe stood behind her. "Mr. Boothe?"

His smile erased all the time that had passed. "You said I'd be welcome."

"You are, Rob." She couldn't help saying his name; she had thought it for six weeks. "You came all the way from the mountains? Alone?"

"Mitch is around here somewhere. Talking to Gunning, I think. Said if he's going to be a circuit rider like God has started to nudge him, he ought to get used to traveling. Brother Latimer's settled in with his son, though. Wanted you to know."

So that was why he was here. “Let me find Papa. He’ll want to—”

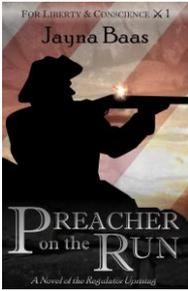
“I’ve already talked to him. For a good long time. He told me where to find you.” He took the jug from her hands and offered his arm. His very presence was a shadow from the heat. “Last time I came looking for Brother Latimer. This time I’ve come looking for you.”

If you enjoyed this story, please consider leaving an honest review on [Amazon](#) or [Goodreads](#).

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ABOUT THIS STORY

I've had bits of this tale floating around in my head for a long time. It didn't have a name. It didn't have many details. But it had Robert and Magdalen and the Davies plantation, and I knew Magdalen was teaching her father's slaves to read. *Promise of Refuge* is entirely fictional, as are its characters, but I've tried to be accurate regarding the North Carolina Slave Code of 1715, which was revised and expanded over the course of the century and did forbid unsupervised gatherings, place severe limitations on the freeing of slaves, and nullify murder penalties for the death of runaways, among other things. Alexander Davies represents those who made an uncomfortable peace with the status quo, whereas Magdalen demonstrates one small way people might have resisted a problem they didn't know how to fix.

I also tried to be accurate in my portrayal of a tobacco plantation. Tobacco didn't become a major cash crop in North Carolina until later, but it was lucrative enough in Craven County for the first tobacco market to open there in the early 1700's. I don't have direct evidence of preachers like Brother Latimer in the Craven County area, but there were Baptists active in North Carolina much earlier in the eighteenth century. The Church of England had already begun to spread, although its growth was slow at times, due in part to the unfounded belief that slaves became free if they joined the Church of England. George Whitefield came to this area on one of his preaching tours, but found most of the populace (especially the Anglican contingent) indifferent to his message of revival. The Davies family's faith is based in part on people like Patrick Henry of Virginia, whose mother attended Presbyterian dissenter meetings while his father remained staunchly Anglican, leading Patrick Henry to place his faith in Christ and support dissenter preachers without ever joining their open break with the Church of England. This is the type of faith I imagine Alexander Davies to have.

I hope you enjoyed this brief prequel to *Preacher on the Run*. I certainly enjoyed writing it! Special thanks to Maralee, who helped me through some truly hair-pulling moments.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JAYNA BAAS (pronounced as in “baa, baa, black sheep”) lives in northern Michigan with a great family of real people and the family of pretend people who live in her head. (Yes, she does know her characters are not real. No, she does not want you to tell them she said so.) Notorious for working on several projects at once and writing her series in the wrong order, she believes German writer Thomas Mann was correct in saying, “A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than for other people.”



Jayna is a member of the Christian Proofreaders and Editors Network and enjoys writing and reading in a wide range of genres, but her favorite story is this: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

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