



NEWTON & HOLLY

A NOVEL *of*
AMAZING GRACE

JODY HEDLUND

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF LUTHER AND KATHARINA

Praise for
Newton and Polly

“Amazing Grace, indeed! *Newton and Polly* is one of the most powerful love stories I have ever read, wrenching the heart and waking the soul. If you read one book this year, this should be it.”

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“Complex and emotionally rich, *Luther and Katharina* gripped me from the very start and never let go. Not even when the final page was turned. The history, the love story, the depth of faith in this novel is masterfully woven by Jody Hedlund.”

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NEWTON
&
POLLY

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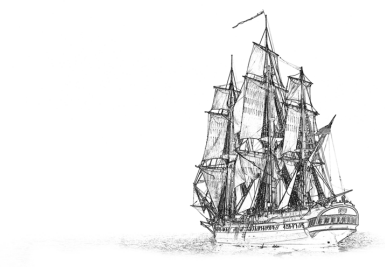
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NEWTON & POLLY

A NOVEL of
AMAZING GRACE



JODY HEDLUND

AUTHOR OF LUTHER AND KATHARINA



WATERBROOK

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NEWTON AND POLLY

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To my mother:
Thank you for the seeds of faith
you planted in your children.
Thank you for remaining steadfast
during the turbulent storms.
Thank you for always praying, always loving,
and always forgiving during the darkest of days.
You exemplified the Father in running
to your prodigals with open arms.
I pray now I will do the same.



PART ONE

ONE

DECEMBER 1742
CHATHAM, ENGLAND

*I*fear that our wassailing has become a nuisance.” Polly Catlett slowed her steps, her toes aching in the stiff leather of her boots, the damp chill of December finally taking its toll.

“Nonsense.” Susanna Smith linked her arm into Polly’s and dragged her toward the front door of the tenant farmhouse that stood across the road from the Blue Anchor Inn. “You’ve such a pretty voice. You could never be a nuisance.”

One of Susanna’s friends, an older Quaker widow who held the beribboned wassail bowl, knocked on the farmhouse door, while the others in the wassailing group formed a semicircle for the singing. A mangy mutt had announced their presence with deep-throated barking that echoed in the crisp cloudlessness of the coming night.

The fading golden brocade that streaked the sky overhead was all that remained of the daylight but enough to show the frozen rosy splotches on each of their noses and cheeks. Enough for Polly to glimpse tension on the face of the older Quaker widow.

"This is the last house," Polly whispered to Susanna, flexing her aching fingers inside her wool mittens. "Then we shall return home."

"Of course," Susanna conceded as the door opened and bright light poured out upon them, illuminating a spark in Susanna's eyes, a spark Polly knew all too well. A spark that meant something was afoot.

The Quaker widow stepped away from the door and took her place among other Dissenters in the group who were attired in plain and unadorned garments as was their custom. Earlier, after Susanna had convinced Polly to join her for the wassailing, Polly wasn't entirely surprised to discover that their company was made up of Susanna's Dissenter friends. Susanna made no pretense about her strong political views and never passed up an opportunity to gather with like-minded friends whenever she came to visit.

Although Polly would have preferred to wassail with friends from her own social circle, she hadn't been able to begrudge Susanna the favor. Nor had she been able to resist an opportunity to sing, even if the group was strange and sober.

Susanna's poke through her heavy cloak was Polly's sign to begin her song. As the open doorway filled with several women, Polly took her place at the fringe of the group and hummed several notes before starting, "A jolly wassail bowl, a wassail of good ale . . ."

The others allowed her to sing the first stanza by herself, and her voice lifted clear and pure with the melody of the traditional song. A hush fell over the women who were now stepping out of the farmhouse. As her song rose, even the dog stopped its barking.

At the Blue Anchor Inn across the road, she could feel the attention of several patrons upon her, men who were either coming to or going from the alehouse. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see

that one stocky man had leaned his shoulder against the weathered clapboards and was staring at her from beneath the triangular brim of his cocked hat.

Susanna glanced toward the barn at the rear of the farmhouse and squeezed Polly's arm. "Sing another verse." Susanna's request was met with a murmur of assent from the hefty woman facing them, likely the farmer's wife with her milkmaids and scullery girls behind her.

Polly didn't need much prodding to continue. Her song filled the air, drawing the plump, almost square-shaped farmer away from the barn toward them. With a limping gait, he lagged behind several boys, likely his sons. Polly was warmed with a small measure of satisfaction that her singing could please others so readily.

Later when she was alone, she would offer prayers of contrition for her vanity, but for now, she was helpless but to release the melody. She sang several more stanzas by herself as the crowd expanded the same way it had at their previous stops. Finally, Susanna and her friends joined in, finishing the song. Together they sang the chorus two more times before offering the wassail bowl to the farmer and then to his wife.

The drink was no longer bubbling hot as it had been at their first visit. Nevertheless, everyone sipped from the bowl and praised the sweet spiciness of fine ale and roasted crab apple blended with cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, and ginger. In exchange for the songs and drink, the farmwife had her maids pass out an apple to each of the wassailers.

The chatter of the singers mingled with those of the farmer and his family, but the laughter this time was different, louder, more forced. Or maybe Polly was merely unnerved by the young man who

continued to lean nonchalantly against the Blue Anchor and stare at her. The other patrons had listened for a verse or two before hustling on their way. But this one hadn't budged, not even when they'd finished singing. The shadows of the early evening prevented her from seeing his features clearly, but from the glimpse or two she'd caught, he was certainly dashing enough to make her squirm.

Polly focused her attention on Susanna, who was speaking to the farmer's wife. "'Tis true. We are ahead of the festivities for our was-sailing as we've not yet celebrated Twelfth Night. But we were in a joyous mood this day and thought to spread our cheer."

The farmer's wife boxed one of the boys in his ear for drinking too long from the wassail bowl. "We won't complain that you've come. Especially since your sister has such a pretty voice."

"I'm not—" Polly started to explain that Susanna was her aunt, her mother's youngest sister, but Susanna cut her off.

"I concur," Susanna said with a smile and toss of her dark ringlets from beneath her wide-brimmed straw hat. "She does have a pretty voice."

Susanna was vivacious even in the fading daylight. Next to Susanna's ravishing beauty and charm, Polly often felt like a pale golden embroidery thread set against a dark lush tapestry. Although she'd inherited her mother's fairness, there were times when Polly secretly lamented that her mother hadn't given her more of the French ancestral heritage, which had apparently been bequeathed upon Susanna to the fullest.

"If I were making the laws," Susanna continued, "I'd deem the entire month of December—and not just twelve days—be devoted to celebrating Christmas. But unfortunately, I'm not part of the

monarchy.” Susanna peered around the farmyard and beyond to the stretch of road that led away from Chatham into the open countryside.

If Polly didn’t know better, she’d almost believe Susanna was looking for someone. Her Quaker friends, too, were glancing around more than usual. With the coming of night, perhaps they were merely nervous about the need to return to their homes. Nothing good ever happened after darkness, particularly near the River Medway where dangerous smugglers had become all too common in recent months.

“Shall we be on our way?” Polly leaned into Susanna as far as the fan hoops on her petticoat would allow. “I vow, it’s time to go before we’re left to wander in total darkness.”

Susanna lifted one inky brow at her widowed friend, who in turn gave a slight shake of her head as though to tell her “Not yet.”

The unspoken communication between the Quaker widow and Susanna only made Polly more wary. Something more than wassailing was happening tonight. Of that she was growing certain. Were Susanna and her friends arranging one of their protests tonight? During her last visit, Susanna had secretly participated in passing out pamphlets expressing disapproval of the slave trade and stressing the need for reforms. Polly hadn’t known of the clandestine activities until she found a stack of pamphlets in Susanna’s bag. When she confronted Susanna, her aunt swore her to silence.

“Perhaps one more song from my dear sister Mary?” Susanna asked, raising her voice along with Polly’s mitted hand. Susanna’s slanted glance told Polly not to question her pretense over being sisters or the use of her given name, Mary, rather than her nickname.

Susanna's squeeze told her to just sing. At the ensuing enthusiasm from the farmer and his household, Polly had no choice but to indulge them in spite of her unease.

Once the last notes of melody drifted away, she was relieved when the members of their wassailing group tightened their cloaks and with brief good-byes started down the lane toward Rochester where many of the Quakers lived.

"Needn't we go the other way?" Polly asked, increasing her stride to keep up with Susanna's lengthy one. She caught the edge of her flat straw hat to keep it from blowing off her head. Underneath she wore a bonnet-like cap edged in lace, which although stylish did little to keep her ears warm.

"We shall accompany our friends a short distance before turning around," Susanna said tersely, with a sharp look over her shoulder toward the farmhouse. They were already on the outskirts of Chatham on the highroad that would eventually wind its way through Rochester and north to London. The road ran close to the bank of the River Medway, and the dampness from the river and the nearby North Sea made the December air especially biting.

As they walked Polly's breath came in cloudy bursts that disappeared into the lengthening twilight shadows. No one spoke, and in the complete silence, their footsteps against the hard-packed, frozen dirt sounded choppy and hurried.

If she didn't know better, she'd suspect they were running away from someone. "Why are we so somber—" Polly started, but Susanna cut her off with a harsh *shush*.

When they came to a fork in the road, Susanna peered over her shoulder again, her pretty features taut with anxiety. Woods hedged them in, preventing them from seeing the farmhouse and the inn.

But sudden shouts from the area whence they'd come drew alarm upon every face in their small group.

"Hide!" the Quaker widow hissed as she picked up her heavy skirts and broke into the hedgerow between the road and the river.

Susanna grabbed Polly's arm and dragged her the opposite direction down the road that led to the nearby hamlet of Luton. "Quickly." Susanna pulled Polly along at a near run. Polly didn't resist as a sense of dread rapidly spread through her limbs, chasing away the frigidness that had gripped her.

Susanna had apparently gotten herself into trouble again. The question was, what kind and how much?

Polly raced after Susanna until her lungs felt seared with the effort. It wasn't long before the heavy clomp of horse hooves pounded the road behind them. Without slowing her pace, Susanna veered into the woods, and Polly had no choice but to follow. They stumbled over windfall and low branches, their crackling and crashing suggesting an advancing army rather than two delicate young ladies.

"Halt." Susanna held out an arm, steadying Polly.

"Susanna, why are we running? What have you done?"

"Not now. For mercy's sake, be silent and hide."

Susanna crouched behind an ash tree, but the hoops at her hips made concealment impossible behind the trunk. Polly slunk to a fuller hedge that was still covered with a smattering of dried leaves. Her hoops were cumbersome too, but she bent low nonetheless. Thankfully the falling darkness would veil them more than the woodland did.

The rapid thudding of her heart and her labored breaths momentarily drowned out the approaching horse. As the rider came

nigh and slowed the horse's gait, Polly held herself motionless, praying the newcomer would pass by.

When the rider reined his horse on the road in front of them, she sucked in a breath at the same time as Susanna. For a long moment, he sat silently atop the beast and surveyed the woodland on either side. When he seemed to turn and look directly at Polly, she stiffened. She didn't know if he could see her through the thick growth and darkness, but when he hopped down from his saddle, her body tensed. He began to move to the edge of the woods. She ducked her head and glanced at Susanna for some indication of what to do. Should they attempt to run, perhaps deeper into the woods?

Susanna merely put a finger to her lips and gave her head an imperceptible shake.

He stopped at the side of the road and tipped up the pointed brim of his hat revealing his face. Polly sucked in another breath. His features weren't clear in the deepening shadows, but she could see enough of his strong jaw and broad shoulders to recognize him. It was the young man who'd leaned against the Blue Anchor Inn and watched her sing.

At the thundering of more horse hooves, the man pivoted away and bounded to the other side of the road. His easy swagger and hair tied back in a queue identified him as a sailor. He fumbled at the clasp of his trousers, and within seconds Polly thought she heard a distinct splatter of rain against dry leaves. Only it wasn't rain . . .

Was the man relieving himself?

Polly had to cup her hand over her mouth to catch her surprise. With the approach of darkness, the moon had made its appearance and illuminated him, but thankfully his horse sidled into the

middle of the road, shielding her from the display. Nevertheless, she was mortified.

To make matters worse, the man began to whistle a ribald folk song. Seemingly without a care in the world, he whistled the merry tune, even as two men on horseback came upon him and reined abruptly, causing his horse to shy sideways and nicker.

The sailor glanced over his shoulder at the newcomers. His whistle tapered off as did the other sound. "If you're thinking of robbing me," he said in a slurred voice, "you're in for a sore disappointment. I gambled away my last halfpence at the inn."

"I don't care the devil about robbing you." Polly recognized the square face of the farmer at the home where they'd just been wassailing.

The sailor gave an unsteady laugh. "Good that, since all I have to give you is the shirt off my back."

The farmer and his companion didn't laugh. Instead, they surveyed the woods. "We're looking for a group of women that came a-wassailing by the farm."

Again the sailor laughed and lurched toward his horse, grappling for the reins but missing and nearly falling to the ground. "If you find them, let me know; I'll join you in the fun."

Polly's muscles turned rigid at his implication.

"Then you haven't seen any women?" the farmer demanded, examining the road that led to Luton.

Polly wasn't sure if the sailor had seen them, but she readied herself to bolt should he divulge their location.

"Women? I sure wish I had seen some," the sailor said finally, maintaining a grip on the reins of his horse. "But alas, if my game of hijinks is any indication, then this looks to be my unlucky night."

Polly didn't know much about alehouse games, but she'd heard enough criticism of the dice and drinking game to know it was one of the bawdiest.

The farmer spoke to his companion in low tones before addressing the sailor again. "If you see the women, you'll earn yourself another cup of ale at the Blue Anchor if you report back to me."

"Aye. I like that bargain," the sailor said. "Make it two cups and a bed for the night, and if I find them, I'll bring them to you myself."

Polly could only pray that he was too drunk to be any threat. From the farmer's snort, she surmised he was rapidly concluding for himself that the sailor wouldn't be of much help. Within moments, the night air echoed with the clomp of retreating horses.

The sailor made a show of stretching his arms high in the air with an obnoxious yawn before scratching his belly. Then for several long moments, he adjusted the length of his stirrup.

Except for the soft neigh of the horse, silence hung in the air. Polly's legs had begun to cramp from staying in one position for so long. Slowly she straightened and arched her back to work out a kink, but in the process her foot shifted against a twig, causing it to snap.

Polly froze and turned her attention back to the sailor. But thankfully, he didn't appear to have heard and was now fiddling with the leather strap and buckle of the bridle. She glanced at Susanna, who remained motionless. Polly cocked her head toward the deep woods behind them, hoping Susanna would follow her lead in sneaking away.

Before she could move, however, the sailor spoke in a surprisingly clear voice that hinted at humor. "I think it's safe for you to

come out now. I give you my word I won't hurt you." The sailor finally turned around and once again looked through the shrubs. Although darkness had now almost completely fallen, his eyes found Polly first and then Susanna.

Susanna remained motionless, apparently still not intending to show herself until the stranger passed by. Polly hesitated, but then took a step away from her hiding spot.

"I saw everything that happened back at the farmhouse," the sailor continued. "And it was a clever plan. Freeing those slaves during the singing."

"Freeing slaves?" Polly's ire rose as swiftly as a breeze on the North Sea. She spun on Susanna. "Are you mad?" Such an exploit was not only a theft and illegal but could — already had — put them in grave danger.

"We were just wassailing," Susanna chided. "This drunken fool is speaking utter nonsense."

At that the young man laughed. "I suppose a farmhouse so close to the River Medway is in just the right location to hide smuggled goods. I have no doubt some local gang unloads their goods on the dock behind the Blue Anchor and pays that farmer a hefty amount to store their overflow in his barn, including a couple of young slave boys smuggled into Kent. The singing was a nice diversion to draw everyone away from the barn. I doubt anyone else saw the Quaker man leading those boys in chains to his waiting shallop."

There was nothing slurred in the man's speech now. Obviously, he'd put on a drunken show for the farmer. And everything he said made perfect sense. If only Polly had acted upon her unease earlier and left before singing the last couple of songs.

Even as she rebuked herself, she conceded that Susanna was

stubborn. Though her aunt was only three years older than her own fifteen years, once determined to do something, Susanna was difficult to sway. Usually her activities were relegated to temperance meetings or peaceful demonstrations. Even the delivery of the anti-slavery pamphlets had been relatively harmless. But this time Susanna had gone too far. Those slaves had been someone's property, and abetting in their escape was equivalent to stealing. English laws were strict concerning stealing of private property. If they were caught and implicated in thievery, they could be hung for their crime.

Although the large majority of slaves were shipped to British plantations in the West Indies, according to Susanna there were still plenty of the rich in England who kept slaves too. She'd disparaged some of her London friends for keeping slave boys, especially the darkest skinned, like little pets in order to have a decorative contrast to their own fashionable white skin.

While Polly certainly didn't condone such practices, she hadn't figured it was her place to work at eradicating an institution that had been in progress for her entire lifetime and beyond.

"We were wassailing," Susanna said more firmly, finally moving from her hiding spot. "And now, if you please, we need to be on our way home."

The young man only laughed again and stood back as Susanna stepped onto the road. Susanna's parents had made no secret that they'd hoped in Chatham, Susanna would mature and stay out of the trouble she often stirred up in London. If only they could see their daughter tonight.

Polly followed Susanna until she was free of the woods and out in the open. The sky overhead was bright with the first stars, and the

moon gave off enough light that she could see the sailor's features more clearly.

His face was deeply tanned as was befitting a man who spent weeks at a time under the sun on the open sea. The slight bend in his nose spoke of a past brawl. But rather than marring his strongly lined features, it only added a rugged appeal.

At the same moment she perused him, she realized that he too was studying her face. She expected he'd turn his stare to Susanna and scrutinize her equally, but his attention stayed riveted to her. She wasn't accustomed to men taking a second glance, especially when she was with the vivacious Susanna, who drew the interest of men the way the queen drew a crowd.

"Where are you ladies headed?" He directed his question to Polly. "I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I allowed you to continue your journey without making sure you arrive safely to your destination."

"We shall be just fine without an escort." Susanna grabbed Polly's arm and moved forward in jerking steps.

The sailor fell into step next to them, deftly handling his horse's reins and leading the creature with a gentle tug. "Would you deprive me of peace of mind?" His cocked smile showed even white teeth.

"We've only a short distance to go," Susanna responded.

"Short?" Polly started.

"It may seem long since you're cold. But our home in Luton isn't overly far." Susanna's tone warned Polly not to contradict her again.

Apparently Susanna wasn't planning to trust this man. And perhaps she was right. After all, he'd agreed to turn them over to the farmer for two cups of ale and a bed for the night. What if even now he was plotting how he might lure them back to the farmhouse?

Polly glanced sideways at the young sailor. His smile faltered as though he sensed their mistrust. "I hope you know I'm neither drunk nor planning to inform the farmer of your whereabouts."

"You have nothing about which to inform the farmer," Susanna insisted. "Unless, of course, wassailing has become a crime. Now let us be on our way without further hindrance. I wish you good evening."

The sailor shrugged. "Aye, then. Have it your way." He came to a halt as did his horse, allowing them to move ahead of him.

Polly's footsteps slowed. The man seemed to be kinder than Susanna was allowing, but Susanna clung to Polly's arm, forcing her to keep the brisk pace. As they rounded a bend in the road, Polly couldn't resist taking one final look at the sailor over her shoulder.

He'd angled his head and was watching them with an amused smile. When the curve in the road rapidly took him from her sights, she hurried to keep up with Susanna.

"Let's run," Susanna whispered once they were alone. As Polly lifted the thick layers of her skirt and petticoats and began to race forward, one thought almost stopped her.

The sailor had intercepted their discovery when he'd distracted their pursuers with his theatrical performance. He'd quite possibly saved their lives.

And she'd neglected to thank him.

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