

HOPE ON THE RIVER

THE BOOK TOUR

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BOOK EXCERPT

A few miles past Lock and Dam Number 21, I came upon a large towboat pushing barges up the river. Nothing unusual, and not large enough entourage to cause me much concern.

I looked at my navigation app on my iPad and quickly determined that I had plenty of room on the port side of my raft, the SS Hail Mary, to exit the navigation channel and just let the towboat go by. For some reason, though, I got on the radio and asked the tow's captain for his opinion. I was quite sure his first set of instructions aligned with my thought: that I should go to my left and stay out of his way until he got by me.

However, his response was not clear, and I repeated my request for guidance from him.

He then said, "One whistle"—meaning that we should pass port to port—and instructed me to go by him on the green buoy side, my right.

I was skeptical, but he assured me that the water on my side was deep and we would get past one another uneventfully.

I should have stuck with my original plan.

The space from the shoreline to his rolling wake—with me in the middle—was not very wide at all. As I approached his port side, I regretted the decision immediately. I could tell that I had extraordinarily little room to wiggle between him and the shoreline, so I picked up speed in the hope that I could ride past his wake quickly.

Unfortunately, that tactic didn't work this time.

The wake he created was not a simple chop; it was a rolling tsunami. I quickly assessed my options. I couldn't go right, because I would go directly into the shoreline. I couldn't go left, because he had not yet gotten far enough past me to allow me to get back into the navigation channel.

So instead I rode head-on into the first of several massive, rolling waves.

The raft pitched straight down into the river and stopped. I gasped as I felt myself being flung forward and down. The water poured in and the motors labored under the brick wall of water I had hit.

It happened a second time, and this time the raft went down deeper and I nearly flew over the steering console.

I knew I wouldn't survive a third time.

I stopped the motors and let the third wave wash over the deck as I pushed myself to the front of the raft and desperately threw three sandbags off the front, into the river.

I then throttled up the motors, turned the nose sharply to port, and made my way back into the navigation channel. I decided that I would fight the roiling backwash and turbulence of the towboat in the channel rather than battle any more of the wake outside it. It took me a good fifteen minutes to ride out this roller-coaster. As the waves got smaller, they came faster, until finally I made it to calm water.

I was exhausted. Sweating. The raft was soaked. And I found myself shaking. Not from the cold but from the realization that the SS Hail Mary had nearly ended up seventeen feet down on the bottom of the river, with me in it.

Months earlier, when I had decided to take a raft down the Mississippi, I had envisioned myself going it alone. After all, how hard could it be, right?

My vision of a slow and leisurely drift, complete with time to read books, wax poetic in a journal, fish for the monster catfish I'd heard and read about, and chat with my fellow "river rats" was as vivid in my mind as a motion picture.

My mistake in how I had rearranged the weight on the raft that morning was multiplied by the error of not trusting my judgment about going to the left side of the channel. Had I done so, the encounter would never have happened. The near sinking would have been avoided. And I would have been in a better position a couple of hours later when the next catastrophe struck.