



CHASING THE NIGHTBIRD

Krista Russell

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*To my husband Robby for his unwavering support,
enthusiasm, and editorial advice,
and to my sons Anders and Graham,
who inspire me in more ways than I can list.*



Lark's Head

New Bedford, Massachusetts, 1851

If it were true that seagulls possessed the souls of dead sailors, Lucky Valera wondered which of his former shipmates was diving at him from the June morning sky.

He waved his arms. "Shoo!" His own stomach felt bilgy for lack of food; he surely hadn't a crumb to offer a hungry bird. Never mind—by guess and by God he'd be seeing the last of New Bedford off the starboard stern by noontide. And with a bellyful of fresh rations in the offing.

He pulled his cap down, hoisted his duffle, and walked quickly over the dawn-lit cobbles, eager to get to the wharf where the *Nightbird* waited. Feeling undone as a frayed line, Lucky yearned to get back to sea. He'd grown up before the mast and, now that Pa was gone, the ship's hands were his only friends in this unfamiliar city. And though it was still a week from his fourteenth birthday, he'd be sailing as full member of the crew this time, not a lowly cabin boy. He breathed in the early morning sea air and the smell of whale oil and tar.

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The bird dove at him again. Lucky darted off the street and into the shelter of Spurling's sail loft.

"Is that you, Alcott?" he shouted at the gull. Alcott had made improper advances to the sweetheart of a Nantucket whaleman, and had been ushered to his reward with one quick snap of the whaleman's tattooed forearm.

The gull wheeled, circling. Its wings and body glowed white in the rising sun, but the feathers on its head formed a dark brown hood. Not usual to see a bird like it in these parts, Lucky mused. He wondered if its presence might signify bad luck.

A movement in the shadow of an alleyway caught his eye. A big black cat. Lucky smiled, relieved to see a good omen. The creature padded across the street, staring up at him with unblinking yellow eyes. Between its teeth, still squirming, was a large gray rat.

"Bully for you!" he called after it. "One less vermin on the wharf, one less bunkmate on the *Nightbird*."

He continued down the road, past the mostly dark shop windows and under a succession of wooden signs hanging above the storefronts: a boot, a bottle, an anvil, a candle. Each sign indicated what manner of goods was traded inside. The bakery window cast a lone rectangle of gold onto the street. The smell of fresh bread made his mouth water.

The gull must have smelled it too, for again it appeared, flying low over the shop signs and squawking at Lucky.

He shook a raised fist. "Brownlee, you deck walloper, is that you? You were always the first to show up at ration

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time." Indeed, it was spoiled stew off the coast of the Aleutians that'd finally done in poor Brownlee.

But the gull didn't answer. It turned and veered off to the northeast.

A woman, broom in hand, stared at him from the doorway of a ship chandlery shop. He doffed his cap.

"Morning, ma'am." She regarded him with suspicion, her glance sweeping the empty street. "Just having a word with a friend," he told her.

The road began to slope more steeply toward the waterfront. Lucky stepped onto one of the iron rails that ran along the side, parallel to the stones. It comforted him to know that just yesterday, barrels of provisions for the *Nightbird* had rolled along these tracks. He wondered what victuals awaited for the first meal aboard. Roast of beef, fried potato, maybe a bit of plum duff? Of course, it would be downhill from there, as far as the quality of the rations. The first meal was always the best.

A shrill screech split the air, loud enough to make his ears ring. Whistles were a bad omen to sailors, and this one bode ill for landlubbers as well, particularly for the poor souls under the employ of the textile mill. The shrill whistle was a muster, tearing the mill workers from their beds and sending them trudging off to the huge buildings that rose from the marshland beside the Acushnet River. They'd labor all day, then lumber home, only to rise again to the same mournful sound, the same dreadful fate.

Lucky shook his head. How could a body tote such a cussed load?

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The gull was back. It dove again, this time knocking the cap off Lucky's head.

"Is that you, Caswell, you son of a sea cook? Stealing my gear while you walked in the world of men wasn't enough for you, eh? Back as a feathered fiend to finish your foolery?"

Lucky bent to retrieve his hat. Hell's bells! Could the blasted bird's antics be some kind of a caution? Still crouching, he squinted up at the gull again. "Pa?"

There came a shuffling—the sound of running footsteps on the cobbles. Before Lucky could rise to his feet, a heavy blow struck him square across the back, knocking him to the ground.

"What in the blue—"

His words were muffled by rough canvas as a sack came down over his head. Powerful arms wrapped around his waist, holding him fast.

"Oyyy!" he shouted, thrashing and kicking. "Shove off," he said through the damp material.

It was no use. His captors—he could tell there were two of them—had pulled him to his feet. One held him tight while the other secured the sack around him with a heavy rope.

Awk, awk, awk. The gull's cry came from close by, sounding like mocking laughter.

"Son of a—" one of the men cursed.

The other guffawed. "Bird sure made a mess of you," he said. "Must have been holding that load for a time! It's all down your back."

"Shut up and move," the other said.

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They pushed Lucky between them along the uphill lane away from the harbor.

"What kind of shanghai is this?" Lucky demanded.

In answer came a deep chuckle and a shove to his ribs.

"I'll have you know I'm crew of the *Nightbird*, and no greenhorn!" Lucky said. "Cap'n Butler won't give any quarter when he learns of this gunboat diplomacy."

"That's mighty tough talk for a little nipper," one of the men said. "You can't be more than twelve."

"Sixteen," Lucky managed. The musty smell of the canvas made his gut roil.

"Ha! The lie smells as bad as he does!"

"He's almost fourteen," said the other.

Lucky jerked at the words. How could he know that? Their voices carried the lilt of the islands. Cape Verdeans, he guessed, like his own pa's people. "Lads," Lucky pleaded, "I'm one of your kind, but you've taken hold of the wrong end of the rope. You've got the wrong man!"

"I doubt it. Ain't you that half-pint darkie they call Lucky?" one of them asked.

"Guess this is our *lucky* day." The other chuckled, then coughed and pushed him forward.

"I'm the son of Black Jack Valera, best rigger on the eastern seaboard."

"Heard ole Jack was best at rigging card games. Word is, that's what got him killed."

"Liar!" Lucky couldn't remember when he'd been delivered such a broadside. He sprung toward the hateful voice, his head making contact with what must have been a fleshy belly. He

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felt the air go out of the man and heard a groan, but he had no chance to revel in satisfaction before doubling over in pain from a blow to the head. A fog descended, muddling his thoughts and finally enveloping him completely.

When he came to, Lucky found himself flung over a shoulder and being carried like a sack of herring, away from the wharves, the harbor, and the *Nightbird*.

He could smell only sour cloth but knew the air had changed. The sounds were not those of the wharves, but the click-clack of hooves and the clanging of steel milk jugs as a dairyman's wagon made its way, with many stops, down a thoroughfare. He must be in a neighborhood.

"Runaway," he heard one of the men say.

"Shanghaied!" Lucky yelled but heard only laughter in response.

Finally, the man who carried him stopped. "Thanks, Antone," he said.

"You owe me," Antone replied from a distance.

Lucky's breath caught. One of them had departed; there might be hope. Despite Lucky's weight, his captor ascended a stairway without effort. He heard a door open as he was lowered to the floor.

"Stand still or I'll box your ears."

Lucky stood motionless while the line was untied and the canvas removed from his head. He blinked and rubbed at his eyes. The air was suddenly filled with a wonderful, spicy smell. An aroma that brought with it the tug of a memory. Island food.

Then Lucky saw him. A large man of about thirty years,

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with skin a shade or two lighter than his own, wearing land-lubber's gear with shirtsleeves rolled up to expose muscular forearms. The man glanced down at his biceps, following Lucky's eyes. A self-satisfied smile passed over his face—a visage fierce, terrifying, and yet strangely familiar.

He directed his attention back to Lucky, a sneer lifting one side of his mouth. Finally, his lips parted to reveal a row of small brownish teeth. "I'd know you anywhere. Especially with that ratty old scarf around your neck."

Lucky's nails bit into his palm. He swallowed and the tendons in his neck went rigid, closing the space between his skin and the kerchief, making it feel too tight. He reached up and tugged at it, straightening the knot at the front. It was Pa's spare. Lucky'd worn it every waking moment since Pa's death. Its presence comforted him in a tangible way, as though by wearing it tied securely around his neck, he could somehow gather and hold the memories of his father.

What would Pa do now?

The man gave a disgusted snort, seemingly disappointed that Lucky had failed to rise to his insult.

Lucky was done sizing up the kidnapper; the *Nightbird* would soon sail and he intended to be aboard. His mind had already leapt ahead from whaleman's commandment #3 (fight anytime you think you can win) to whaleman's commandment #4 (run when you know you can't win). This was a case of fish or cut bait, and Lucky would be cutting. Right out the open window to his left, he decided. Probably a ways up from the ground, but it couldn't be helped.

"And you are?" he said, turning his gaze back to the

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man's face and its wide, ugly smile. Three strides, he figured, then a leap of faith and—if he survived that—freedom.

"You don't recognize me?" the man asked.

Lucky edged toward the opening. "Why would I? You're obviously no sailor."

"No," he replied, and Lucky caught a glimpse of something dark behind his eyes. "I'm your brother."