

SAMPLE

THE LIFE OF
JOHN NEWTON
AND THE
SURPRISING STORY
BEHIND HIS SONG

AMAZING
GRACE

BRUCE HINDMARSH

CRAIG BORLASE

**A M A Z I N G
G R A C E**

AMAZING GRACE

The Life of John Newton and the
Surprising Story Behind His Song

BRUCE HINDMARSH

CRAIG BORLASE



W PUBLISHING GROUP

AN IMPRINT OF THOMAS NELSON

Amazing Grace

© 2023 Bruce Hindmarsh and Craig Borlase

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by W Publishing, an imprint of Thomas Nelson.

Published in association with the literary agency of WTA Media, LLC, Franklin, Tennessee.

Thomas Nelson titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version. Public domain.

Scripture quotations marked *esv* are taken from the *ESV® Bible* (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Any internet addresses, phone numbers, or company or product information printed in this book are offered as a resource and are not intended in any way to be or to imply an endorsement by Thomas Nelson, nor does Thomas Nelson vouch for the existence, content, or services of these sites, phone numbers, companies, or products beyond the life of this book.

ISBN 978-4003-3404-9 (audiobook)

ISBN 978-1-4003-3403-2 (eBook)

ISBN 978-1-4003-3401-8 (HC)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022947112

Printed in the United States of America

23 24 25 26 27 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Charles Morris

Contents

Preface • ix

PART I

- Chapter 1: Death (1725–1732) • 3
- Chapter 2: Love (1740–1743) • 11
- Chapter 3: Consequences (1743–1745) • 29
- Chapter 4: Descent (1745–1746) • 51
- Chapter 5: Breaking (1746–1747) • 69
- Chapter 6: Storm (1747–1748) • 85
- Chapter 7: Slaves (1748–1749) • 103
- Chapter 8: Shackles (1750–1754) • 117

PART II

- Chapter 9: Freedom (1764–1773) • 141
- Chapter 10: Reckoning (1772–1788) • 161
- Chapter 11: Abolition (1788–1790) • 179
- Chapter 12: Home (1790–1807) • 193

Epilogue • 197

Afterword • 199

Acknowledgments • 205

Notes • 207

For Further Reading • 217

About the Authors • 219

Preface

Swissair flight 111 was en route from New York to Geneva on the evening of September 2, 1998, when it suddenly plummeted 2,400 meters into the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Nova Scotia, killing all 229 people on board. The tiny tourist village of Peggy's Cove was immediately transformed into a command center for the police, Coast Guard, and other emergency officials. Shocked family members arrived to look out over the waves that held their loved ones. An army chaplain went to the water's edge and offered to pray with the grieving family of a nineteen-year-old California student. He led them in prayer, and then the family started to sing a hymn in four-part harmony, and then followed this with "Amazing Grace." The chaplain noticed that all the rescue workers and onlookers were transfixed by the scene. Everyone stopped until they were done. He added, "Things like that were going on all day—amazing grace in the middle of incredible sorrow."

It was on those same North Atlantic seas 250 years earlier that John Newton, the author of "Amazing Grace," first cried out to God for mercy in the midst of a storm that threatened to kill all on board a foundering ship bound for England. Newton wrote "Amazing Grace" some years afterward, when he was settled at a parish church in the English Midlands as an Anglican minister, but the hymn has endured through two and a half centuries and has become today a powerful symbol for many people of hope in the midst of tragedy.

The hymn has figured prominently at moments of intense national grieving in America. After the space shuttle *Challenger* burst into flames on television in 1986, the American people heard "Amazing Grace" played at the memorial service for the astronauts. After a domestic terrorist exploded a bomb at an Oklahoma City federal building in 1995, killing 168 people, "Amazing Grace" was again carried from church services by television news programs. The memorial Mass for John F. Kennedy Jr. in July 1999 concluded with the singing of "Amazing Grace" as well.

In 2001, immediately after the terrorist attacks on September 11, a spontaneous candlelight vigil began in Union Square, and people started again to sing “Amazing Grace.” This did not just happen in New York. “Amazing Grace” was sung at both formal and ad hoc memorials across the United States. This song continues to be sung at commemorations of the event and in other times of public tragedy and private grief. Examples abound. “Amazing Grace” is, as one critic observed, the “spiritual national anthem” of America.

In Canada, on November 20, 1998, at the memorial service for Michel Trudeau, the son of former prime minister of Canada Pierre Trudeau, who was killed in a skiing accident, “Amazing Grace” was played on bagpipes. Two years later, on the anniversary of the Columbine High School shootings in America, a student at a high school in Orléans, near Ottawa, stabbed four fellow students and a school instructor before giving himself up to the authorities. In the pandemonium and shock afterward, a number of Pentecostal students gathered at the front of the school, held hands, and began to pray. They were soon joined by other students, Christian and non-Christian alike. Spontaneously, they began to sing “Amazing Grace.” That was when the media noticed the prayer circle and the cameras focused on the forty to forty-five students. It was on the national news that evening.

Perhaps even more remarkably, this song that was written by a former slave trader has been taken up by African American congregations and made their own. This was true before and after emancipation in America. “Amazing Grace” became a song of personal testimony. It was gospel music greats like Mahalia Jackson, who offered the song to a wider audience yet. She recorded “Amazing Grace” for Apollo Records on December 10, 1947. Her soulful version of the hymn was played on the radio in the immediate postwar years and helped to move “Amazing Grace” into the popular consciousness once and for all. It was there to be sung during the civil rights movement. It was there to be sung during the Vietnam years. It was there for everyone who needed a prayer for grace in times of pain and unrelenting wretchedness.

After a white supremacist shot and killed nine African Americans in Charleston, South Carolina, at an evening Bible study on June 17, 2015, including the politician and senior pastor of the Mother Emanuel AME Church, Rev. Clementa Pinckney, President Barack Obama gave the eulogy for the slain pastor. In the middle of the president’s remarks, he paused. He wasn’t sure

whether he would do this, but when the moment came, it seemed right to him. President Obama began singing “Amazing Grace.” He knew the congregation would join in with him right away, and they did. It was a powerful moment.

Where do we find hope today in the midst of deep divisions in society and violent disagreements? Where do we find hope for the human condition? Where do we find hope for all the griefs and sorrows that threaten to undo our lives? Perhaps we need to look again at the perennial message of “Amazing Grace.” Perhaps here we might find a renewed hope that however difficult the troubles in our lives, however deep our personal shame and regret, however dark the evil that stalks the earth, there is a mercy that is deeper yet, a forgiveness that makes all the difference, and a power for reconciliation greater than ourselves.

The 250th anniversary of the writing of the hymn by John Newton is a fitting occasion to discover the remarkable story behind the song and to learn something of the dramatic life of its author. In this story is a message of grace for us all today—one we need to hear, now more than ever.



When John Newton wrote his autobiography in 1764 at nearly forty years of age, he published it anonymously with an almost tabloid-style title: *An Authentic Narrative of Some Remarkable and Interesting Particulars in the Life of ******. The cover promised a faithful retelling of what would be some extraordinary experiences. It did not disappoint.

The book you hold presents Newton’s story retold for another generation. Like his autobiography, it also seeks to be an “authentic narrative,” taking the real drama of his life and filling out the scenes based on the hints he gave us and from what we can reconstruct from other historical sources. For example, in the first chapter we combine the facts of eighteenth-century Wapping, where Newton grew up, with his own recollections to recreate his early boyhood as vividly as it would have been for him (including a dead body). We want you to have a front-row seat to his biography as it unfolds in real time.

Importantly, though, we have used our imagination not only to add color or to embellish an old story, but also to enter as fully as possible *into* John Newton’s mind and his world at every stage. We have based these imagined

scenes on the many sources he left us, including his autobiography, diaries, logbooks, letters, and extensive published writings. To this has been added research into other contemporary sources and the considerable scholarship available on Newton and his times. His world was as real as ours—just as tactile, visual, and audible—and we want you to feel this.

This has meant creating fictional but plausible dialogue and conceivable episodes to fill in the biographical facts and framework as realistically as possible and represent the inner life of Newton and his contemporaries. Sometimes the dialogue is verbatim, drawn from Newton's letters and other writings, and at other times it is imagined. But this is not a novel. It is a dramatized biography with the feel of a film or live play. It is important for readers to know that the principal narrative, the chronology, and all the proper names (people, places, ships) and documents (hymns, letters, books, minutes of meetings, etc.) follow the sources exactly. In fact, in several places we have quietly corrected details that were mistaken in earlier biographies. We have included some notes on sources for each chapter at the end of the book and a short bibliography for those who would like to dig deeper into the historical record. In drawing upon original sources and manuscripts, we have modernized spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, where this would otherwise be a distraction for the reader.

In the end, we hope the result for you as a reader will be a lively story that captures the deep truth of John Newton's life, one that places you right in the midst of the drama. If you feel what he felt—see him striding proudly along the River Thames in his sea coat, feel the slap of the salty sea spray on his cheeks in the North Atlantic, and hear the clop of horse hooves on the cobbles of the eighteenth-century city streets he walked—then you have actually gotten a little closer to Newton. Our hope is that this will be another “authentic narrative” of some still very “remarkable and interesting particulars” in the life of John Newton.

When you read about Newton's dramatic life, immersing yourself in it like this, you will inevitably pause now and again to compare his experience to yours. He made some very foolish decisions. Well, so have we. He did things that were shameful. We hate to admit it, but so have we. He fell punch-drunk in love as a young man and often acted stupidly, and, oh, we can remember those moments in our own lives. And so on.

And then as Newton descends into deeper darkness, ready even to kill himself and capable of murder, we are left to ponder the times we, too, have been desperate and felt that all hope was lost. Even harder, when he sinks so low as to enter into the slave trade, unaware at the time of how evil this was, we may have to pause and ask ourselves whether we could be capable of something like that.

Most of all, though, as Newton finds mercy and forgiveness, and when he shows remorse and grows in wisdom and love, we may be inspired to think, *If there was grace for him, maybe there can be grace for me too*. A story like Newton's invites us to be honest about failure, about wretchedness, about the things to which we once were blind. If "Amazing Grace" means anything, it means this.

In Newton's story we see a clear illustration of the fact that nobody comes to Christ painlessly or all at once—that though the gift of grace is freely given, none of us receive the gospel without having to go deeper, well beyond the moment of initial conversion. The more we become aware of how deep is our need for grace, the more we understand how precious a gift it is.

And so Newton's story is a journey of discovery—a journey we must all travel ourselves. In Newton's life we see a parable of how we need grace far more than we initially thought. We see that we have been complicit in things that have been deeply hurtful to others. We see that the older we get, the more we need grace, for the closer we get to the light, the more impurities show up. Maturity means knowing more and more how much we stand in need of God's grace, and walking therefore with humility and gentleness, just as Newton did. But at every step, God is at work, calling us home to himself. There is room enough yet in this story for us all.

Part 1

'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far

John Newton woke up blind in the darkness, and lay there, perfectly still. His eyes were half welded shut, crusted tight by sleep. The house was locked up in silence too. Nobody was stirring. Not the old couple who slept in the room next door. Not the maid in the scullery below. Yet there was something calling to him, something propelling him out from under the stiff cotton blanket that his father had brought back from one of his many voyages. Alexandria? Venice? John could never remember. Not that it mattered. He kicked the blanket off and crept out into the darkness. After all, it wasn't every day a boy got to see a dead body.

The room was unfamiliar to him, but he did not light a candle. His exit had been well planned, and he had laid all his clothes out in order the night before. His yellow woolen stockings, his dark velvet breeches with buckles at the knees, the long coat that people said made him look like a miniature version of his father. He dressed in careful silence so as not to wake anyone else in the house. He had no idea what they would do if they found him up so early. They were kind folk, good people who were friends of his mother. There was a chance they would have no issue with a six-year-old boy going out onto the streets of London on his own like this, but it was better not to find out. The adventure was worth the risk. After all, they said the dead body swinging from the gallows was one of the most notorious pirates of his day.

By the time he felt his way downstairs and stepped out into the street, the sky was just beginning to shift from inky black to bruised gray. John knew the streets of Wapping far better than the house that had been his home ever since his mother's health deteriorated, and he moved swiftly along the narrow lanes and alleyways. He passed silent, lifeless houses that he knew were home to joiners and shipwrights, to coopers and caulkers and boat

makers—men with whom his father had business, whenever he was home. John was careful to keep away from the sewage that flowed in streets toward the Thames and knew well enough how foul the stench would become as the summer's day progressed. People called it the *evil odor*, and it was one of the reasons he had chosen to make his trip at first light, when the air was still cool. There were other reasons, too, like the fact that at such an early hour the crowds would not have formed. He could get close to the body, close enough to see it in all its tortured glory. And if he needed to, he could run away without any trouble.

Within minutes he rounded a corner and came face-to-face with the Thames. He stopped. The river was full, just like it always was, but no matter how many times he had seen the same view, it was impossible not to pause and stare at the floating empire laid out before him. There were hundreds of ships of all sizes and styles on the river. Brigs and snows, one-mast sloops and two-masted schooners, all designed and modified for their particular purpose. For every one of these merchant vessels, there were four or five barges nearby. Some would be ferrying customs officials on board to ensure the correct taxes were paid, some ferrying supplies to those waiting to leave. There was no limit to the power of British maritime trade.

John ran his eyes over the scene, taking in every change since the day before. He knew some of the ships by name, and those he did not he could read like words in a hymnbook. Having grown up with a captain for a father, it was easy to tell apart the ones trading around the North Sea or the Mediterranean from those that went as far as the East Indies, bringing back silk and spices. The simplest to spot were the ships that headed south to the Guinea coast of Africa before taking their human cargo across the Atlantic and following the trade winds home, loaded with sugar, rum, and tobacco. With their fenced-in quarters on deck and nets to prevent people jumping overboard, the slave ships were the only ones that looked like floating prisons.

John stood and stared long enough for the sun to rise clear in the sky. When he felt light on his face, he turned away. Upstream was the rest of London, but he had no interest in Parliament or palaces. Downstream was where he wanted to go. Eventually he'd join his father and make it out to the ocean and then on to the rest of the world. But first it would take him to the place he had spent the last day thinking about: Execution Dock.



John walked as far as he could along the Thames before the road led him away, passing shops and yards that were as familiar to him as the warmth of his mother's embrace. The moment the air turned stale with the smell of sweat and tobacco, rum and sugar, John's pace quickened. Even though his father was far away on a run to the Mediterranean and wouldn't return for months, John had no desire to linger near Captain Newton's favorite coffee shop. Instinct had taught him that the loud-mouthed, fierce-eyed men who frequented it were best avoided whenever possible.

The sea trade was full of big men with loud voices and foul tongues who ruled by fear. John had been surrounded by them from the day he was born. He had learned how a man who had power out there on the sea, who commanded crews of mutinous sailors and navigated the dangers of pirates and privateers, demanded to be treated with deference and respect. Even in his own home. Especially by his only son. So John had grown up knowing only ever to call his father "sir," to always walk ten paces behind him when in public, and to quickly drop his eyes to the ground the moment his anger flared. Fear was the one gift his father had given John. That and the stiff cotton blanket that was about as comfortable as sleeping beneath a canvas sail.

John approached Execution Dock for the second time in as many days. Yet now, early on Sunday morning, the place could not have looked more different from the way it had the previous afternoon. On Saturday there had been thousands of people gathered, a giant press of cheering, happy onlookers. The crowd surged the length of the dock, overflowing onto the stairs that led to it and onto the nearby riverbanks for a better view. John had tried to cleave his way through them, but it was no use. He had soon found himself crushed on all sides like a ship trapped in the ice in the frozen north. He had been forced to retreat farther downriver and follow events as best he could from a distance.

The procession had sounded more like a carnival than a death march, with people cheering and laughing all around as it made its way from the Tower of London down past London Bridge. John had only caught a glimpse of the high court marshal walking at the front, carrying a silver oar as a sign of his authority. Behind him, John guessed, was the cart with the doomed man and the chaplain should the condemned wish to confess his sins.

He hadn't been able to see the man approach the gallows. Hadn't been able to hear whether he addressed the crowd or not. But he had heard the shouts and cries of delight throughout the crowd as soon as the rope snapped tight, and the noose did its work.

Now, with the entertainment of the previous day over, John was almost alone as he approached the dock. The tide was out, revealing a wide track of dark mud, rock, and human waste that led down to the water's edge. Up by the shore, yet close enough to be almost completely covered by the river at high tide, were the gallows. John had passed them almost daily when there was no body and had often stared at the greasy algae that clung to the timbers, making them look like they belonged to a long-abandoned shipwreck. He'd asked his mother plenty of questions, like why the gallows were built down so close to the water or what kind of crimes the men committed who were punished there. Her answers were always brief as she hurried him along.

There was no mother to stop him now. There were no crowds for him to fight through, either. No press of bodies that threatened to throw him from the stairs that led from the street down to the waterside. There were only the gallows, a handful of people milling around on the steps nearby, and a body turning slowly at the end of the rope—where it would remain until three tides had washed over it.

John inched closer. Only one tide would have risen and fallen since the man was hanged the previous afternoon, but the body already was marked by the hours it had spent underwater. His hair spread in worm-like tendrils over his pale, bloated face. His eyes were locked open, staring out at the sky. There was a growing stench of seawater, sewage, and decay around him, and the man's filthy, wet clothes were steaming in the morning sun. For a moment it looked as if he was being slowly burned to death.

"Lord, have mercy on the poor sinner," said a soft voice at John's side. He turned to see a man staring up at the rope, his head slowly shaking from side to side. Beyond him was a woman, her eyes narrowed and sour.

"There be no mercy for the likes of him," she spat. "Nor should there be. Sinners get what they deserve."

The man opened his mouth as if to speak, but the sound of nearby church bells left him silent.

It was John's cue to leave, but he took one last look up at the body before

turning to the man beside him, and he asked the question that had been with him all morning. “Was he really a pirate?”

“No,” the man frowned. “He was no pirate. He was a captain.”

“A captain what became a thief,” added the woman. “Don’t matter who you are, your sins will find you out. Them that deserve it always end up swinging from the rope.”



John took the back route over the road, passing by the timber yard and out onto Gravel Lane. The streets were no longer empty, especially outside the churches where knots of well-dressed people gathered and greeted one another politely. He sped up and danced around those waiting outside the parish church that his father attended whenever he was home. John never much liked it there. It was almost impossible for him to sit still for so long while the congregation chanted one long, slow psalm after another. When his attention wandered—which it always did—his eyes would wander. He’d take in the statues carved from marble and paintings in their gilded frames. They made him want to get out of the heavy pew and run, even more than the singing.

His mother’s church was a different story altogether. The building itself looked different, with no paintings and no statues, just plain walls and a simple pulpit at the front. His mother had tried to explain why there was such a contrast between his father’s church and hers—something about Jesus forgiving people who truly repented of their sins—but to John it only ever came down to the songs. Instead of droning through metrical psalms that left him trying to suppress his desire to yawn, in his mother’s church—the Dissenting Chapel as she called it—the songs made him feel alive. People sang with real feeling, like the words meant something. And the music! He heard one of the old men in the congregation say that when these tunes were first introduced, Queen Elizabeth herself had called them “Genevan jigs.” These were the sort of tunes that made him want to stand up and smile, to throw his head back and bellow the words as loudly as if he was standing on deck, calling to shore.

The chapel service was just about to start as John nodded good morning to the old couple in whose house he had been staying for the past weeks. He slipped into the pew that he usually shared with his mother. Five Sundays had

passed since she last sat next to him. Five weeks in which he spent Monday to Saturday trying not to think about the way she looked before she left the city to stay with friends in the country, where the air would be better for her. But here, on Sunday in the chapel, with nothing but empty space beside him, he was powerless to hold the thoughts back. It was bittersweet.

As the room stood to sing the first hymn, he smiled. It was one of his mother's favorites, and his too. He sang,

O God, our help in ages past.

The words rose strong and warm within him. It wasn't hard to imagine his mother standing right beside him. Her thick skirts that swayed as she sang. Her eyes smiling as her high, clear voice guided him along the melody.

Our hope for years to come.

The way she would place her hand on his shoulder and draw him closer to her. The way she would squeeze tighter whenever they reached the words she liked best of all.

*Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.*

The song over, the congregation returned to their pews, ready for the sermon. The minister's opening words were not what John expected.

"There is a body swinging down by the river today," he said, his slow Scottish baritone rolling through the chapel. "Many saw him die. Many even cheered when he did. But I tell you this: we are none of us so very different from that sinner hanging at the dock. We are all fallen from God. We have all broken his covenant and transgressed his laws. None of us have a rag to cover our nakedness, so wretched are we."

The minister paused and the room froze in the silence. Head bowed, John felt as if the dead man's eyes were staring right at him.

"And yet, all of us have the hope of the gospel. All of us can be redeemed. The meanest and vilest of sinners may fly to Christ for mercy."

The minister carried on for some time, talking about how the law was a schoolmaster to bring people to Christ. John understood little, but he felt much. A twist in his stomach, a catch of breath in his throat as if the air was suddenly weaker. Or maybe it was stronger; he couldn't tell. But he knew without a doubt that he was relieved when the sermon was finally over and the singing resumed. And when he stood again to open his mouth and let his voice flow out, it was as if his mother was right there beside him.



A week later John woke up later than usual. It was already light outside and there were voices downstairs. He recognized the old couple, but there was another voice speaking that was unfamiliar to him. He tried to make out what they were saying, but the voices were quiet and muffled. With the parlor occupied, he would struggle to slip out of the house unnoticed, not that it mattered. He was feeling excited. His seventh birthday was fourteen days away, and he had it on good assurance that his mother would be well enough to receive him. He lay in bed imagining what it would be like to board the coach and ride east to the fields of Kent. How he would polish the buckles on his breeches and shoes beforehand and be sure to shake every last mote of dust from his coat. He would tell her all the news from London, recount what he could of the sermons that she had missed on Sundays. He might even tell her about the great crowds that had gathered for the man who had been hanged, though he would report it all as rumor instead of firsthand experience.

As soon as he was dressed, John skipped downstairs and into the parlor, still a little lost in his thoughts. The old couple were sitting down, but it was the presence of a stranger standing by the fireplace that brought him back to himself. He was younger than John's father but looked just as somber.

"Master John," said the old lady, not looking at anyone in particular. "This is Mr. Catlett. It is with his family in Kent that your mother has been staying these past few weeks . . ."

Her voice trailed off. Nobody spoke.

John decided to hide his confusion and offer a small bow, the kind he had seen his father give whenever he saw a wealthy merchant down by the docks. "I

am pleased to meet you, Mr. Catlett. Am I to travel with you to see my mother today? Is she recovered early?"

There was no reply. He searched for an answer in the faces of the only people he knew, but they offered none. All eyes were on the man by the fire-place. His were fixed on the floor.

"Your mother," said Mr. Catlett, his voice barely making it out from his throat. "She passed."

John Newton—now a strong-shouldered fifteen-year-old with four sea voyages to his credit, freshly returned from eight months spent working in the office of one of the most esteemed merchants in the whole of Alicante, Spain—stepped down from the carriage that had paused at the entrance to the farmhouse. He hauled his heavy wooden sea chest that contained almost all his worldly possessions onto the grass and felt the dread rise within him like bile. He was back home, returning once again to stay with his family. Never before had he felt so much like an unwelcome stranger.

The farm at the village of Aveley in Essex belonged to his stepmother's family. So, too, did his father. They had married within two years of his mother's death, not long after his father had returned home from his Mediterranean run to be told that his wife had died from consumption. Almost as soon as Captain Newton sold up, married, and moved out of London, John had been sent away to boarding school. After two years of beatings at the hands of harsh schoolmasters, he had returned to the farmhouse to find that his stepmother had given his father another son, with one more child on the way. It was as though he had been replaced. The farm at Aveley had never been John's home, and the people living within its walls had never really been his family.

John left the sea chest on the grass, briefly considered whether he should knock on the door, then walked inside. There was nobody around. It was only when he opened the door to the parlor that he found someone, a young servant girl he did not recognize—and who clearly did not recognize him. She glanced up from the fireplace that she was clearing out, shot him a mildly terrified look, and fled out the door. He was alone in a house where he had always felt alone.

It was late afternoon in high summer and all the windows were closed

tight, turning the air stale and lifeless. John stood in the silence and instantly remembered how much he disliked the farm at Aveley. The room was full of furniture and paintings that served only to remind him how little he belonged. Half of the furniture was his stepmother's—the plain writing table, the clock, the painting of a hunting scene in the rolling countryside. These things all looked as if they had never belonged anywhere else, as if the house had been built around them. But they clashed mightily with the rest of the room, which was full of ornately upholstered chairs, an oversized gilded mirror, and various wall hangings and oddments that could have been purchased only in some dusty, distant port. These were furnishings John could easily recall from his childhood home in London. There were other items, not present, that he remembered too—a painting of his mother's father, a delicately made wooden box in which she kept her most treasured letters, and her Bible with its dark leather cover wrinkled from use. None of these were in the parlor now. Nothing about the room gave any hint that his mother had ever existed. John's pulse quickened and he resolved to ask his father about these missing mementos as soon as he saw him.

The floor outside creaked just as the door opened and his father entered.

Captain Newton had always been an imposing figure. His chest was as broad as a forty-gallon barrel of rum, his stare as fierce and fixed as the noonday sun. He never merely walked into a room; he would often pause at the threshold, as if it was his first time on the deck of a ship of which he had just taken command. Even when he had secured every last scrap of attention from those present, he would wait. He would hold the silence. Even the stillness of the air was his own, along with the room and the people and anything else that he desired. Only when the room submitted, when the conquest was over, would he speak.

"You look tired, John."

John's mouth opened but no words came out.

"What? Are you not well?"

"No," he said, though it sounded more like a cough than a real word. "Quite well, Father. Thank you."

Captain Newton broke off his gaze and swept across the room. "Sit with me," he said, carefully rearranging his long coattails as he settled himself in the ornate chair. "The letter. From the Spaniard. I trust you have it?"

John reached into his pocket and handed it over, the taste of bile in his mouth even stronger now.

The letter was addressed to Captain Newton, written by his friend, the merchant to whom John had been apprenticed for much of the last year. It was an account of John's time in Alicante, a report of his work as a junior clerk in his warehouse, and—John assumed—an explanation of why the twelve-month posting was terminated at eight.

Captain Newton's face was locked rigid as a death mask. For over a minute his eyes slid across the page, betraying nothing of the letter's contents or his reaction to them. As his father neared the end, John wondered whether the verdict might not be so bad after all. Until something on the page snagged the old captain's eyes. John saw them hover, narrow, then lift slowly and lock upon his own.

"Well," said Captain Newton, exhaling slowly. It was neither a question nor an invitation, and the word died in the air.

John knew better than to speak to his father without being addressed directly, so he stood in silence, eyes on the intricately woven rug at his feet. The room felt even more crowded and stuffy.

"The Spaniard is a wise man," said Captain Newton. "He is a good man too. And, I should like to add, the Spaniard is also a partner of mine in trade. We have conducted business together over many years. He is not a man who makes mistakes."

Captain Newton held the letter almost at arm's length, staring at it as if the ink was still wet and he was worried about it staining his clothes or the furniture.

"The Spaniard writes that you lack restraint. He describes your behavior as unsettled. He even suggests that you have developed a foul mouth capable of profanity, which actually concerns me less. It was always your mother who cared about profanity, not I. My cares have always been that you are too easily lost in your own thoughts. Too easily swayed by childish passions."

Captain Newton's stare shifted from the letter to his son.

"Nothing he writes surprises me. Nothing, that is, apart from his closing statement. He writes that, as a man of business and trade, you are sorely lacking. He judges that you are not worthy of the Newton name."

There was a tremor in his voice, and though John knew he should not look

up, he could not resist. His father's face was flushing red, the vein in his temple visible now. The mask was finally breaking.

"I bred you to the sea," spat Captain Newton, abandoning any attempt to hold his anger in check. "I took you with me, shared my cabin and my food with you. I taught you how to live aboard, how to survive. I even dared hope that one day you might become a captain yourself. And yet you return from Spain in disgrace, sent home because of your failings. Have *I* failed in some way? Is the error *mine*?"

John's head was heavy and his mouth was dry. He stared at the fireplace. He felt suffocated, like all the air had left the room. How good would it feel to pick up the heavy iron poker and use it to smash all the windows, one by one? He could almost taste the clean, fresh air flowing in.

He looked back toward his father, who was still presenting the letter like a lawyer at court. Still staring hard at him. Still burning red.

"No, sir."



In the season that followed John's return to Aveley, little happened. His father spent several months away on a run across the North Sea, and John tried his absolute best to avoid interaction with anyone else in the house. He soon mastered the art of living as a ghost. He found that days could pass without him seeing either his stepmother, her parents, or either of his two half-siblings. All he had to do while he was in the house was stay quietly in his room reading, only leaving when he was sure that there was nobody around. On the one occasion each week when he was forced to be in their presence—the Sunday morning visit to the parish church—they did not trouble him with conversation.

Outside the house, however, John was anything but silent. He knew several of the boys in the village and would happily spend hours in their company when they had time to spare. They were a tough bunch, the wild sons of cowmen, dockhands, and drovers, and most of them were apprenticed to their fathers' trades. John knew they saw him as something different, even exotic, and he played his role with flair. They would listen in silence as John shared stories from his most perilous voyages with his father, and they'd snigger like little boys at the description of the whores who lived near the merchant offices in Alicante.

Best of all they liked it when John would bring a pair of hunting horses from the farm's stable block and lead them on frantic gallops over fields and down narrow lanes until the horses' eyes rolled white and the boys felt sick from fear.

When winter was just beginning to ease, there emerged some news that was even more interesting than stories of Spanish whores or Turkish pirates. The British Admiralty was preparing for war with Spain, and a naval frigate, ready for battle, had been spotted at anchor in the Thames just a mile and a half south of the village. Being the nautical expert of the group, John led an expedition one Sunday afternoon so that the boys could see it for themselves.

When they reached the bank, John saw that she was even more impressive than he had imagined. With two decks, seventy cannon, and three fully rigged masts as tall as any he had ever seen, she dwarfed every other vessel on the river. All five boys watched in silence as the crew busied themselves rowing boats and ferrying supplies from the dock on the far side of the river.

After an hour or two, as they were preparing to leave, one of the sailors rowed toward them, fighting against the strong currents that were well-known in this reach of the river. He shouted for their attention and asked whether they would like to go on board. They all agreed heartily, and he told them to return the following Sunday at noon. He would row them over for a tour.

All week long John thought about the frigate. He considered making up an excuse to miss church on Sunday morning but did not like the idea of having to talk with the family any more than was strictly necessary. No, he could attend church and still make it to the frigate in time.

Church, for once, ran long. When it was finally over, John fled the churchyard as quickly as he could and ran the mile to the river at full speed. He arrived on the bank in time to see the sailor pulling on the oars with all four of his friends already aboard, laughing and cheering him on. He was too late.

John's anger and frustration mounted as he looked after them but froze the moment he heard a shout from the boys and saw the longboat pitch violently over. He had no idea what caused it, but he watched in horror as all of his friends and the sailor himself were thrown powerfully from the boat. The boys were floundering in the water. Like John himself, none of them could swim, and even if they could, the currents would have been too powerful. Within less than a minute, his best friend was gone and most of the others.

The death of his companions had a powerful effect on John. For weeks he

was overwhelmed by the realization that his life had been spared by his simple decision to go to church that morning. His near escape occupied his every waking thought, and a good deal of his dreams too. He had been spared by doing his religious duty, saved by his obedience. There was only one possible response—to be the most saintly Christian possible from now on. He must redouble his religious seriousness. For several years he had oscillated between sin and conscience, but no more. He was fifteen, but he would live, for all intents and purposes, like a monk.

To anyone looking on from a distance there was little difference in his outward behavior. He did stop stealing horses from the stable, but mostly he spent his time avoiding people. To those living at the farm, the changes were more obvious. He stopped eating meat. He could often be heard sobbing in his room, bemoaning his sins, and when he wasn't weeping, he could be observed praying or reading Scripture endlessly, day and night. He hid away like a hermit for almost two years, hoping that if he could only avoid all distraction, perhaps then he would become holy.



“Enough!” Captain Newton started shouting the moment he threw open John’s door and swept back the curtains. There was no pausing on the threshold to take command of the room, no attempt to coerce attention by a prolonged silence. This was an all-out attack, a broadside from twenty cannon at close range, designed to overwhelm and achieve immediate surrender. “You shall cease this nonsense immediately!”

John said nothing. He hadn’t, in fact, been praying much and it had been days since he last opened his Bible. His religious resolves had given way to a more general moroseness. He had been sitting alone, shivering in the cold and staring at the dwindling fire in the grate, counting down the hours until the short winter’s day was over and he could go back to bed.

“Please,” said Captain Newton, waving a letter. His voice was quieter, almost gentle now. “I have news for you. I inquired of a friend of mine whether he might have a position for you. And I have now heard back.”

John kept his head low, not bothering to make eye contact. The captain did not seem to notice and carried on.

“His name is Joseph Manesty and he is a merchant in Liverpool. I have never sailed for him, but I have it on good authority that his business is sound. He writes that he will take you on. He is offering you a position in Jamaica.”

John looked up.

“Yes, I thought that might be of interest to you. A few years in the West Indies and you’ll forget all about these wretched winters.”

“What is his trade? I know nothing of the land.”

Captain Newton smiled. “Sugar.”

The word instantly made the room ten degrees warmer. There wasn’t a person in England who had not heard of the wealth of the sugar planters. Theirs was a world of gilded carriages and lavish estates, and there were rumors that some planters had become wealthier than the king himself.

“Yes,” said Captain Newton, clearly pleased with the prospect for his son and speaking more quickly now. “That is the beauty of what Manesty proposes. You need know nothing of the sugar trade at first, for he is offering you a job as an overseer of slaves. But he writes that if you prove yourself shrewd and hardworking, he will make you a full planter within five years. If you make a success of that, then you can return to England, buy a fine estate, and perhaps even enter Parliament. It is a path to success and the chance of a lifetime. What do you make of it?”

The idea of becoming a wealthy man grew on John and grew quickly. Sugar was the gateway to everything that was good in the world, and only a fool would turn his back on so great an opportunity. There was another aspect to Manesty’s offer that appealed almost as much as joining the ranks of the sugar rich, though John barely admitted as much to himself, let alone his father. The stirrings were there, all the same. Ever since he had seen his friends die on the Thames, he had tried so hard to suppress his wild and reckless appetites, but those willful passions had refused to die. If he was in Jamaica for five years or more, away from all the restraints of home, he could indulge whatever pleasures he wanted. He would be free to live as he pleased. True, it did not fit with the idea of being a pious, respected churchman, but after so many months of trying to live free from sin and to avoid all temptation, he was exhausted. Sin was everywhere, wasn’t it?

Within days the plans were in motion. Letters were sent to and from Manesty, confirming John’s acceptance of the post and arranging the dates for

his arrival at the offices in Liverpool and his subsequent departure for Jamaica at the start of the new year. It gave John just one more month of life in Aveley. He was seventeen years old, and he counted down the days like a prisoner awaiting freedom.



With less than a week to wait before his departure for Liverpool, John was preparing to run an errand for his father the next morning. It was a half day's ride toward and across the river to pass through the town of Chatham in Kent and deal with some business matter or other in Maidstone, and the distraction was welcome. Captain Newton had just given him the papers to take on his journey when a letter addressed to John arrived at the farm door.

He did not recognize the handwriting, but the name of the sender brought him back to a world that was long forgotten. It was from Mrs. Elizabeth Catlett, the woman who had nursed his mother in her final weeks and whose husband had delivered the news of her death. She was inquiring after his health and news of his life in general and made it clear that, if ever he should desire, he would be more than welcome to visit them at their home in Chatham.

The coincidence struck John immediately. What were the odds of the invitation arriving the very day before he was due to pass directly by the Catletts' house? Surely it was too implausible a coincidence to ignore. Yet John's first instinct was to do precisely that. More than a decade had passed since his mother's death. The thought of returning to the house where she died and dredging up old feelings troubled him.

Still, there was something about the letter. The way she talked so lovingly about his mother. There was a warmth in her turn of phrase, a kindness and gentleness that flowed from her pen to the page. It called to a part of him that had been buried for years.



Though the morning was fresh and the sky clear when he left the farm, by the time John arrived at his destination at noon the weather had turned sour. When he finished his father's business and mounted the horse to begin his

journey home, the rain stung at his cheeks. He was tempted to forget all about his plan to visit the Catletts. It would be better just to stay in his saddle and battle through the wind and the rain until he was home again.

In the end, he decided to stop, if only briefly. The closer he got, however, the more the feelings of loss over his mother's death returned to trouble him. He could hear the blood rushing loud in his ears as he stood at the door and knocked. He was nervous. His throat became dry and shut tight as he heard the sound of people moving within. But the moment the door opened, he forgot all about the cold and the long journey home and the rain that was dripping down his back. The anxious feelings evaporated like summer morning mist as Elizabeth Catlett gasped, reached out for both his hands, and let the tears flow down her face.

"Oh my!" she cried, her eyes dancing with joy. "Oh, my dear boy! I would know you anywhere, John Newton!"

She stepped out and embraced him there in the doorway, with the rain falling on them both. She held him for the longest time before sweeping him inside to meet the family who had already gathered in the hallway, eager to welcome him in. First he met John, the eldest son who was eleven, and Mary, who was two years older and balancing baby George expertly on her hip. She said hello and explained that everyone in the family called her Polly before retreating from view. Sarah—aged four—demonstrated her very best attempts at a pirouette, while two-year-old Susanna looked on from behind her mother's skirts. Even though the sight of Mr. Catlett briefly transported John back to the day he discovered that his mother had died, his broad smile, firm handshake, and warm words of welcome quickly erased any trace of sorrow from John's heart. The effect was so instant and so powerful that it almost seemed like magic.

From the very moment that the front door closed beside him, John felt like he had slipped into another world. How could this be? Chatham was only half a day's ride from the farm, but here in the home of the Catlett family, everything had been renewed. Silence had been replaced by laughter, closed doors and windows thrown wide-open. They were elegant, polite, and well-mannered to be sure, but it was a home of living, breathing, shouting, dancing people, not a house of statues. John could feel himself coming alive.

For an hour or more the conversation tumbled and rolled around him

like music. Mrs. Catlett—who insisted that he call her Aunt and Mr. Catlett Uncle—peppered him with questions about his life one minute, then told him stories the next, stories that he had never heard before of her childhood friendship with his mother. John Catlett was fascinated by John’s tales of life at sea, and Sarah finally executed her pirouette without stumbling.

Soon John was invited through to the dining room and sat among the family around a large table bathed in candlelight. The stories came faster now, the laughter louder and longer. He had no memory of what food he ate that evening, but he knew it to be better than any meal he had ever enjoyed before in his life.

They returned to the parlor after they had eaten and played cards for an hour or more. John was given baby George to hold when Sarah knocked her father’s glass of port over. No one seemed to mind, and it surprised him how much he enjoyed holding the baby as he slept in his arms.

“Well, John,” said Uncle George (as Mr. Catlett insisted John called him) once the children were sent up to bed, “it is far too late for you to be riding home tonight. You will stay with us, of course.”

“And not just tonight either,” said his wife. “Stay a week, stay two if you can. We have plans for a visit to the market at Maidstone next Saturday. Is there any reason you are needed back in Aveley before then?”

John did not hesitate, did not even pause to consider mentioning Liverpool or Joseph Manesty or five years in Jamaica that would transform him into a wealthy man. “None at all,” he said. “None at all.”



That night he lay awake and listened to young John Catlett snore gently on the other side of the room. The last time he had slept in the company of another person he had been sailing back from Spain. He had lain awake then most nights as well, his mind fearful of what his father would say to the letter he carried with him from the merchant who had just dismissed him as an unruly apprentice.

Now, two years on and in the home of the Catletts, John could not have felt more different. There was no fear, only wonder. How could two families be so different? How could the air in one house be so stale and old, while in

the other it was sweeter than any he had ever tasted? How could his father have kept him away from this family for so many years?

He suspected that he knew the answer to that question. At one point in the evening Elizabeth had hinted that she and George had disapproved of the speed with which Captain Newton had remarried. John had no idea if they had expressed any such misgivings to his father, but he knew that if they had, Captain Newton would not have taken it kindly.

Yet instead of brooding over these thoughts and nurturing resentment, John lay awake feeling happier than he had felt at any other point in his life. About the source of this there was no doubt or confusion whatsoever.

It was Mary—or, Polly, as her family called her.

She had captivated him from the very first moment he saw her in the doorway. The way she had greeted him with such a natural smile, radiating something that came from deep within, only then to look away bashfully. Her kindness to her siblings, the way she praised young Sarah for every ballet attempt. Her capacity for laughter and singing and joy of all kinds. She was more alive than any person he had ever met. Yet she carried herself with all the poise of one who moved easily in social circles well beyond his own.

He lay there with his heart beating, bone-tired but soul happy. Sleep was impossible, but it did not matter a bit. He wondered whether she would let him call her Polly in the morning, and how he might go about asking. It was a delicious conundrum to contemplate, the kind that left him smiling in the darkness until he closed his eyes and slipped into the imagined world of a life together with the girl who was even now sleeping just a few feet away in the next room.



Even before he could bring the subject up himself the next day, Polly insisted that John address her like everyone else in the family. His blushes matched hers and he happily agreed, just as he agreed to Aunt Elizabeth's invitation that he stay a while longer.

John was still with the Catletts when they visited the market at Maidstone the following Saturday. He was with them when they attended church the day after that as well. All through the following week he stayed on at their house,

taking walks in the afternoon and playing cards in the evening. He learned to laugh as they laughed, to tease and be teased in return, and to remember what it felt like to be treated with genuine, unabashed affection. The great gloom that surrounded his father was nowhere to be seen in the Catlett home. There was only ever warmth and light and love.

In time, however, John accepted that he had to leave. After three weeks in their company, he saddled his horse—who had grown fat from the lack of exercise—and then he moved from one family member to the other, saying his goodbyes, until he became mortally tongue-tied as Polly was left, standing before him.

Hours later he was just as silent, though with a whole different range of emotions, as he stood before his father and the captain roared and raged like the fiercest of typhoons ever known. This time it was not love that choked back John's words. It was fear, the only emotion that his father ever seemed to evoke in him.

John stood and listened as his father ranted about how he had thrown away the best opportunity a young man could ever hope to receive. His father shouted about the embarrassment of having had to inform Joseph Manesty that John had gone missing. "There is no chance of a passage to Jamaica now, I tell you. And even if there was, do you really think Manesty would trust you after what you have done?"

John said nothing. No matter, his father's anger. He was busy thinking of Polly, secretly congratulating himself for having executed his plan so well. He had stayed long enough for the plan of spending five years in Jamaica to be well and truly destroyed. Whatever came next, he would surely be able to see his beloved again soon.

Captain Newton was still shouting. "And your stepmother," he hissed. "Think of what you have done to her. She has been sick with worry all this time, afraid that you were murdered or press-ganged by the navy to fight another of this nation's infernal enemies."

John risked looking at him, but he dared not say what was in his head—that he was surprised that Captain Newton's wife had even noticed his absence, let alone feared for his safety.

There was yet more shouting, but his father was slowly winding down. John dropped his eyes and felt himself slip back down into the gloom that

permeated every inch of the house. He waited for his father to end, knowing that he would have no choice other than to accept his punishment, come what may.

“You need discipline,” Captain Newton said, his mouth flecked with spittle. “And there is one place that you can be sure to receive it.”

John looked hard at his father, wondering whether he was about to tie him to the door and give him forty lashes with the cat-o’-nine-tails as if he was some errant sailor.

Captain Newton paused, breathed deep and exhaled slowly. “It is time you served as a common sailor. There will be no more sailing with me. No more enjoying the privileges of the captain’s cabin. No more of the quarterdeck for you. You need to be below deck, with the ordinary seamen. There, among the unruly wretches, you will learn to behave. For if you do not, the suffering you will endure will scar you forever.”



In less than a week John was precisely where his father wanted him—on a merchant ship preparing to head out into the English Channel, bound for the Mediterranean and the distant ports of Antioch, Tyre, and Alexandria. He would be away for months, perhaps even as long as a year. But if Captain Newton hoped that fear of harsh life aboard would shock his son into a change of attitude, he was mistaken. The way John saw it, no matter how long the run lasted he would still be reunited with Polly far sooner than if he had taken up a position in Jamaica for Manesty.

The hope of being reunited with Polly shone bright within him, bright enough to see John through his first days on board. As the ship was readied for sea—with repairs being carried out, supplies taken in and stowed, and sails, yards, and topmasts raised—twelve-hour days stretched to thirteen, fourteen, and longer still. Each night he returned to the forecabin—the low, damp space in front of the mast where the crew slept—and collapsed into his hammock that swung inches away from his fellow common sailors. He was exhausted, and the voyage had yet to begin.

Despite the fact that John had only a handful of voyages to his name, he soon discovered that sailing with his father had given him his sea legs and

taught him the basics of sailing, though shielding him from the realities of life among the lowest on the ship whose place was before the mast. When the ship finally weighed anchor and land slipped from view, it became clear that blisters, exhaustion, and claustrophobia were only part of the challenge ahead of him. The crew became restless and unruly, and at times the forecabin felt more like a tavern on the verge of a drunken brawl than a place for weary men to rest and recuperate.

More than once a crew member crossed a line and encountered the wrath of the captain. When it became clear that his preferred punishment was wooding—where the first mate wrapped a rope around the guilty sailor’s head and tightened it until his eyes popped out—the crew’s behavior improved instantly.

For much of the voyage south along the coast of France and then Spain, John kept his head down and his mouth shut, something that his father had given him ample opportunity to practice. By the time they passed through the Strait of Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean itself, he started to thaw. He became a little less shy, joining in with the sea shanties that they sang while they worked. He stopped trying to suppress his laughter when the songs got a little bawdy. He turned his back on whatever faint traces of religion remained within him, and once more gave himself over to pursuing a life without much thought of God. In Rotterdam on his last voyage with his father, he had picked up a book entitled *Characteristicks* by a “freethinking” philosopher. It became his new Bible. It worked like a poison, emboldening him to live his own life on his own terms, like being captain of his own ship. In time he took up swearing again, returning to one of the vices that had landed him in so much trouble during his months as an apprentice back in Spain. Soon John was cursing and blaspheming and sounding more and more like a regular sailor. By the time they arrived at the island of Zakynthos off the coast of Greece, and the sailors made plans for their night in port, he was considered to be part of the crew enough to be invited to go whoring with them.

John declined. He said that he was happier taking a watch and staying on board. He didn’t try to explain about his feelings for Polly or talk about his determination to remain chaste for her. He just left the men to go and walked the deck as night fell, listening to the distant sounds of a harbor town coming to life.

When his four-hour watch was over, John retreated to his hammock. The

others wouldn't return to the ship for hours, and he appreciated the fact that for once, the smell and heat of the forecabin were almost bearable. He was tired, and not just because of staying awake for the watch or all the hard work of loading and unloading that was involved whenever a merchant ship arrived in port. His fatigue went deeper, right down to his core, to his very soul.

The dream started immediately.

At first, it was unremarkable. He was alone, on deck, midway through a watch while the ship was docked outside Venice. It was as if his mind was every bit as tired as his body, and instead of creating a whole new dreamworld it could only summon the energy to rewind John's life a few weeks, to the scene of the ship's last anchorage.

When a stranger appeared on the far side of the deck, John knew he was dreaming. When the stranger invited John to approach and see something precious, John knew that he had to obey.

"Here," said the stranger, extending his hand. "See what I mean?"

John could feel his sleeping pulse quicken. It was the most beautiful ring he had ever seen, a thick band of gold with a bright ruby glowing in the center. When he was finally able to peel his eyes from it, he noticed that the man was staring at him, smiling.

"Take it," he said, grabbing John's hand and placing the ring in his palm. It was heavier than John imagined it would be, and so much warmer. "Preserve it carefully, mind. While you do so, you will be happy and successful. If you lose it or part with it, you must expect nothing but misery."

John looked up but the man was gone. The deck was empty again and he returned his gaze to the ring. It was like holding a whole world in the palm of his hand, an entire star compressed into one simple, beautiful ring—a ring that had power beyond any he had ever heard of.

"That," said a voice he did not recognize, "is a fine jewel." John looked up to see a different stranger standing before him. He was staring at the ring, his eyes wide in appreciation.

"Yes," said John. "And as long as I have it, this ring will make me happy and successful."

The man's eyes snapped up to John's. He frowned momentarily before his face broke out in a wide smile. "A magic ring?" He was laughing now. "Are you sure? That sounds like a fantasy to me."

John was instantly humbled and closed his hand. “Well, I am not sure. There was a man and he said that it had power and then he gave it to me. But . . . I . . . I do not know where he is now. If we find him, I can have him explain to you what he meant.”

The second man smiled and waved his hand in front of him as though he was clearing smoke.

“No. You do not need to find that man to know the truth about that ring. You should throw it away.”

The idea made John recoil. “I shall not. This ring is . . .”

The words wouldn’t come.

He looked in his hand again. It was a fine ring, but he suddenly felt foolish for believing it was anything else.

“Very well,” he said, hurling the ring far away from the ship into the pitch black of the ocean night.

The sound of the ring hitting the water was loud and low. The rumble grew quickly until it was as loud as any storm John had ever sailed through. He looked up to see distant mountains engulfed by flame.

“You fool,” sneered the second man. “That ring held God’s mercy. Now that you have thrown it away there is nothing for you in life but the fires of judgment.”

For a moment John was alone on deck. His hand empty, his eyes locked on the flames in the distance. Then he heard someone approach. It was the first man. John’s chest gripped tight with fear. Bitter acid rose in his throat.

“Peace,” he said, his eyes kind as he looked at John. “Peace. Tell me, if you have the ring in your possession again, do you think you will be wiser? Will you hold on to it and not be swayed by those who would lead you astray?”

John nodded. It was all he could do. He watched as the man smiled, climbed onto the deck rail that ran around the ship, and dived into the water.

As soon as he returned, the distant flames died out. Apart from the sound of water dripping from the man’s clothes, the deck was silent and perfectly still. The man stood, eyes fixed on John, and opened his hand to reveal the ring again.

John grabbed for it, but the man was too quick. He pulled it back out of reach and shook his head. “No. If you took it now, you would only throw it away again. I will hold it for you instead. Whenever you need it, I will produce

it on your behalf. But you must choose how you are to live. Will you pursue virtue, or will you turn your back on it?”

“Yes,” said John, his voice as loud and as clear as the flames that had lit up the night sky. “I choose virtue. All my days I shall choose it.”

