

# **THE SENTINEL**

**By**

**Jeremy Bishop**

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Visit Jeremy Bishop on the World Wide Web at: [www.jeremybishoponline.com](http://www.jeremybishoponline.com)

Whales. What can I say about them? As an anti-whaling activist, I'm supposed to have this shtick memorized, supercharged, cocked, locked and ready to fire across the bow of anyone who looks at a whale the wrong way. But here's the simple truth: while I share the same mild affection for the world's largest creatures that most people do, I sort of just fell into this job. I needed work out of college and answered an ad in the paper. Turns out what I lacked in passion, I made up for by having an analytical mind and a knack for pretending to be someone I'm not—a lifetime of moving around the world and trying to fit in can do that to a girl.

So when I take the glass jar filled with red paint and lob it toward the *Bliksem*, one of Greenland's few whaling ships, I'm fairly indifferent to whether or not it hits the mark. But I'm currently incognito, so I need the effort to at least look genuine.

Red gore explodes across the *Bliksem*'s gray hull. I let out a genuine whoop. Some suppressed side of me finds this fun, and for a moment, I understand the appeal that has thirty, mostly college dropouts, heading out to sea to combat whaling for months at a time. It feels like when I egged Jimmy Sweedler's house after he left the prom with Susan Something. A part of me hopes he got her pregnant, was forced to marry her and now lives in a trailer infested by rabid chipmunks. But the thirty-three year old, responsible part of me just feels bad for his parents who had to clean up those two dozen eggs.

Yeah, *two dozen*.

I had anger issues.

Still do, actually, but I can keep it in check when I'm undercover, or use it to fulfill the act.

"That's right, you whale killing sons-a-bitches!" I shout, shaking my fist at the *Bliksem*, which is just a hundred feet away.

Cheers rise up from the deck crew—aka: my fellow paint bombardiers—standing by my side. There are three men and two women on the deck with me—all at least ten years younger than me. In fact, other than Captain McAfee and his one-man "security" team, an Australian known only as Mr. Jackson, I am the oldest crewmember on board. Much of the young volunteer crew sport dreadlocks, not simply as a fashion statement, but also because fresh water showers are rationed while at sea. As a result, the *Sentinel*—the anti-whaling ship that's been my home for the past month—smells like it must have when it was an active duty Norwegian whaling ship.

"Nice shot!" shouts Greg Chase, the scrawny first mate. He's got a big awkward smile on his face, which is covered in patches of facial hair struggling to proclaim him a man. Complimenting his shaggy face is a pair of glasses that sit askew on his nose. The kid—he's twenty three, but I can't help thinking of him as a kid—looks like he should be in his parent's basement playing Dungeons & Dragons, not attacking whaling ships in the Arctic Ocean off the northern coast of Greenland. That said, his brown eyes absolutely gleam with excitement, and

he's by far the smartest person on this ship, which makes him a threat. Because if anyone is going to figure out I'm not who I claim to be, it's him.

So when Chase hands me a second glass jar, I take it with a double flick of my eyebrows that says I'm getting my rocks off, too. Before my first attempt, the other deckhands had loosed a barrage of nearly fifteen paint jars, all of which fell short of the mark. So much so, that the crew of the *Bliksem* had begun to laugh and mock us with an assortment of hand gestures that universally translates to "cocksuckers."

They're all frowns now. Dressed in thick sweaters and winter caps, some of the *Bliksem*'s crew leans over the rail to see my handiwork. The crimson stain, which looks eerily like blood, covers the ship's name stenciled on the side and runs in red rivulets toward the sea. It's a gruesome sight, which I suppose is the point. A dead and bled whale pulled into port doesn't do much to turn the stomach, but a ship covered in blood from the hunt might not be so kindly received. And the images being captured by the *Sentinel*'s crew will make great PR. Bold? Yes. But effective? I'm not convinced.

But judging the effectiveness of the *Sentinel*'s tactics isn't why I'm here. My job—my true job as an undercover investigator for the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA)—is to observe and record the less noble actions, if any, of the *Sentinel* and her crew. The allegations leveled against the *Sentinel* and her captain are sully the whaling debate and making the anti-whaling community look like zealots. So I'm here to either vindicate them, or expose them as pirates, turn my evidence and testimony over to the international and Greenland authorities and clear the good name of other anti-whaling organizations. On top of that, I'm tasked with the job of recording the effectiveness of the whaler's hunting techniques. Greenland only recently started hunting humpbacks again and their whalers are out of practice. Many whales take a half hour to die—some as long as six hours (experienced whalers can put a whale out of its misery inside of one minute). Given the dual nature of this mission, the WSPA needed someone with both undercover experience and a level head.

Translation: my lack of passion keeps me from freaking out at the sight of whale blood. Call me a cocksucker in sign language and I'll throw red paint at you—or worse if I can get my hands on you. Kill a whale and I'll take notes. I believe in the cause—in a world full of cows, why hunt endangered or even threatened creatures? But I've lived all around the world, have eaten most meats imaginable, including—*gasp*—whale, and I've seen more than a few animals slaughtered.

It's the circle of life.

Hakuna matata.

Pass the A1.

I haven't had a bite of meat since stepping foot on the *Sentinel*, which runs a vegetarian galley. I've lost five pounds and have more energy, but damn, I could go for a cheeseburger. I force the thought of cooked meat from my mind and focus on the task at hand.

With all eyes on me, I raise the jar over my head, take aim and see a tall man with long blonde hair on the deck of the *Bliksem*. He's pointing a video camera in my direction. I flinch away from the lens. "Shit!"

If my face is caught on camera while taking part in this act of high seas vandalism, it could destroy the validity of my testimony. I can see it now; *The violence needs to stop says the fist-shaking, paint-throwing, crazy lazy. But they called me a cocksucker by thrusting their hands toward their open mouths and pushing their cheeks out with their tongues! Like this! Sorry, that was rude. We were implying you needed to brush your teeth, say the whalers. Fresh breath is important to a seafood eating culture.*

“What is it?” Chase asks. “You all right?”

His concern is nice, but fades quickly when I say, “They’re recording us.”

“They *always* record us,” he says. “This is what you signed up for, Harper. You’re here to take a stand. To go on record against these murderers. If you go to jail, so be it. That’s what we do. I’ve been in jail four times already.”

How Chase could survive in jail is beyond me. I can think of ten raunchy inmate nicknames for the kid off the top of my head. He doesn’t give me time to test them out in my mind.

“Look,” he says. “I know this is your first time out. And it can be intimidating. You’re not used to this kind of action. I get it. You can cover your face if you want, but eventually you’ll have to make a stand and reveal yourself.”

I contemplate making a joke about revealing myself, but that would either turn him on or piss him off—neither of which is something I want happening, so I hold my tongue.

He reaches past my head, pulls up the hood of my bright red jacket and ties it tight so only my eyes can be seen. “These guys are amateurs. They’ve never had to face us before. This isn’t like the Japanese. They have no LRAD, no flash-bangs, no water cannons. They don’t even have a loudspeaker to shout at us! But you’ve got the best arm on board and I want you to fuck their shit up!”

He’s got a bigger smile now. Couple his grin with the goofy face and passion stolen from a *Braveheart* speech and I can’t help but laugh. He takes my chuckle for excitement and I play the part. With my face concealed, I turn and send another jar sailing across the hundred-foot divide between the *Sentinel* and the *Bliksem*.

But I’ve put a little too much pepper on this pitch, and instead of striking the hull of the whaling ship, it soars toward the wheelhouse. The tall blond man, who looks like some kind of modern Viking, ducks, and for a moment I think I’ve been saved. Then the distinctive sound of a breaking window fills the air. I cringe, thankful that the cinched hood hides my face from their crew and ours.

A battle cry rings out from all around me. Not just from the crew on deck, but also from the *Sentinel*’s wheelhouse. The whole crew has seen what I just did.

*Great.*

Chase gives my shoulder a hearty shake like he’s Captain Blackbeard and shouts, “They’re not going to want to pilot that ship for weeks!”

“From paint?” I ask. I imagine that some of the instruments got splattered in red, but I can’t see how a single bottle of red paint thrown through the wheelhouse window could disable a two hundred foot ship.

Chase’s smile turns fiendish, and I know I’ve been duped.

I curse myself for not looking at the bottle before I threw it and ask, “What was it? What did I throw?”

“Butyric acid,” he says.

“Acid!”

He’s laughing now, and I suddenly wonder if he’s sane. The FBI might have been a better choice for this undercover mission. Of course, we’re in Greenland’s waters and the *Sentinel* is registered in the Netherlands so I think this would actually be the CIA’s jurisdiction. But the CIA is too busy keeping people from blowing up buildings. They probably don’t think twice about whales, unless they can be weaponized, which I’m sure someone somewhere is working on. So that leaves me, Nancy Drew of the seven seas.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “It’s no more acidic than orange juice. It’s essentially rotten butter. Slippery as hell and smells worse than a point blank blast from a skunk’s ass. Worst thing you could ever smell.”

Chase’s nose must not work, because the people on board this ship are the worst thing I’ve ever smelled. I look to the *Bliksem* and see the wheelhouse crew stumbling and slipping out of the cabin. The tall Viking man with the camera catches an older, chubbier version of himself wearing a captain’s cap, and helps the man down the stairs leading toward the main deck. I’m thankful that the man is no longer recording, but my relief is short-lived. The old man I suspect is the captain of the *Bliksem* collapses at the bottom of the stairs.

The cheers around me grow louder still and I feel sick to my stomach. Opposing the killing of whales does not justify harming people. It’s just not the same. That’s an opinion that could get me thrown off this ship, but the man could be having a heart-attack. And it could be my fault! What if the jar hit him? What if he got a dose of the vile smelling acid in his face? As panic grips me, I fear that Chase will ask me to throw more bottles. I feel so weak with worry I doubt I could do it. Thankfully, the captain’s voice booms from the wheelhouse window before more bottles can be thrown.

“Time to send the message home!” Captain McAfee shouts. The man is tall and skinny, but has the voice of a baritone. He’s all contradictions. Sixty-five, but full of energy. A full head of hair that’s stark white. Went through knee surgery after an accident, but walks like a middle-aged mom trying to regain her figure. Preaches love for the Earth’s creatures, unless you include humans. “Get away from the rail and hold on tight!”

The crew around me jump away from the rail like it’s been electrified. But I stand dumbly in place.

“Harper!” Chase shouts. “Get away from the rail!”

“Why? I don’t—” But then I see it. We’ve changed course and are closing the distance to the *Bliksem* at a sharp angle. The *Sentinel* was an ice breaking whaling ship before it was bought and outfitted for anti-whaling missions. It sports multiple hulls and its bow is strong enough to slice through icebergs. I imagine ship hulls aren’t too dissimilar.

“McAfee’s going to ram them?” I ask no one in particular.

But Chase has heard me and shouts, “Yes! Now get down here!” He takes hold of my jacket and yanks me back. I fall to the black deck and am pinned down by the malodorous Chase. A

moment later, an impact shakes the ship. The groan of metal on metal drowns out the shouting voices of both crews and lingers for what feels like minutes.

When it ends, I'm pulled to my feet. The deck crew rushes back to the rail and lets out a cheer. I stumble up behind them and catch site of the *Bliksem*. Its port side hull has a long dent that isn't nearly as bad as I expected, but that's probably only because it's also designed to take on icebergs. A lesser ship would have no doubt been sunk.

I marvel that the *Bliksem*'s crew hasn't taken aim with their harpoon or tried to ram us in return. At first I think they're incredibly patient people, but then I remember the captain. It's possible they're preoccupied with saving the man's life. In fact, as the *Bliksem* languishes behind, I wonder if anyone remains in the wheelhouse. The Arctic is a bad place to be on a boat without a pilot. But then I see the Viking man with a bandana wrapped around his face. He climbs the stairs to the wheelhouse and pauses at the top to look at us—at me. The *Sentinel*'s crew shouts obscenities at the man until he enters the wheelhouse.

As the voices fade and calm returns to the Arctic sea, I let slip my true feelings, "He's fucking insane."

It's just a whisper, but Chase hears me. He spins around, eyes ablaze, and says, "I know. He's amazing."

The fact that "fucking insane" is taken as a compliment is nearly the last straw, but I manage to swallow my revolt and say, "So what next? Is that it? Mission accomplished?"

"No, no, no," he says, licking his lips like a hungry dog. "We've only just begun."

I lie in my cot, hands clasped behind my head, and stare at the ceiling. I'm exhausted and emotionally drained from the day's excitement, but sleep is something I can only daydream about at the moment. The crew is having a party. It's not supposed to happen. Captain McAfee runs a dry ship. But the Neo-Hippie crew brews a tea that I think must be laced with something. Because after drinking it, the party starts, inhibitions go out the window and the thump, thump, thump of drug enhanced sex echoes through the ship.

The guys grunt, like they're baboons with bright blue asses, each trying to upstage the other.

The girls put on an audio show worthy of any porno, filled with "Yes, yes!" and "Harder!" and squeaked out "Oh my gods."

And all I can do is lie back and listen to a chorus of dry humping. Seriously, I doubt many of them are doing the deed. Maybe at first, but now, with so few opportunities to get clean? *The smell*—I laugh, thinking about it. I snuck a package of one hundred baby wipes on board. If it were discovered, I'm sure they'd be stolen or borrowed into extinction within a few days. I sneak a single wipe into the bathroom with me and wipe myself down twice a day in an effort to stay odor free. The evidence gets flushed. My black hair is cut short, so it's easy to manage, and I keep it messy and spiky to help fit in.

But I'm also clean because I keep my pants on. Not that I've been tempted to do the nasty while on this trip. No one here, male or female, even closely resembles the kind of man I'd be interested in. Some of the guys are lookers, sure, and that's fine if you can get past the smell, but the true measure of a man is his heart, not his cock. That's what my father said. Lovely thing to teach a daughter, but the Colonel didn't censor himself for anyone. I swear he'd have been a general if he could've controlled that yap of his.

It also helps that no one has even approached me. A number of girls on board are pretty, but the guys seem to favor good humor over pretty eyes. In that category, Jenny Gillespie is Queen, despite being a bit chubby. She's got a figure like some ancient revered fertility goddess. Apparently, chunky women were hard to find a thousand years ago before Walmart gave them a place to congregate.

I like to think that I haven't been approached yet because they see the toughness in my eyes—a genetic trait inherited from my father—but that can't be it. If their hippie brew is enough to overcome their stench, it's certainly potent enough to blot out any fear of me.

*Am I scorned?* I wonder. *Am I a woman scorned?* Someone, somewhere climaxes loudly and I burst out laughing.

A knock at the door silences me.

This is new.

The handle turns before I can respond. Light fills the room, forcing me to squint. "That you, Peach?"

Peach is my roommate—I have no idea what her actual name is. She’s got long dreads, a short body and a flat chest. Most of the guys here would pass her up if she wasn’t such a slut. When I see the silhouette of my visitor standing more than a foot taller than Peach, I know I’ve got my first caller. Must have made the brew extra potent tonight, because the only pheromone I’m putting off is unscented Seventh Generation baby wipes mixed with a strong dose of “get the fuck out.”

“You awake, Harper?”

The voice is clear and unhindered by any mind-altering substances. As a result, my visitor is easy to identify.

Greg Chase.

“You’d have to be dead to sleep through this noise,” I say.

“I witnessed a seal hunt once. Mothers and babies. None were spared the club.”

*Well, this is morbid,* I think.

A rapid fire banging issues from a neighboring cabin.

“This sounds worse.”

His quick turnabout makes me laugh despite myself. “That’s awful,” I say.

“Mind if I turn on the light?” he asks.

“Go for it,” I say, but then I’m filled with a fear that he’ll be buck naked.

Yellow light blooms from a small desk lamp, lighting the small cabin in a gentle glow. I’m happy he didn’t use the florescent overhead light. Those things make me wish I was blind. I’m even happier that he’s dressed in shorts and a short sleeve shirt. It’s summer here in the Arctic, so the temperature bounces back and forth between forty and fifty degrees—warm enough to melt a crap load of ice—but not really warm enough for beach attire.

He notes my attention to his clothing. “I don’t mind a little chill. Helps me think.”

I sit up a little, mindful to keep my blankets pulled up over my chest. I too, don’t mind a little chill. Helps me sleep. But my tank top could be misconstrued as suggestive, so I keep the comforter hiked up like a chastity cloak. He hasn’t said anything else, so I break the silence with a simple, “What’s up?”

He sits in the desk chair, which is free of Peach’s mess mainly because I actually use the desk and clear it off on a daily basis. The rest of the room is pretty much a pile of worn clothes, odd supplies, anti-whaling literature and rotting food.

I try to breathe through my mouth.

“You stepped up today,” he says, looking down at me with what I think are kind eyes, but his glasses have made them small, like some kind of burrowing mammal, so I’m not entirely sure. “You know, I wasn’t sure about you at first.”

Uh oh. “Why’s that?” I ask.

“To be honest, you’re not our typical volunteer.”

I do my best to wave him off. “I’m not different from the—”

“Yes,” he says, “you are. You’re intelligent.”

“There’re a lot of smart people on board,” I say, despite the words tasting like bullshit.



“Smart, yes,” he says. “Intelligent, no. There’s a difference.” He motions to the messy cot behind him. “Peach is smart.” He picks up an anti-whaling pamphlet with a Greenpeace logo on it. “She can absorb almost any subject and regurgitate the information in her own words. She’s contributed a lot of great articles to Sea Sentinel’s website.”

I look at all the reading material strewn around the room. I’d never really noticed Peach reading it, but I suppose that’s why it’s there.

“But,” he says, tossing the pamphlet away, “she can’t think for herself. She can’t plot, can’t strategize, can’t predict.”

“And I can?” I ask.

“I suspect so.”

“Why?”

“For starters, you’re one of four people who won’t leave this ship with an STD.”

I laugh again, but stop when I see that he’s serious. I quickly identify the other three disease free crewmembers—McAfee, who seems to have no interest in anything but whales, Mr. Jackson, whose obsession with order and cleanliness repels the ship’s females like a force field, and Chase, who values clear thinking, is very responsible and I now suspect is the mind behind McAfee’s madness.

“Okay, busted, I’m smart *and* have opposable thumbs,” I admit, but I need to end this conversation before he starts asking questions. I’ve got a cover story, but the WSPA isn’t the CIA. I don’t have fake IDs or the documents to back me up. A few calls from the ship’s satellite phone and I’d be revealed. “But it’s late and I really should try to sleep despite the noise, so if this is going to be a ‘way to go, champ,’ speech, let’s skip to the end.”

I flash a smile that says I was joking, but no one ever says something like that without at least being half serious.

He grins and stands. “Fair enough. But that wasn’t the only reason for my visit. Our cause needs more people like you. Like me. Committed people. I think we make a great team.”

I’m tempted to say, “Me Tarzan, you Jane,” which would be ironic because my first name is actually Jane, and it would be insulting because between the two of us, I’m clearly Tarzan and there is no doubt that he is Jane. I keep my mouth shut, but a moment later wish I’d said something, because he finishes with:

“Maybe more.”

He looks at me with the same blazing eyes I saw staring down the *Bliksem*, gives a wink and heads for the door. “We’ll talk more in the morning.” He stops in the doorway and looks back at me. With a grin, he sings, “The lookout in the crosstrees stood, with his spyglass in his hand. ‘There’s a whale, there’s a whale, there’s a whalefish,’ he cried, and she blows at every span, brave boys, and she blows at every span.”

He closes the door behind him, leaving me stunned and unsettled. I now know why none of the guys have made a pass at me. They’ve been forbidden. I’m off limits, care of the first mate. And while I appreciate the fact that I haven’t had to deal with sexual advances, having to turn down a horny sailor or ten is far less creepy than being claimed by the Dungeon Master. Even

worse, he's just quoted an old sea shanty about whalers spotting a whale to hunt, but I got the clear impression that he is the whaler in the song, and I am the whale.

*So much for 'Me Tarzan, you Jane'. No, I tell myself, you Ahab, me Moby Dick, and if you hunt me, I'll kill your crew, sink the ship and then pull you under. Dad would be proud.*

Before I can smile, my thoughts are interrupted by a loud warning klaxon and the sound of shrieking voices—the kind that say, “Someone’s just been murdered.”

### 3

After throwing on a pair of jeans, I dash up the stairs, taking them two at a time, toward the main deck. I'm pulling my sweater over my head when the ship turns hard to port. I tip to the side, slam into the stairwell wall, and fall. My head pops out of the top of the sweater, and I let out a shrill cry. I'm instantly embarrassed despite the fact that I might break my neck, but I know I look and sound like the Muppet, Beaker, so there's that. But luckily the Swedish Chef is there to catch me.

Two strong arms embrace my falling body and I jolt to a stop against a cushiony body.

"You okay?" Jenny Gillespie asks.

"I'm good," I say, standing and pushing my arms up the sleeves, trying not to look as stupid as I feel.

But Jenny is looking past me, toward the top of the stairs and the continuing shrieks of horror. She could care less about my appearance.

I wonder if all fat people are like that, and then feel like a total asshole for thinking it. I would have fallen down ten metal steps and could have broken my neck if not for her. I decide to stop privately mocking her and other people who shop at Walmart. Okay, just Jenny. Walmartites are still fair game. It's highly doubtful anyone on this ship would shop from an evil corporate giant.

A high pitched squeal rolls down the stairwell.

"What's going on up there?" One of the male crewmembers asks. I'm not sure what his name is. I think he's the cook, which does nothing to ingratiate him to me. Raw vegetables are the best thing on the menu.

I realize the question was directed at me. I'm first in line. And there are now five people behind me. "I have no idea," I say, and continue my trek for the main deck.

The door has been left open, which is a no-no in the Arctic, where even during mid-summer, temps can still dip below freezing. I exit quickly, am struck by a cold breeze and hug my arms around my chest and hunch down. The action saves me from a bloody fate, but makes Jenny a very large target.

"Something hit me!" she shouts, clutching her chest and staggering to the side.

I race up to her, hoping she hasn't been shot. I didn't hear a gunshot and seriously doubt Greenland's whalers are using sound-suppressed hand guns, never mind the accuracy it would take to shoot someone from one moving ship to another. But as ludicrous as it sounds, she *was* hit by *something*. As she sits down behind one of the Zodiacs secured to the main deck, I quickly survey our surroundings and note that the second Zodiac is missing. Strange, but not a threat. I look up briefly and see a furious Captain McAfee staring down at the chaotic scene, shouting something I can't hear. When Jenny releases a string of rapid fire "Oh my gods," I turn back to her.

Dark red blood stains the sweater where her hands are clutched. “It hurts,” she says.

“Let me look,” I say.

She shakes her head. The first reaction most people have to being severely injured is the desire not to know exactly how bad it is. But I’ve heard enough war stories from my father to know not to screw around with injuries. If it’s bad, there might only be minutes to save someone, or to say goodbye. “Let me look, now!” I shout.

My raised voice startles Jenny into compliance. She slowly moves her hands away. There’s enough blood to make me gasp, but I can’t see a tear in her sweater. And if it’s intact, so is everything else. “You’re fine,” I say.

Her eyes go wide. She looks down at her chest. Gives it a pat. She looks relieved, but says, “What hit me? It really hurt.”

As a coppery smell tickles my nose, I begin to suspect an answer.

A wet *thwack* a moment later confirms it. A chunk of ragged, fatty meat wrapped around a thick bone lands on the deck behind me. A part of me imagines the meat on a grill and my stomach rumbles. But Jenny stops my fantasy short.

“What is that?” she shouts, recoiling from the flesh, which has clearly been drowned in blood before it was thrown the distance between the *Bliksem* and the *Sentinel*.

I pick up the meat, drawing a squeal of disgust from Jenny.

“Its scraps,” I say.

“Scraps?”

“From a kill.”

“From a kill?”

*Oh good Lord, Jenny!* “From a whale. It’s whale meat.” I point to her chest. “And that’s whale blood all over you.”

Her pink cheeks go white like she’s some kind of color changing octopus. Jenny’s mortified face coupled with the horrified screams of the rest of the crew, who’ve figured out what’s being hurled at them, is more than I can bear.

A snicker emerges from my lips and I clamp my hand over it.

But Jenny has seen and her disgust turns to righteous anger. “You think this is funny?”

Angry Jenny is much more amusing than disgusted Jenny and I fail to contain my laughter. After five seconds, her face lightens. I’ve heard it said that laughter is contagious. Sitcoms use laugh tracks for that very reason, but I’ve never actually seen an explosive person defused by laughter. Apparently, Jenny has a sense of humor buried somewhere in her girth.

*Damn, how long did I last? Three minutes before I mocked her size again? I’m so evil!*

We’re both cackling like wounded seagulls when I glance at the wheelhouse again and find McAfee’s eyes glaring down at us. His eyes lock onto mine and I don’t know if the man has telepathic powers or what, but I swear I hear him say, “There will be a reckoning.”

Laughing at something like this is no doubt akin to mutiny. And I’ve pulled Jenny into the shitter with me. Thankfully, the captain has bigger problems to handle tonight. He’ll no doubt do what he normally does—retreat to his quarters with Chase and emerge two hours later with a grand master plan I’m fairly certain will come from Chase’s brain. If Chase has as much pull

with the captain as I suspect, I might be able to get away with my humorous breach of protocol, but I doubt it.

I help Jenny to her feet, saying nothing about the captain. She had her back to him, so it's possible she might escape his wrath, and I don't want to worry her. Two scares in one night might be more than her heart could—*fuck! I am Evil!*

“Stay here,” I tell her as I work my way around the Zodiac. With whale meat being flung around like we're in the middle of some whaling high-school food fight, it's a risky venture, but I need to see it. I need to see the Vikings hurling bloody meat. I tell myself it's for my report, but it's really just because I find it so amusing. Flinging meat in most situations would strike me as silly and wasteful, but throwing whale meat at the *Sentinel*. Well, that's just pure genius.

Jenny doesn't argue, and I round the front of the Zodiac. A wall of cheering men greets me. The all male crew of the *Bliksem* stands along the rail, dipping their hands into buckets of meat and hurling it toward the *Sentinel*. And unlike the *Sentinel*'s peace-loving crew, every crewmember on board the *Bliksem* throws like a man. I look to my right and see a long stretch of bloody meat sliding down the side of the ship, walls covered in whale blood. What I don't see are people. The crew has retreated from the attack, hence the cheers of the opposing crew.

Then I see the Viking, lit by the *Bliksem*'s floods. He's looking right at me again. But I'm not hidden beneath a hood this time. He can see my face. My body. And I sense the eyes of a man at sea too long staring at me. I shake my head, no, at him.

He flips me off.

I counter his continuing barrage of rude sign language by returning a volley of my own, duplicating the cocksucker gesture his crew is so fond of. And strangely, despite being on opposing ships, separated by a hundred feet, we share a laugh.

I glance around making sure no one has seen and when I look back, the Viking looks worried. He stumbles a bit, and then is waving his hands at me, telling me to get back. For a moment I wonder why, and then realize I'm an idiot for not seeing the same thing twice in one day.

The *Bliksem* is closing the distance.

They're going to ram us.

Tit for tat on the high seas.

*Damn, someone's going to get killed if this stupidity doesn't stop.* Fueled by rage, I storm past Jenny and head toward the wheelhouse door.

“What are you doing?” Jenny asks.

“McAfee is going to apologize and end this or I'm going to throttle his ass and stage a one man mutiny.”

Jenny follows me and says, “I'm with you.”

“He's likely to lock us up,” I warn.

“I'd like to see him try,” she says.

I climb the steps to the wheelhouse feeling more confident. If McAfee gives me trouble I'll just have Jenny sit on—

*Damnit!*

The metal stairs clang beneath my feet as I storm up to the tall wheelhouse. The *bong, bong, bong* of my feet on the steps has alerted the bridge-crew to my approach, so when I burst through the door, all eyes are on me. A gust of wind sweeps in behind me. It's a rather dramatic entrance, and I think it might help my cause.

Then I see Captain McAfee. He goes nuclear.

With a beet red face he shouts, "Get this trash off my bridge!"

Chase is there. He's stunned. "Captain?"

"She can't be trusted!" he shouts and then stabs a finger toward me. "How many more of you are there? What are you really doing here?"

*What the hell?* The level of manic craziness radiating from McAfee sends a wave of nervousness radiating out of my stomach. Still, this needs to end. Jenny gives me a little push from behind, urging me on. I recover from the captain's verbal slap and remember why I'm here.

"You need to contact the *Bliksem*, now," I say with as much authority as I can muster. "This can't continue."

"What are you talking about?" Chase asks. He's starting to get a look in his eyes, not quite as accusing as McAfee's, but suspicious.

"We throw paint at them, fine. Rotten butter? Stupid, but okay, whatever. But then we *ram* them and now they're going to ram us? How's that—"

"What?" McAfee shouts, a look of true horror entering his eyes. He dives to the port side of the wheelhouse and looks out the window at the *Bliksem*. I catch a whispered, "Oh my God." I wonder why Mr. Ram-happy is worried about getting up close and personal, and then he shouts, "Hard to starboard! Flank speed!"

Flank speed? Seriously? Flank speed is faster than the ship's full speed. It's a fuel hog and can't be sustained for long because the engines on this refurbished ship will overheat. I've never heard the term used outside of a military context. It's a last ditch effort move reserved for emergencies like trying to evade an enemy aircraft. Granted, we're about to get T-boned by an ice class ship, but I thought that was the game McAfee played. His level of panic now seems out of place.

Then he's got the radio in his hand. "*Bliksem, Bliksem*, this is the Captain of the *Sentinel*. Stand down and we will leave you in peace."

Several of the crew in the bridge, including Chase, turn their heads toward the captain, aghast. Retreat is bad enough, but a peace fire?

"He's probably lying," Jenny whispers.

She's right. McAfee is as untrustworthy as any genuine pirate. He'll say and do just about anything to stop the killing of whales. Anything but accept defeat. But his concern seems genuine.

When there is no reply, McAfee speaks in the radio mic again, “*Bliksem, Bliksem*, this is—” A booming voice interrupts. At first the words are hard to make out, but I realize that the voice is speaking Greenlandic—no, not speaking, singing.

McAfee lets out an angry shout and tosses the mic to the bridge floor. He storms back toward the window where Chase is watching the Bliksem’s approach.

“She’s a fast ship,” Chase says, matter of fact. “We can’t outrun her, even at flank speed.”

McAfee pounds his fist against the windowsill. He’s like a big four year old who’s just had his favorite toy taken away.

“You can dish it out, but you can’t take it?” I can’t help myself. I inherited more than my eyes from my father, and what’s the point in staying silent now? I’ve already outed myself. Gotta get my wisecracks in before they lock me up.

“Someone get her off of my bridge!” McAfee shouts.

When no one moves, I notice that Jenny is standing tall behind me, arms crossed, lips downturned in a snarl. I’m not sure why Jenny is supporting me right now, but I’m glad for it.

“Where’s Captain Crew-cut when you need him?” I ask. I’ve never used the nickname before, but have no doubt that everyone knows I’m referring to Mr. Jackson. He’d have no problem removing both Jenny and me, even if we decided to put up a fight, so I’m glad he’s not here, but then that’s the real question. *Where is he?*

I remember the missing Zodiac and I’m struck with a realization. “You instigated this, didn’t you?” I ask, stepping further into the bridge. “Jackson’s not here. A Zodiac is missing.” No one on the bridge looks surprised by this information. Some of them no doubt helped launch the Zodiac.

“We did nothing to warrant this attack,” Chase says, keeping a measure of calm about him.

“You mean aside from ramming them earlier?” I say.

Chase’s eyes go dark for a moment and I see an anger matched only by McAfee’s.

“Ignore her,” McAfee says. He turns to the crew, each manning their posts at radar, the wheel, weather and charts. “Where’s the nearest land?”

*Land?*

“We’re four miles out from the mainland,” someone says.

“Map shows a peninsula jutting out,” someone else says. “Maybe just a mile to the east.”

“Get us as close as you can,” the captain says. “Where are they?”

“Closing,” Chase says from his spot by the window, “but not fast. We have a minute at best.”

“Too close,” McAfee mutters.

“Too close for what?” I ask.

It’s like I’m not in the room. No one acknowledges that I’ve even spoken.

That’s when I notice exactly who the wheelhouse crew is tonight. Manning the wheel is Markus Jenkins, the second mate. Nick Eagon, the third mate, stands at the radar, which means the first four tiers of command are on the bridge at the same time. They normally operate in shifts. Paul Kennet, who’s essentially just an able shipman, stands at the maps. He’s got no real power, but his loyalty to McAfee and the *Sentinel* is unquestioned, as this is his fifth year with

the organization. Aside from the missing Mr. Jackson, the entire inner circle of the *Sentinel's* crew is here. They were planning something big.

A shifting shadow by the maps reveals a sixth crewmember is present. I stand on my tippy-toes and see a rainbow hemp hat that often conceals a head of dreadlocks I know well. "Peach?"

She steps out of hiding. She doesn't look angry like the others. More confused and afraid. She's holding a video camera.

Something is definitely not right here. Whatever they're up to, they recruited Peach to document the event and no doubt put a verbal spin on it.

Somewhere in the distance, I hear the high-pitched whine of a Zodiac. Its revving engine pulses as it bounces across the waves somewhere out in the darkness.

The radio crackles and Mr. Jackson's voice fills the bridge. "Mates, you have about thirty seconds to put some distance between you and the *Bliksem!*"

Thirty seconds until what? Can he see how close the *Bliksem* is to striking us?

"She's right on top of us!" Chase shouts, his voice tinged with worry. "Brace for impact!"

I take hold of a chair that's been bolted to the floor. The ship shudders from the impact. Alarms sound.

The voice of John Nicholson, the chief engineer and one of the few people on board with whom I can have an intelligent conversation, sounds from the radio. "What the hell happened? We've got a hole in the hull down here! It's above the waterline so—"

McAfee toggles off the radio, silencing Nicholson.

*What the hell?*

"Get us out of here!" he yells at Jenkins.

"I doubt they're going to hit us twice," I say, but my subconscious has just put together a puzzle my conscious mind had yet to realize existed.

Thirty seconds.

Mr. Jackson said thirty seconds. But the man is precise like a Swiss clock. The *Bliksem* struck after only five seconds. No way he'd be twenty-five seconds off target. So what's coming next?

"No time!" McAfee shouts.

I see a telltale warning sign that tells me things are about to go to hell. I grab Jenny, and tackle her to the floor. Everything moves slow. I see her face contort with hurt, maybe because I was rough, maybe because she felt betrayed by my action, or maybe because she's upset that a little person like me could take her down so easily. But her face morphs into abject fear before we hit the floor.

The *boom* is louder than anything I've ever heard. Feels like someone just shoved fondue skewers into my eardrums. Every single window shatters. Shards of glass fly out like daggers. I see them pass over my head as I'm thrown against the far wall.

My head strikes hard. I try to shake it off, but a pain-filled fog rolls into my head. As my vision fades, I see a fireball rise up past the shattered wheelhouse windows. Armageddon has come to the Arctic.



I come to with a deep breath that sends me into a fit of coughing. The air is no good. Tastes of smoke. When I open my eyes, that's all I can see. Thick gray smoke rolls through the wheelhouse like English fog. I pull my sweater up over my mouth and nose and say, "Hello?"

It seems a ridiculous thing to shout, like I'm some girl scout with a bunch of Samoas knocking on a door. So I step it up and shout, "Is anyone still here?"

The idea that I've been left alone to die of smoke inhalation fills me with vengeful anger. But then, maybe everyone is still here and just incapacitated? A deep, yet feminine, groan comes from nearby. I try to stand, but fall to my side.

The ship is listing. We're going down.

I return to my hands and knees and crawl toward the groan. I find Jenny face down near the door. The air is better here. The smoke is entering from the other side of the bridge and rolling out of the door.

"Jenny," I say. "Are you hurt?"

"Head hurts," she says, then moves her limbs. "Nothing broken, though. What happened?"

"Explosion."

She looks confused for a moment, then her eyes go wide. She remembers. "You saved me."

"We'll see about that," I say. "We're listing. Taking on water."

"We're sinking?" she asks, her voice rising with panic. She knows as well as I do that just a few minutes in the Arctic Ocean is enough to kill. If the *Sentinel* goes down, we do not want to be on it when it does. There are inflatable lifeboats and survival kits on board, but time is short and I can't leave until I know we're not leaving someone behind.

"I'll be right back," I say.

"Where are you going?" she asks. "We need to get out of here."

"I'll just be a minute." I take a deep breath, then slide into the smoke. Crawling fast, I move through the wheelhouse. At first, I'm relieved I haven't found any bodies—if there were multiple people to pull out, I'd probably die before finishing. I head for the back of the room and see an arm, limp on the floor. I crawl toward it, saying, "Hey!" But as I round the base of the map station, I see Paul Kennet's face. A shard of glass the size of a trowel is embedded deep in his neck. A river of blood seeps from his neck and flows across the listing floor where it pools against the wall.

The smoke is thick here, so when I see the body and suck in a quick breath, smoke scratches my throat and sets me to coughing. I'm about to head for the exit when I see a second body. It's hard to identify because of the smoke, but I catch a flash of rainbow colors and know it's Peach. Dead or not, I can't leave her.

Crawling over Kennet's dead body is hard. I nearly puke twice when I feel his still warm blood soak into my jeans at the knees. But I make it to Peach and I'm glad to see no glass buried

in her body. She's small enough that I could throw her over my shoulder, but I wouldn't make it far in the smoky gloom. So I take her by the ankle and drag her toward the door. I hear her body bumping into things as I tow her, and I cringe each time, but it's better than asphyxiating, burning alive or drowning in freezing water, so I keep moving without looking back.

As the smoke clears and I near the door, I see that Jenny, bless her overworked heart, hasn't abandoned me. "Is there anyone else?" she asks, and looks about ready to charge into the smoke.

"Kennet," I say, "but he's dead."

Her face pales. "Dead? Are you sure? Did you check his pulse?"

I didn't, but six inches of glass in a man's throat generally qualifies him as a dead man in my book. But I don't want to tell her that, so I lie. "Yeah, let's get the hell off this ship."

Cold Arctic air relieves my lungs as we pound down the wheelhouse stairs and return to the main deck. The first thing I notice is the angle of the deck. If I sat on my ass, I'd zip right down to the ocean, which is just a few feet below the gunwales now. *We're going down fast.*

"Oh my god," Jenny says.

I expect to see her looking down at the frothy ocean, but her head is turned up a little higher. I follow her gaze and find the *Bliksem* pulling away. But she's in similar shape. A massive hole is open on her starboard bow, and a second on the aft... a portion of the ship that never touched us.

She's going down fast too, so I certainly can't seek any help there. Not that I can see her crew with all this smoke. Something deep in the *Sentinel* shakes beneath our feet. Maybe it's an explosion, or air being forced out by the rushing water. I really don't give a shit. But it spurs me into action.

I thrust little Peach into Jenny's enormous hands and say, "Wait here. I'll get one of the inflatables." As I say this, Jenny's eyes flash to where the second Zodiac had been secured. Gone.

I waste no time cursing whoever took the Zodiac and our best chance of survival and instead head for the door to the lower decks. The inflatables are kept in a locker at the base of the stairs. When I open the door, I'm struck by a burst of air, pushed out by intense pressure. It's thick with the stink of oil, salt and thirty stinky crewmembers. It occurs to me that this was the first time this door had been opened, which means that no one on the lower decks has yet to escape. When I hop down the stairs two at a time, and land in frigid water, I see why. The interior is flooded, lit by flickering emergency lights. Three bodies float face down in the water. Everyone below decks was either killed by the explosion or quickly drowned.

"We're sinking faster!" I hear Jenny shout. "Hurry up!"

Opening the door released the air pressure and is allowing the ship to sink faster. Whose bright idea was it to stow the inflatables below decks? Ignoring the bodies and my freezing ankles, I yank open the locker and find two inflatable lifeboats.

*Two.* For thirty crew.

*Son-of-a-bitch! Someone needs a good swift kick in the nuts.*

I yank out one of the inflatable life rafts, which looks like a huge thick modern suitcase. Free of the locker, it falls and nearly takes my arm off. Must weigh as much as Peach! With the big

suitcase out of the locker, I notice a backpack stuffed in behind it with the word “Survival” handwritten across the top in black. I have no idea what’s in it, but I snatch it and throw it over my shoulder. The ship suddenly lurches and I nearly fall into the now knee-deep water, pulled down by the heavy life raft.

Jenny screams and I run up the stairs, which are tilted so bad I’m running almost completely on the wall and I’m not running up so much as horizontally. I have to duck to get out of the exit. And when I do, I can see why Jenny screamed. The deck is nearly at a ninety degree angle to the water. She’s knee deep in water and standing on the ship’s rail. And freezing water and sinking ship be damned, she still has Peach in her arms.

“Can you step to the side?” I shout down to her.

She looks up, sees what’s in my hands and moves to the left until she slips. She catches herself, but doesn’t try to move again.

“I’m going to pop this thing open. When I do, try to reach it. I’ll have to slide down the deck after it.”

“Just do it!” she screams.

I’m not entirely sure how do to this. I’ve never used a life raft, let alone an inflatable one, but a big bright yellow tag labeled “PULL TO INFLATE” makes it idiot proof. I give the tag a yank and the suitcase explodes to life, pulls itself free of my grip and falls into the water next to Jenny. At first it looks like she won’t be able to reach it, but the octagonal raft just keeps on growing. The whole thing is bright yellow and has a tent-like roof with four clear plastic windows. A flashing strobe has already begun to blink at the pinnacle of the tent. She snags the raft, pulls it closer, opens the clear plastic hatch, tosses Peach inside and looks back up at me. “C’mon!”

There’s now a twenty foot, nearly vertical drop between me and the submerged rail. I know this could hurt, a lot, but what choice do I have? I leap out of the door and press my body against the deck, hoping friction will slow me down. I cover the distance in a flash, but never reach the rail. Jenny catches me below the armpits and tosses me into the life raft next to peach. She pokes her head in after me.

“Get to the other side of the raft,” she shouts. “Take Peach, too.”

I’m about to argue, but then she starts climbing in and I feel the whole thing start to tip toward her. I grab Peach and drag her to the far side of the raft, which is far larger than I was expecting. I suspect Jenny might weigh more than Peach and I combined, but we’ve provided enough counter balance that the raft doesn’t flip.

The raft bobs up and down as we catch our breath. A moment later a loud gurgling draws our attention out the clear plastic windows. The flashing strobe light atop our raft lights the scene like some kind of low budget horror movie. Half of the *Sentinel* is underwater and the rest is quickly sliding under the surface. Compressed air bursts from windows, blowing water and debris into the air.

“It’s pulling us in,” Jenny says, her voice a whisper.

She’s right. The suction of the sinking ship is pulling us closer. A spray of water strikes my window. I jump back and by the time I return to the window, all that’s left of the *Sentinel* and

who knows how many members of the crew is gone. As our raft spins in lazy circles at the center of the submerged ship's footprint, silence descends over the ocean.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jeremy Bishop** has, by all outward appearances, lived a normal life. He grew up in a nice home, in a friendly seaside town. But, as is often, the pleasant facade seen at first glance conceals a darker side. Throughout childhood and early teen years he encountered malevolent entities that whisked in and out of rooms, moved furniture and haunted his dreams.

At second glance, the seaside town was only miles from where the puritans tortured innocent women and hung them as witches, a history and culture that permeated the area. A closer inspection of the nice house revealed past evils of previous owners—bullet holes in windows and a five foot square, red, white and black Swastika painted on the basement wall—a basement that terrified Bishop and his two brothers, even as adults.

He processed these encounters through drawings of monsters and devils, expunging horrible images from his mind. As an adult, he continues to expel the monsters of his childhood through his novels, the first of which, *TORMENT*, is based on a dream. Enter the mind of Jeremy Bishop if you dare. Share his nightmares. Experience the fear that shaped his life. You may never be the same.

Visit Bishop online at [www.jeremybishoonline.com](http://www.jeremybishoonline.com)