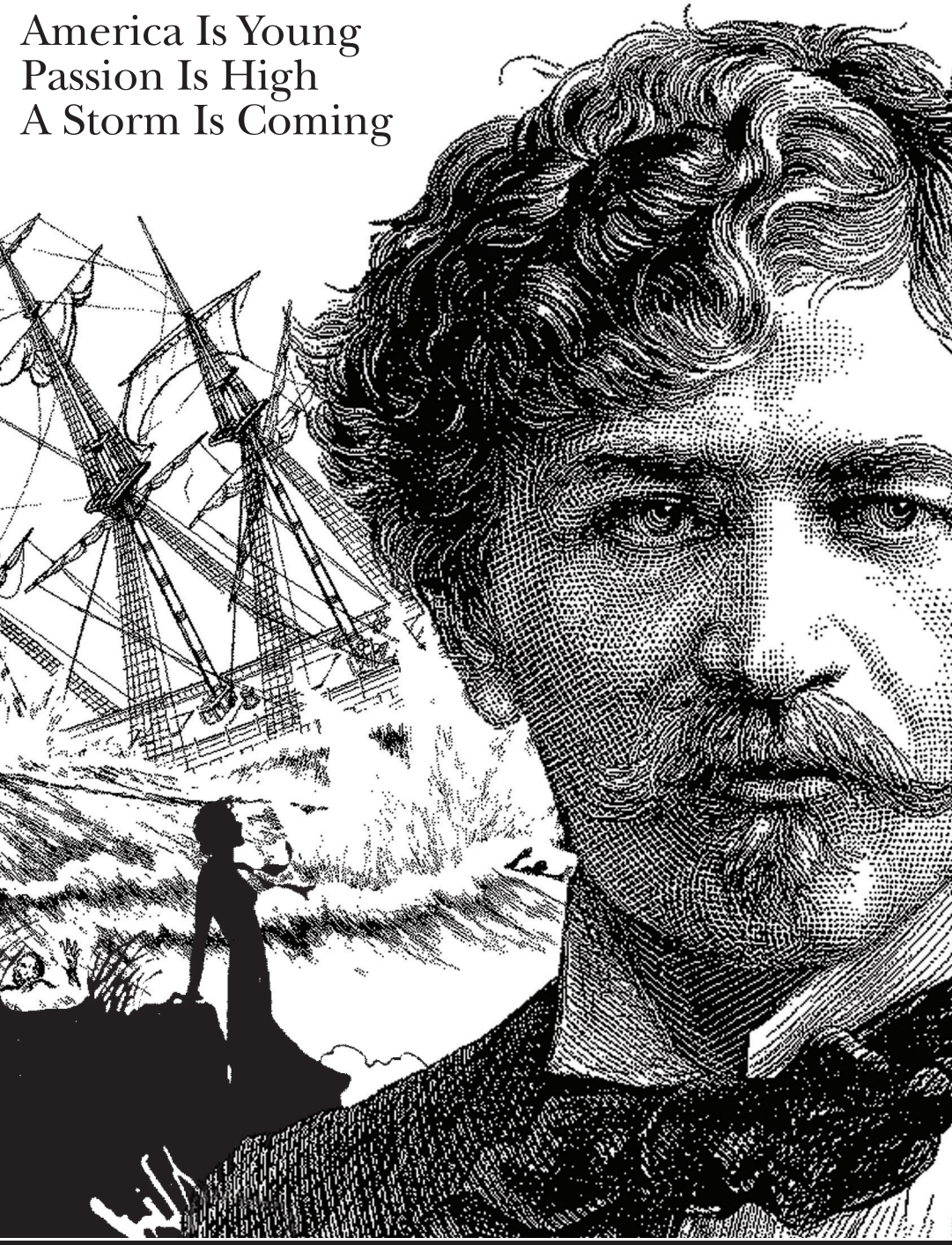
Fire Island

A Novel by

John J. Stevens

America Is Young
Passion Is High
A Storm Is Coming



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Chapter Forty-Nine

The Launch of the Life Boat

Mr. Century," James commanded, "help us off, then stand-to on the beach."

Century was stunned by the command. He belonged in the boat. He was number one. It was because he couldn't swim, of course, and in these seas, *Audacious* would likely capsize at least once, if not several times before the crew would be able to launch her, if at all.

A man who couldn't swim would be a dangerous liability under those circumstances. Yet Century was angry and hurt nonetheless. Shame replaced cold as the predominant sensation in his body.

Listlessly, he donned his cork lifevest along with the other men. His vest though, was ridiculously undersized for his massive frame which only increased his sense of shame. The other men averted their eyes from his, as if they were conspirators in a caper, though, of course, it was James' call, and James' call alone.

"Heave to, men." The crew struggled with *Audacious*, lifting the boat off the cart, and on down the beach. The surf greeted them like a wall of fury. Morale bottomed out when faced with the imminent prospect of launching into the roiling porridge, peppered with an ominous tangle of ice and debris from the wreck.

James picked out a spot in the leeward "shadow" of the

stranded vessel, to take advantage of the slight break in the surf provided by the hulk. It seemed the height of folly to even think of launching a boat into this maelstrom, but James was not to be deterred. He proceeded as if unaware of the odds against him.

"Stand ready, men..."

Abraham Century stood at the stern of the boat, blinking back the frozen rain that pelted his face. He kept his face turned away from the wind, so he could hear James' commands. Jimmy Gilbert, Thomas Mannering and Skull Murphy, looking like pallbearers, manned the port side. On the starboard side were Elijah Slocum, John Barker and Trask, already up to their knees in it. James took his position next to Century at the rear.

"At my command..."

"*Now*!"

The men all pushed at once, and *Audacious* set off nicely. As they had so often during drills, they pulled themselves into the boat at James' command, and soon the boat was fully loaded.

The great challenge of such a launch was to get beyond the breakers as fast as possible. To do so meant keeping the bow headed dead straight into the surf, and having the men pull fast and hard. A little luck couldn't hurt either.

To hit these rollers at even the slightest of angles would spill the boat, dumping everyone ignominiously into the boil.

Not that they could be any wetter than they already were. The crew was incessantly drenched with the icy water coughed up high over the bow as the boat withstood one hammer blow after another from the incoming waves. It froze upon their oilskins as soon as it struck, and hardened to a bitter crackling mail.

James stood tall in the stern, leaning on the rudder. But, as the small boat pitched up and over a wave, the rudder would split the sea, and James would lose control of the steering. He had all he could do to keep the vessel headed into the surf. But, incredibly, the launch was successful in the first attempt.

Trask and the other men pulled and pulled at James' command. Had they ever doubted James' insistence on military discipline, they never would again. Without their focus on their

duty, without obeying their commander, without working as a team, in a moment they would all be swallowed by the sea.

As it was, the little crew seemed puny in the midst of these mountainous swales. But, mercifully, concentrating on their efforts shielded their thoughts from the peril that surrounded them.

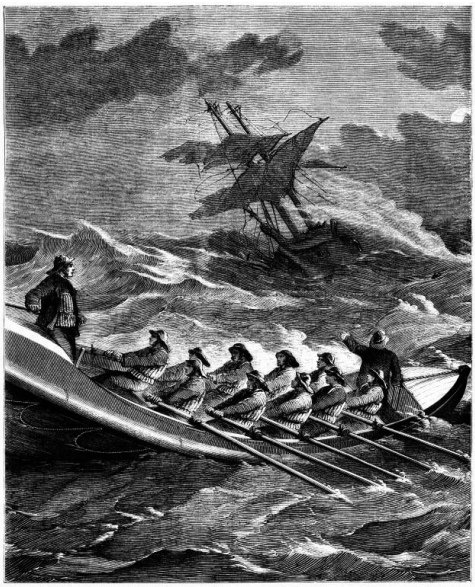
But as the *Audacious* approached the stricken vessel, Trask peered over his shoulder, and lost his nerve. The stranded vessel was a complete catastrophe. His rowing lost rhythm; his arms felt like lead and, worst of all, the image of Josh started flashing through his mind again.

"*Aargh*. I'm getting a bloody blister on my ass!" yelled Gilbert.

And more than one man commiserated. The wet oilskins rubbing against the hard wooden bench of the boat gave the rowers one more reason to wish they were home.

"Almost there, men," cautioned James. "Almost there."

"Look in the masts, sir!" yelled Mannering.



"Port, row. Starboard, lay off."

Dark lumps broke the straight line of the mast silhouette as it cut its harsh swath across the charcoal sky. One of the figures seemed to be waving, though it was too dark to tell if it was an arm gesturing or one of the lines swaying in the gale.

"Port, row. Starboard, lay off," James commanded.

Audacious approached the battered hulk to leeward. James planned on coming between it and the beach, using the sullen vessel as a wind breaker. This strategy would make it easier to keep

Audacious close enough to the wreck to affect a rescue.

Had he chosen to come at the wreck from the windward side, the side of the wreck that faced out to sea, he would expose the crew to a considerable risk – that of having *Audacious* slammed into the grounded vessel upon approach.

Of course the leeward side had its risks as well. A tangled mess of debris dangled from the vessel to leeward like the tentacles of an ornery jellyfish – lines, wooden chucks of the wreck, spars and sails. The chop was littered like a frothy-gray soup.

"Together now. Pull! Pull!"

James cozied *Audacious* to within 25 feet of the boat. Now, 20 feet. Now 15. But there seemed to be no opening in the debris to allow for actual contact.

"*Ciao*!" someone shouted from on-board the vessel "*Sopra qui*!" The man was Italian! For the first time, Trask glanced at the name of the broken vessel - *Nuova Speranza*.

"*Ciao*! *Sopra qui*!"

"Standby. We're coming," James yelled in response.

But the desperate man kept up his call. Over and over again, he hailed the rescue vessel. "*Ciao*! *Sopra qui*!" "*Ciao*! *Sopra qui*!"

The debris in the water clogged the men's oars, making forward progress impossible. Again and again, James attempted an approach without success. At one point, he instructed his men to grab hold of one of the lines trailing from the vessel, and pull the boat in, but *Audacious* nearly capsized in the effort.

James reminded himself that the lives of his crewmembers were at risk, as well as those who still lived on-board the *Nuova Speranza*.

"*Ciao*! *Sopra qui*!"

"Godammit man! I can't stand it. Y're bleating like a sheep!"

Gilbert was standing in the boat now, yelling at the wreck.

"If y' don't shut-up, we'll leave y' here. Then y'll get quiet, 'n' stay quiet fer a long time…"

"Mr. Gilbert, compose yourself," James said.

"Do we have to save him?" Gilbert cracked, as he sat back down. "Sharks have to make a living too, y' know."

"Mr. Gilbert…"

"Who'd know? One quick kick, and he's shark food, and no one's the wiser, *eh*, boys?"

"*Ciao! Sopra qui*!"

"*Aargh*..." Gilbert moaned, and rolled his eyes. "He didn't understan' a single word I said."

The incoming waves had pushed the grounded vessel on her side. Leaning shoreward, her mainmast, the only mast left standing on the vessel, hovered directly over the *Audacious* on her closest approach. The situation spawned an idea in James' mind.

"We're going to attach a line to that mast, and board the vessel that way."

The crew exchanged a sideways glance.

"Mr. Slocum, at my command, toss that line over the cross-spars."

"Starboard...pull, pull. Together now. Pull! Pull!"

Slocum bounced the rope coil in his hand, nervously measuring the weight and resistance of it. He looked straight up at the gothic spire towering overhead. It was a toss of a good 25 feet from a rolling boat, into the teeth of a hurricane wind.

"Stand-by Mr. Slocum. Set your aim. Standby...Let her go…"

With a muscular grunt, Slocum uncorked a mighty heave, propelling the uncoiling rope into the dark sky beyond sight. And, like a magic rope conjured into the air by a magician, the extended rope suddenly pulled taut. It had found its target!

The crew exploded into a round of cheers with Slocum the hero.

John Barker grabbed the far end of the rope, now dangling in the water, and quickly tied a bowline knot. Slocum pulled down on his side of the line, and the bowline traveled up into the darkness toward the cross spar. When it arrived, Slocum pulled taut with his full body weight, and the bowline grabbed tight.

"That's not going anywhere," Slocum announced firmly.

"Trask." The sound of his name coming from Joshua James struck like a blow to his stomach.

"At my command, you're to climb aboard. Bring a line with

you. Make a foothold in it, and tie if off on that spar. You're to lower the survivors into the vessel."

There was no further explanation or discussion. James knew the peril to which he had just put Trask. Yet there was a clear-headed logic to choosing him. Since losing his leg, Trask had developed an abnormally strong upper body, especially his arms. He had made it something of a personal mission to build his strength. As his bunkmates could attest, he could do 200 military style push-ups at a clip. What's more, without a leg, the ratio of his upper body strength to the overall weight of his body was far greater than any other man on the boat. Trask was clearly the right choice for this mission.

Trask lashed a coil of rope to his waist, and, without a word of farewell, clasped the hanging line, and jumped off and away from *Audacious*.

He immediately began swaying and twisting in the wind. But soon, he got his bearings, and, hand over hand, raised himself up into the mast. As he did, he reminded himself sternly not to look down. The churning morass waiting to engulf all falling objects would have chilled the courage of any man.

He grabbed hold of the icy cross-spar with one hand, then two. He hoisted himself up, and slung his leg over the top of it. Down below the men cheered.

Trask lay on the spar for a moment, his chest heaving.

A strange sensation came over him…*Here he was again*! Face down on an icy spar of a floundering vessel just off shore in a hurricane. The odd thought occurred to him that he could have been almost anywhere at that moment – in front of the fire in Cassandra's living room, drinking rum in a saloon on Cherry Street…anywhere. But he was here, now, in great peril, 25 feet from his death. By choice…

Why, he wondered. *Why*?

He saw Josh again, not in his final moments, as was his usual haunt, but staring right at him with an open face and wide eyes.

"Save me," he said.

The sound of his voice was so real. It *was* real. He actually

heard the sound of it…and it frightened him more than looking down.

"Are you OK, Trask?" James shouted from below.

"I'm fine," he shouted down.

"Find the survivors," James yelled.

"OK," Trask said shakily. "OK."

Two men were found alive: the cook, who had been calling incessantly for rescue, and the first mate, though his body was so frozen Trask could barely unwind it from the main mast. Trask found three other bodies. The rest had been washed overboard, or had died in a futile attempt to swim to shore.

The cook stepped into the foothold. He made the sign of the cross on his chest as he was lowered.

"*Grazie Angelo*!" he said, over and over again on his way down.

Trask tied the first mate around the chest and feet. The crew lowered him like cargo into the boat. Expectations were low all around on his chance for survival.

"The rest are dead, sir," Trask shouted to James below.

"Then lower yourself," James replied. "We'll come back for them in the morning."

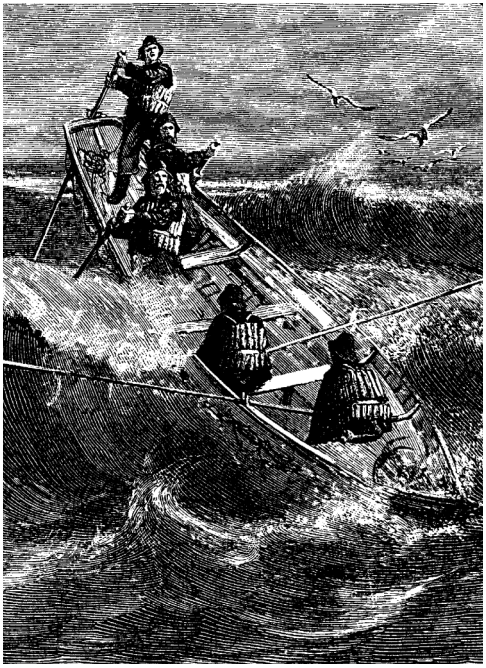
James had done a masterful job keeping *Audacious* in position, but when Trask lowered himself into the vessel, the boat seemed too full by half. Mannering bailed frantically to buoy the vessel.

"Starboard! Pull! Now, together men. Pull!"

But with more bodies in the boat, it became harder to coordinate their efforts at navigation. James tried to stay within the shadow of the wreck, but as *Audacious* moved away, the wave action got heavier. Not more than 200 yards from shore, the vessel blasted into a gray and foam-speckled behemoth that threw the boat like a cork. It remained afloat, but athwart the waves now, the men were defenseless from a broadside.

"Starboard, pull! Port, reverse!" James tried to right the vessel quickly, but the men were shook, and out of sync. The inevitable rose up quickly off the sandy bottom like a black wall, drooling foam from its caps, and loaded with ice chunks of up to 2,000 pounds.

One of the men screamed as they were all jettisoned from their perches into the soapy brew. The wave rammed the boat in after them.

They were lost to each other instantly.

The rescuers suddenly found they were in the unlucky position of requiring rescue themselves…