

FOR LIBERTY & CONSCIENCE ✕ 1

Jayna Baas



PREACHER
on the RUN

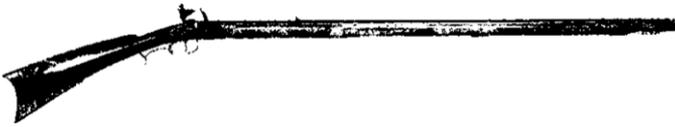
A Novel of the Regulator Uprising

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MARCH 22, 1767
SANDY CREEK,
NORTH CAROLINA

Prologue

“YOU BOYS ARE *CERTAIN* YOU WANT ME TO BE A leader in this.” Robert Boothe searched the faces of the men around him. “It’s not just a few men here and there anymore. It’s—” He picked up the paper in front of him and read, “*An association to assemble ourselves for conferences for regulating public grievances and abuses of power.*” He let the page drop. “It’s a mighty big responsibility, leading a thing like that.”

“If we trust you enough to write it, we trust you enough to lead us in standing by it,” one of the men said.

John Woodbridge clapped Robert on the shoulder. “You’ve been leading folks for years, Pastor. We trust you. And whoever *don’t* trust you—knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know, ain’t that what the Bible says?”

“I don’t think the Bible was talking about my leadership skills,” Robert said. His drawl was quiet in the big meetinghouse. Too quiet. But he was not a man given to raising his voice.

“What was it you wrote in that pledge?” This from a rangy, angular man Robert knew only as Perry. “Right near the end, there. ‘In cases of differences in judgment we will submit to the majority of our body.’ So submit.”

Robert glanced up and looked around at that “majority of the body,” what part of it was present. So many men, all sick and tired of government corruption. Just like Robert.

All he had ever wanted was to be a preacher. A circuit rider, at that. Living life for the Lord, for the lost, for the wind in his face. Now he was “regulating public grievances and abuses of power.” And still shy of thirty-five.

He took the pen Woodbridge handed him and ran his eye down the page one last time.

“That we will pay no taxes until we are satisfied they are agreeable to law . . .”

“That we will pay no officer any more fees than the law allows . . .”

“That we will attend our meetings of conference as often as we conveniently can or is necessary . . .”

“That we will contribute to collections for defraying necessary expenses . . .”

“That in cases of differences in judgment we will submit to the majority of our body.”

Signing the pledge did not force him to act as a leader. But Robert would not feel right joining anything he wasn't willing to take through to the very end. Once he signed it, there was no turning back. Not that there was any turning back, even now. Not after eleven years of preaching freedom.

“To all of which we do solemnly swear,” he read slowly, out loud.

He signed the pledge. Robert Boothe was a Regulator. No turning back.

PART I



RESISTANCE

March 22 - May 16, 1771

“If it be possible,
as much as lieth in you,
live peaceably with all men.”
Romans 12:18

FOUR YEARS LATER
MARCH 22, 1771
AYEN FORD,
NORTH CAROLINA



ROBERT BOOTHE HAD NEVER KNOWN COUNTY justice Geoffrey Sheridan to barge into a late-night Regulator meeting at the Ayen Ford Baptist meetinghouse. Other folks certainly had done just that. The sheriff, for instance. But not Geoffrey Sheridan. The moment his old friend came through the door, Robert knew those other folks weren't far behind.

"Sheriff Kendall on his way?" he asked in an undertone, stepping away from the men clustered in the back of the meetinghouse.

"Not only the sheriff this time," Sheridan said. He was in his mid-forties, only ten years older than Robert, but tonight he looked sixty. "One of the governor's men is with him. A new man, Colonel Charles Drake. I don't know what you and your men are meeting about tonight, and I don't want to know. But you've been preaching without a license for fifteen years, and you've been leading Regulators for nearly half that. Colonel Drake is looking for trouble. If he looks here—"

"I allow as he'll find it." Robert smiled grimly. "Thanks, Geoff. Now you'd best be getting out while you can."

The only warning was a sudden noise outside and the

crack of a musket butt against the door, and then it was too late. No time for Sheridan, or anyone else, to make it out the back way. Robert motioned Sheridan behind him an instant before the door crashed against the wall.

Robert had dealt with the wrong side of the law before. He'd dealt with it in his church building, too. But the last thing Ayen Ford needed was a new agent of Governor Tryon, and the stranger behind the sheriff wore a sword that branded him as a military man. No older than Robert, tall and trim, coal-black hair in a flawless queue and eyes that looked right through you and out the other side. Robert said, "What's this about?"

Ebeniah Kendall was a big man. Robert was solidly built, but the sheriff was easily sixty pounds heavier, made weightier by the knowledge of his own power. He said, "There's a law against seditious meetings. I've seen my share of dissenter preachers calling for rebellion, so don't try to play holy and innocent with me. And don't try to tell me this is just neighborly talk, either. This is the kind of thing the governor wants to put an end to. Which is what Colonel Drake and I are here to do."

"This being Colonel Drake, I gather." Robert nodded toward the stranger, who appeared to be examining the room. Plain oak walls and simple plank benches, a few windows, a front door that Kendall had forced open, and a second exit behind the unadorned pulpit. Drake pulled his attention from his perusal and wordlessly inclined his head, either bored or simply content to remain quiet. Out of the corner of his eye Robert saw Saul McBraden move restlessly. *Lord, help.* If Saul got it into his head to knock the sheriff upside the head or some such thing, five and a half feet of musket would blow the pastor of the Ayen Ford Baptists from here to kingdom come. Robert wanted to go to heaven, but not that way.

"Put the gun down, Sheriff," he said evenly, hoping his tone would give Saul the hint to calm down. "I'll give you fair warning that you're on God's property and He's watch-

ing you, but beyond that I'm not aiming to run and I'm not aiming to fight you."

Kendall glanced at Drake and started to lower the musket just as Saul McBraden exploded. "But Pastor, they have no right to come on in through here unprovoked and—"

So much for calming Saul down.

"I told you, there's a law," Kendall snapped.

"That doesn't mean the law is right," Saul muttered. "Or the way you enforce it, either."

Robert slipped in front of Saul before Drake could see the young man's clenched fists. Saul's hair was more blond than red, but every now and then, the red showed in his temper. If Saul got mad enough, and the officials got mad enough, everyone would get riled and they'd all end up in jail. Which they would anyway if Sheriff Kendall and this Colonel Drake fellow found out they'd been meeting to discuss unjust taxes.

"If you're here to break this up, then break it up," Robert said. "There's no need for it to get out of hand."

Geoffrey Sheridan came forward a step. "These are good men, Colonel."

"I'll be the judge of that, Justice." Drake's gaze roved over the small gathering of men, church members and otherwise, before again coming to rest on Robert. But he said nothing more, letting Kendall do the talking.

"Everyone get out," the sheriff said, motioning with his musket.

The men looked at Robert. Robert nodded. One by one the men moved to the front door and filed out. Robert knew, and they knew, that the colony's riot act said anyone who didn't leave a meeting within an hour of the sheriff's order would be guilty of felony. Sometimes a man had to pick his battles. Saul was last to go, looking like he'd just as soon stay and fight it out with the law.

Robert locked eyes with Colonel Drake, each man gauging the other. Drake was all chiseled edges and poise, dark and polished, how Robert had always envisioned an

eastern military man to look. Robert was more a continuation of the rough brown wood of the meetinghouse. Oak-brown hair, bronzed skin, buckskin hunting shirt. Not of Drake's world at all.

"I would never have guessed," the colonel said slowly, "that a building as small and plain as this could ever be suspected as the breeding ground of mass rebellion. Or that a man like you should be suspected as the leader of it."

"Life is full of surprises, Colonel."

"Are you admitting—"

"Nothing at all."

A spark of something like humor flickered in Drake's dark eyes. "I see." He held Robert's gaze a moment longer, then wheeled abruptly and motioned for Kendall to follow.

Kendall moved obediently toward the door. "If anything comes of this, preacher," he said, "we'll be back. And we'll be coming for you."

"It'd not be the first time," Robert said quietly.

"And you, Justice." Drake paused at the door. "This is the last time you'll play with fire."

When Robert got home, Susanna's piping seven-year-old voice instantly called from the bedroom. "Is Papa home? Can I get up and say good night, Mama? You said I could if I was awake. I'm awake."

"So I hear," Magdalen Boothe murmured as Robert leaned down to kiss her.

"Let her wait a minute," Robert whispered into Magdalen's hair. Thick dark bronze ringlets, loosely bound back, smelling of lye soap and thyme. Robert's manservant, Gunning, entered the room and hastily edged back out. Gunning could wait, too.

Magdalen gave Robert the minute he'd asked for plus a little more, then pulled away and called back to Susanna. "Come say good night. Then back to bed."

Susanna padded out, her light blond curls wisping out from under her nightcap, her cornflower-blue eyes suspi-

ciously heavy. She stopped a few feet short of Robert and asked, "Why are you holding Cricket?"

Once, while Robert was loading his rifle, Susanna had watched him close the frizzen, the hinged steel that struck sparks over the priming pan. It squeaks, she had said, just like a cricket. The rifle had been named Cricket ever since. Persistent squeak notwithstanding, Cricket was a beautiful gun. Tempered .45 caliber bore, flame-maple stock, brass fittings, scrolled carving that Robert had done himself on long winter nights. The flint was knapped sharp, the trigger as smooth as any he had ever known. He'd take Cricket and a good horse over any other advantage a man could name. But there were times, like tonight, when a good rifle was not the answer.

"You know Papa brings his rifle down to the meeting-house with him sometimes," Magdalen said smoothly.

"Can I go with you next time, Papa?"

"Depends how late it is and what I'm doing." Robert reached around her and set Cricket in the corner.

"What were you doing this time?" Susanna wanted to know.

"Talking with some men."

"About the vestry tax?"

Robert frowned. "Who told you about that?"

"Benjamin told me," Susanna said.

That explained it. Benjamin Woodbridge, older brother of Susanna's best friend, was twelve and knew everything.

"And I heard you say it to Mama after church last Sunday," Susanna added.

Robert glanced at Magdalen, wondering what else Susanna had overheard in days past. "The vestry tax is a mighty heavy subject for so late at night, Susanna. And a mighty heavy subject for a curly little head like yours."

Susanna would not be deterred. "But what is it?"

"Money we have to chunk in to support the Church of England," Robert said. "Even if we don't agree with the Church of England."

Susanna's forehead puckered. "But that's not right."

"Well, some of us don't think so."

"Rob . . ."

The soft southern in Magdalen's voice turned his name into a syllable and a half, a quiet warning that it was late, that this was no time to rehearse one of his worst grievances. So he amended his statement in silence, thinking, A whole slew of us don't think it's right. Baptist, Presbyterian, Quaker, who knows what else, all of us hate it. All except the Anglican clergymen it profits.

But Susanna was not satisfied. "Does everybody have to pay the vestry tax? Benjamin said so."

"Everybody around these parts has to," Robert said.

"Supposed to, leastways." This from Gunning, who came all the way into the room this time. "Sorry, Master Rob, I didn't mean to walk in on you and the missus while you were—uh—"

"No harm done, Gunning." Robert winked at Magdalen.

"While you were what, Papa?" Susanna piped up.

"Nothing, pumpkin. And neither is the vestry tax. Nothing to bother your head about, that is." Robert didn't mind explaining things to his daughter—but how did one explain a decade and a half of injustice to a seven-year-old who didn't know what "extortion" meant?

"Papa," Susanna said, "what's extortion?"

"Benjamin again?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I figured," he said.

"I don't hear anything that sounds like *good night*," Magdalen hinted.

"Good night, Papa," Susanna said obediently, lifting her face for a kiss. Robert complied and gave her a gentle nudge in the direction of the bedroom.

Gunning said, "How was the meeting?"

"You just heard. Nothing to bother your head about."

Gunning gave him a look. "That might work on Miss Susanna, but not on me, no sir."

"It doesn't work on her, either," Robert said wryly. "John Woodbridge needs to grub up more work for Benjamin to do. Aye, we were meeting about the vestry tax. More than that, though. The scouts say that four days ago Governor Tryon got permission from his council to muster his militia and march our way. We've got a conference of Regulators planned for the twenty-seventh, but in the meantime, we're studying on what to do. We didn't get far before Sheridan came to warn us."

He gave them the short version of the night's events and his encounter with Colonel Drake, passing lightly over the details, not wanting to frighten his wife. Not that Magdalen Davies Boothe was an easy woman to frighten. She had left her life as the privileged daughter of a plantation owner to follow Robert to his mountain circuit, where she had known things far more frightening than officials with overinflated views of themselves.

"Is there anything you can do to—prepare?" Magdalen asked.

"Get a license," Robert said with a humorless smile. "That's all a man like Drake wants—control over what I say and where I say it."

"He thinks he's got more say over it than the Lord does?" Gunning's smile was equally mirthless.

"If he thinks he does, he's wrong," Robert said. "The county has no authority to limit where and when a man may preach the Word. But even Geoffrey Sheridan doesn't seem to understand that, obliging as he's been. I didn't tell him how some of the boys and I are fixing to preach on the street tomorrow. I don't think he'd have taken to that idea, though he'd know better than to think he could change my mind."

"Give him time, love," Magdalen said gently. "The Lord didn't show you everything in a day."

"Geoff's had nine years," Robert said dryly. "But you're right, of course. You always are."

"I try to be." Abruptly the teasing left her voice and she said, "This man Drake who came with the sheriff—did he

know who you are? How you've organized the Regulators here and led petitions and all?"

"If he did, he didn't say so," Robert said. "Which is what worries me."



Two

“ROB. WAKE UP.”

Magdalen was shaking him. Robert opened one eye, grunted. “Mm.”

“Wake up. Did you hear that?”

He rolled halfway over. “Hear what?”

“*That.*”

The straw tick crackled as Robert sat up and listened. Someone across the street seemed to be making an unholy racket. He glanced at the kitchen window through the doorway. Dawn was still well on the other side of the horizon.

“Some no-account out celebrating. Though what there is to celebrate these days I don’t know.” He lay down again and waited for Magdalen to settle beside him. “More likely, maybe, someone making a protest in his own way.”

A crash. Like a door rending from its hinges. Across the street but loud enough to be their own front door.

“I don’t think that’s it, Rob,” Magdalen said in a small voice. “Across the street—that’s—”

“Sheridan’s house. I know.” Robert was already on his feet, reaching for the garments that lay over the chair in the corner. “Something’s wrong. Stay here and I’ll go see.”

“Be careful, Rob.”

He finished throwing on his clothes. "Don't you worry, love."

Torchlight flared from Geoffrey Sheridan's house as Robert stepped into the street. A pair of horses moved restlessly in front of a splintered void in the front wall. Robert's fingers tightened on Cricket's cool barrel. If whoever was over there tried to cross the street and kick Robert's door in that way, Cricket would do the talking. Robert was a peace-loving man, a Baptist pastor, after all. But when it came to protecting family, Baptist pastors in these parts could shoot.

He moved closer, his steps cautious as he edged past the horses. Voices carried from within the building. Sheriff Kendall's, strident as always. Sheridan's voice, too, and a deeper, quieter one. The words were indistinct, but the tones indicated an argument.

Footsteps neared the doorway and Robert faded into the shadows. Sheriff Kendall appeared, carrying a torch. Behind him came Colonel Charles Drake, the governor's emissary. He was escorting Geoffrey Sheridan. Sheridan's lips were pressed together, his hands clasped in front of him.

Not clasped.

Shackled.

Anger surged through Robert, a notch shy of white rage. Without moving from the shadows he said, "What do you think you're doing, Drake?"

Colonel Drake wheeled. The torchlight accentuated the sharp lines of his face, turned them hard as stone. "Reverend Boothe. I might have known."

"I asked you a question, Colonel."

"What do I think I'm doing, was that it? I might ask you the same thing."

Robert moved forward. "I'm looking out for law and justice, is what I'm doing."

"Don't try, Rob," Sheridan said in a low, weary voice.

Drake's smile showed straight, perfect teeth. "On the contrary. Law and justice say that Sheridan has undermined

the governor's authority long enough."

"That's a rank lie."

"You would say so," Drake said with a shrug. "From what I understand, you've been reaping most of the benefits."

"This is wrong, Colonel."

"My word here is law."

"Not to God."

"Listen to me, preacher." The smile was gone. Drake's gaze pinned Robert's. "The only reason I'm not taking you with him is that I'm giving you just enough rope to hang yourself."

Magdalen looked out the window, seeing dim silhouettes in the torchlight across the street, two men, no, three, parting from one lone figure. Dark shapes, but nothing more. What if Rob—

No, Lord. I'm not going to go there.

She forced herself to turn from the window. The taper she'd lit and set on the kitchen table flickered as Gunning let himself in the back door. "You all right, Miz Maggie?"

She almost couldn't see him, the way his dark skin blended with the shadows. But his deep voice was comforting. "I'm all right. Rob went to see what all the noise was."

"I figured he would. That's why I come in. He'd have wanted me to."

"I just hope Rob doesn't do anything foolish."

The front door opened behind her. Robert said, "I haven't, though I've surely a mind to."

Magdalen turned. Robert shut the door. His voice and face were calm. Too calm. But when he looked at her the candlelight showed that his eyes, the deep color of warm molasses, were not. Magdalen could tell even in the semi-darkness that her patient, gentle husband was mad enough to spit, as her mama would say, God rest her soul.

"What happened?" she said, as much for Robert's benefit as her own. "I thought I saw the sheriff."

“Aye.” He set Cricket in the corner with care but a little more force, she thought, than was strictly necessary. “And Charles Drake.”

“But what were they doing at Sheridan’s house? In the middle of the night?”

“Arresting him for treason.”

“Oh, Rob, no.”

“I thought you said he let Sheridan off with just a warning at that meeting of yours,” Gunning said.

“When he speaketh fair, believe him not: for seven abominations are in his heart,” Robert said bitterly.

“What did you do?” Gunning wanted to know.

“I’d have shot him if my conscience would’ve let me.” He rubbed the back of his neck and looked at Magdalen, dark anger still in his eyes. “We had some peace with Geoff on the court. He kept the rest in line. But now it’s up to us.”

“And all the other men like you,” Magdalen said softly.

She was scared to death of what could happen to him, standing against men like Drake and the governor. But she was proud of him, too. She let her eyes follow the rugged line of his profile, his wide shoulders, his nut-brown hair cut just above the back of his collar. Next to the Lord, she’d never loved anyone like she loved Robert Boothe. He was an easy man to love, as a rule. But she knew for a fact she wouldn’t want to stand in his way when once he’d had enough.

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