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## Ambush

John Lerro knew he was in trouble.

Squinting out through the slanted wheelhouse window of the freighter *MV Summit Venture*, the deputy harbor pilot couldn't see anything. Not the five loading cranes that stood at mute attention along the empty deck, which stretched out for five hundred slick feet of ship in front of him, five stories below where he stood.

Not the grumbling Chinese lookouts in heavy rain gear he'd posted to the bow of the heaving, 19,734-ton vessel less than fifteen minutes before.

Certainly not the lighted buoys tossing in the churning Tampa Bay waters, the markers that would tell him when it was time to turn this massive, unwieldy pile of steel awkwardly to port, in order to stay inside the invisible lanes of the shipping channel.

He couldn't see the Sunshine Skyway Bridge, two thin ribbons of concrete, silver steel, and asphalt that crossed fifteen miles of the open bay and rose to more than 150 feet at their pinnacle—easy enough to pass under with a good day's weather, but a target that required a

sharpshooter's eye when an unanticipated squall like this one turned everything into unfocused black and white and terrible saltwater boil.

But John Lerro knew the bridge was there, in front of him somewhere.

It was 7:30 in the morning, May 9, 1980. A Friday. The sun had been straining to peek out from behind the ominous gray fog for almost an hour.

The gale had begun as hard, steady raindrops falling in rough rhythm from an opaque sky; within seconds *Summit Venture* was being suffocated by blowing white water coming from every direction at once, howling like a pack of hungry wolves trying to sniff out an opening to roar through. This was predatory weather, and it had pounced on *Summit Venture* at the worst possible moment.

As a veteran merchant mariner who held a full captain's license, Lerro had been in hard and sudden blows before. He knew that keeping calm, steadying his twitching nerves, was essential.

In his three years with the Tampa Bay Pilots Association, he had gone under that bridge almost a thousand times, safely guiding mammoth shipping vessels from all over the globe through the tricky inland channels and into—or out of—the Port of Tampa and the smaller ports in Pinellas and Manatee counties.

Flying a Liberian flag, the four-year-old *Summit Venture*—forged in a Japanese shipyard, 606 feet long and 80 feet abeam—had a thirty-man crew, all of them Chinese. As federal and state maritime laws mandated, the captain had consigned his vessel to the Tampa Bay pilot group to reach the port, where the holds were to be filled with pulverized phosphate rock. That morning it was John Lerro's turn in the pilot rotation.

He was thirty-seven years old, the youngest pilot in the organization. A third-generation Italian American from the Bronx, Lerro stood out among the rugged southern men who had been navigating the bay for decades and the leather-skinned tugboat captains who'd been hired as pilots through the back-slapping recommendations of their longtime friends in the group.

Resentment toward Lerro ran deep among the veteran pilots. Not because he was a fast-talking, opinionated New Yorker, with the wavy



Fig. 1. MV *Summit Venture*, 20,000 gross tons and 606 feet in length, known as a “handysize bulker” and built in Nagasaki, Japan in 1976. On May 9, 1980, flying a Liberian flag, it was to take on a load of pulverized phosphate at the Port of Tampa. Courtesy of [www.swiss-ships.org](http://www.swiss-ships.org).

black hair, deep-set brown eyes, and square jaw of a movie star. Not because he liked to talk about classical music and ballet.

Not because he was aloof or unfriendly—on the contrary, Lerro had a quick wit and a generous nature.

Many of the other men didn’t like him because of a 1975 law that took the hiring of new members out of the pilots’ hands and placed it under Florida’s Board of Professional Regulation. Lerro had been the first pilot hired by the state body under what was, in effect, affirmative action. He wasn’t one of them. He had been *forced* on them.

Taking *Summit Venture* into port was Lerro’s only assignment for May 9. He was to close on a loan in the afternoon, in a Tampa bank,

and use the money to buy stock in the Tampa Bay Pilots Association. After three years as a deputy he had earned the right to become a full pilot, share in the profits, and more than double his \$40,000 annual salary.

He had an observer on board. Bruce Atkins—like Lerro—had decided to change his career course and become a harbor pilot. Even though the thirty-two-year-old Atkins had been a ship’s master with Gulf Oil for years, he still had to spend thirty days as a “trainee” on Tampa Bay, riding with each of the association’s pilots and deputies on routine transits, familiarizing himself with the bay. Atkins didn’t want to be on *Summit Venture* on May 9—it was the thirtieth day, and he felt more than ready to begin piloting on his own.

Besides, Lerro had been his pilot during many Gulf Oil transits into Tampa, and Atkins didn’t think much of the wiry New Yorker’s handling technique. On more than one occasion Atkins had come within seconds of taking back control of a ship, as he just didn’t think Lerro was making the right decisions.

“Ah, what the hell,” he’d finally decided. It was just one more trip up the bay.

Once docked in Tampa, the crew—aided by the longshoremen at the port—would fill *Summit Venture*’s five cargo holds, a three- or four-hour procedure. Then the next pilot in rotation on the Tampa side would negotiate the ship back out of the bay, and disembark at the Egmont Key pilot station, before the big freighter sailed for South Korea to unload at the Port of Pusan.

There was, of course, no need for harbor pilots on the open ocean. The sea is a wide highway with no designated lanes. No shoals, no tides or tricky currents to be concerned with.

Captain Liu Hsuing Chu had picked up Lerro and Atkins at 6:20 that morning, anticipating a routine transit up the roughly forty miles of water to the assigned port terminal.

At the Sea Buoy, before he’d started in, Liu had ordered the ballast tanks emptied. Normally the tanks are filled with seawater, to make an unladen ship ride more heavily—and steadily—on the sea. Discharging the ballast was standard procedure before an empty vessel was brought into port to load up. In the shipping business, time

is money, and the real estate at the loading docks came with a high price tag: the sooner *Summit Venture* got in, the sooner it would get out, and another ship could put in at Rockport Terminal to start the whole process all over again.

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As 7:30 approached, Lerro understood implicitly that his options were limited. The number one priority, for every one of the association's eighteen senior pilots and six deputies, was *don't hit the Skyway*. He was well versed in Tampa Bay's spider web of dredged deep-water channels and the treacherous shallows that could leave a ship stranded and helpless.

Both spans of the magnificent traffic bridge were crowned by complex configurations of silver steel girders that resembled the superstructure atop an old-time railroad trestle, or something a boy in the 1950s might build with his Erector Set. This distinctive feature, which made the Sunshine Skyway one of the most instantly recognizable tall bridges in America, was integral in holding the separate sections of cantilever arch together.

The black storm materialized when *Summit Venture* was a little less than a mile to the west of the Skyway. Monitoring the ship's radar, Atkins had just announced that he'd spotted buoys 1A and 2A, marking the tricky dogleg turn into Cut A—18 degrees to port—that would keep *Summit Venture* in the shipping channel and deliver it safely under the bridge's highest point before continuing to Tampa. They were almost there.

In that instant the curtain dropped. Visibility was zero. Blowing white water assaulted the thick windows and small wheelhouse port-holes, dimly illuminated for a second at a time as if someone were flicking a light switch on and off in an adjacent room.

Bursts of static from the marine radio, crackling with the hard weather, punctuated the stale air in the small, white-paneled wheelhouse, competing with the baying wind and explosions of chest-rattling thunder for the attention of the five men on duty, each standing tense and hard-knuckled at his station.

Captain Liu and his crewmen looked nervously at Lerro, who stood

fixed at the window, raising and lowering his binoculars, and at Atkins, whose eyes never left the starboard radar screen. Atkins was watching not only for the turn buoys but for the bridge itself, which would appear as a straight yellow line.

To Atkins's horror, as the radar made another sweep the center of the screen became solid yellow—damnable interference from the weather cell that had descended on them without warning.

Where was the turn?

Lerro raced between the radar and the window, the window and the radar, and began to consider his options. The Sunshine Skyway Bridge was up there, a fixed object, with Friday morning rush hour traffic poking along in both directions.

He issued orders for the bow lookouts to report sighting of a buoy on the starboard side—that would be 2A—and to make the anchors ready, just in case something drastic was necessary.

Like all big ships, *Summit Venture* had its own unique handling characteristics. But the mathematical logic was indisputable: a 20,000-ton ship, light in ballast and proceeding at half-ahead (about 9.5 mph) requires half a mile to come to a complete stop.

Turning hard to port, reversing back across the width of the channel, was not an option. Pilot Jack Schiffmacher was outbound with the empty gasoline tanker *Pure Oil*, Lerro knew, and was likely to be in the channel and coming his way just as *Summit Venture* was swinging around. A collision with a fuel ship could cause a massive explosion that could cripple or destroy both vessels.

A hard turn to starboard might be the best course of action, although with the wind out of the southwest, at his stern, Lerro would then risk having his ship—riding high with less than a dozen feet of draft in front—blowing broadside into the bridge. And the immediate depth of the spoil area, where the bay bottom sludge dredged from the channel had been deposited, was unknown. In the best-case scenario, *Summit Venture* would ground in the mud and wait out the storm.

The risk would be great, whichever way he turned.

A cry from Atkins broke his concentration. The radar had cleared, for one crucial sweep. "It's all right," Atkins said, his calm, profes-

sional voice belying the urgency of the situation. “I have the buoys. We’re in the channel.”

Just as quickly, on the next sweep, the yellow clutter returned, and the buoys were gone again.

The rain blew harder. *Summit Venture* plowed ahead.

Over the crackling onboard communication circuit, Captain Liu heard from the bow lookout. A turn buoy had been sighted.

Immediately Liu relayed this to Lerro, whose steely eyes were fixed on the window, as if staring hard enough would reveal the crucial turn markers’ whereabouts through the darkness and wet ferocity.

“Where, captain, where?” Lerro replied, without turning his head. “I have to know!”

He didn’t wait for the answer.

*Summit Venture* was now two-tenths of a mile from the Skyway Bridge, with no radar and no visuals. Because it takes time for large, heavy ships to respond to their mechanical commands, pilots have to think fast and plan their movements in advance, even under the best of conditions. Once Lerro understood that one of the Cut A buoys had been sighted, he chose his course.

There was, he reasoned in those tense seconds, no other choice but to assume he was in the right place. Any hesitation would bring him closer to certain disaster. With the wind behind him and a favorable current, *Summit Venture* should still be able to make the turn, and glide under the bridge, without incident.

Attempting to stop the ship now would unquestionably result in a collision with the Skyway.

“It’s the best thing I’ve got,” Lerro said under his breath. He gritted his teeth. He would “shoot for the hole,” as the pilots called it. Atkins’s brief radar sighting, and the report from the lookout, would have to do.

He ordered the engine speed reduced to Slow Ahead, and the 18-degree turn to port, to guide the ship into Cut A and safely between the towering spans of the Sunshine Skyway, through the 800-foot gap where the shipping lane flowed uninterrupted beneath the high roadway.