

## THE ATLANTIC CITY BOARDWALK IN THE SUMMER OF 1975 ISN'T CUTTING 13-YEAR-OLD JOEY A BREAK.

His grandparents' hotel, the St. Bonaventure, is struggling to bring in business. The city is getting more dangerous by the day. And nobody in Joey's large, busy Jewish family will take him seriously. So when he gets a job offer from mobster Artie Bishop, known as the king of Steel Pier, Joey jumps at the chance to prove himself. Artie treats Joey like "one of the guys"—someone reliable and strong.

But running with Artie's crew means deceiving the people he loves most and crossing lines he never questioned before. When Artie asks Joey for a very dangerous favor that puts Joey's family at risk, Joey must decide what strength really means to him and what price he's willing to pay for it.

**"Beautifully written and full of adventure."**

—Chris Baron, author of *All of Me* and *The Magical Imperfect*

**"Everything a great book needs: an engaging main character . . . page-turning adventure . . . and a huge helping of heart."**

—Nora Raleigh Baskin, award-winning author of *The Truth About My Bat Mitzvah* and *Nine, Ten: A September 11 Story*

**"One of the best middle-grade novels I've ever read!"**

—Cindy Baldwin, author of *Where the Watermelons Grow*

**"A fun read from start to finish."**

—Gennifer Choldenko, author of the Newbery Honor book *Al Capone Does My Shirts*

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Advance Praise for  
***THE PRINCE OF  
STEEL PIER***

“An immersive coming-of-age story, beautifully written and full of adventure, that had me cheering for Joey Goodman from the very first page.”

—Chris Baron, author of *All of Me* and *The Magical Imperfect*

“Stacy Nockowitz’s *The Prince of Steel Pier* has everything a great book needs: an engaging main character, a blooming crush, page-turning adventure, and a loving, quirky family that owns a hotel on the delightfully nostalgic Atlantic City boardwalk. Oh, and don’t forget to throw in some just-short-of-too-scary gangsters and a huge helping of heart.”

—Nora Raleigh Baskin, award-winning author of *The Truth About My Bat Mitzvah* and *Nine, Ten: A September 11 Story*

“*The Prince of Steel Pier* deftly blends wry insight with deep heart to explore big questions about strength, faith, and power. One of the best middle-grade novels I’ve ever read!”

—Cindy Baldwin, author of *Where the Watermelons Grow*

“I love the funny voice of Joey/Joseph/Squirt Goodman. (Who wouldn’t fall for a Skee-ball champion with a big heart and a nervous stomach?) I was captivated by Joey’s large lovable family and the authentic rendering of the 1970s Atlantic City setting, complete with gangsters, gangster’s daughters, lucky frog fountains, sinister business, and mysterious packages. A fun read from start to finish.”

—Gennifer Choldenko, author of the Newbery Honor book  
*Al Capone Does My Shirts*





# *THE* **PRINCE OF** **STEEL** **PIER**

STACY NOCKOWITZ

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## ***CHAPTER 1***

### **ST. BONAVENTURE HOTEL ATLANTIC CITY, NEW JERSEY**

***AUGUST 1975***

It's nine o'clock on Friday morning, and Mrs. Goldberg is definitely dead.

We stand around the bed in her hotel room, but Mrs. Goldberg isn't waiting for us to decide what to do next. She died in her sleep. She's just lying there, eyes closed, mouth ajar. She's the first dead hotel guest I've ever seen. Come to think of it, she's the first dead anything I've ever seen, except for bugs. That might explain why I'm shaking.

She doesn't look peaceful, like I thought a dead person would look. More like defeated. Or deflated. She's a balloon with the air let out.

Uncle Sol rubs his chin like he expects there to be a beard beneath his fingers. "And here I thought we were going to get through the whole summer without one

guest dying on us.” The guests at the St. Bonaventure are so old that two or three usually die during the course of a season, but my dad never let me see one before. “Such a shame. Mrs. Goldberg was a good guest. Paid for the whole summer up front. Never missed our Shabbat services.”

“She gave good tips too,” says my oldest brother, Reuben. “Slipped me an extra ten at the end of August in ’73 and ’74. She didn’t have to do that.”

“She looks like a piece of gefilte fish,” my other older brother, Simon, mutters.

Dad glares at Simon. “What’s the matter with you?”

Simon rolls his eyes. Under his breath, he says, “It’s not like she can hear me.”

Uh-oh. Whatever’s in my stomach starts tossing itself around like a bunch of beanbags.

Uncle Sol turns to my brothers. “Pack her things. I’ll go downstairs and make the phone calls.” Reuben and Simon begin moving around the room. Simon pulls Mrs. Goldberg’s suitcases from the closet, and Reuben starts emptying the dresser drawers.

When Uncle Sol pulls the bedsheet over Mrs. Goldberg’s face, I press my hand to my stomach. Why is the room tilting?

Everyone turns and gapes at me.

Oh, wait . . . did I say that out loud?

Dad sighs in his “I knew this would happen” way. He grabs my shoulders and practically pushes me across the room to get me out of there. I notice two dead flies on the carpet by the bathroom threshold. Dead flies and a dead old lady.

A weird, zombie-like groan escapes my throat, and I throw myself at the toilet just in time to puke my guts into the bowl. Perfect. Way to go, Joey. Really impressive. I can’t imagine a worse start to my month down here at the shore.

Someone puts a hand on my back. “You okay, squirt?” It’s Reuben. “Too much for you, huh?”

I answer him by barfing some more.

When I’m sure I’ve emptied myself out completely, I squeeze into the space between the toilet and the tub. I swipe at my face with my shirt sleeve. Great. Shaking, throwing up, *and* crying.

My eyes float over a framed picture on the wall across from where I’m huddled. It’s an old, colorful print of Steel Pier and the Boardwalk and the beach back in the ’30s or ’40s, back when Atlantic City was the most popular vacation spot in the country. The sky in the poster is the color of robins’ eggs, and I press my lips together hard, thinking I’ll never again see the sky that blue, the sand that clean, Steel Pier that golden and glowing. Once you’ve seen a dead body, things don’t look that perfect anymore.

No other guests die over the weekend, but my whole family still tiptoes around me like I'm a hospital patient. They whisper in corners, thinking I can't hear them, but if there's one thing about us Jews, it's that we're not quiet people.

Mom keeps putting her hands on her cheeks and shaking her head. "He could be traumatized for life!" Then she grouches at Dad for bringing me up to Mrs. Goldberg's room.

Bubbe and Zeyde, my grandmother and grandfather, keep telling me to go lie down. That's their response to everything. Skin your knee? "Go lie down." Have a rash? "Go lie down."

At least five times, Reuben says, "I could take him for a slice of pizza."

Uncle Sol thinks he's a doctor. "Give him flat ginger ale. That will settle his stomach."

Even my ten-year-old brother, Ben, has something to say about the whole thing. "I coulda told you that Joey was gonna upchuck when he saw the dead lady. When the next guest dies, I'm going to go look at the body. It'll be good for my acting. Maybe the next part I get will be as a corpse." He rolls his eyes back and dangles his tongue out of the corner of his mouth.

Here's what nobody says: "It's okay, Joey. We know there's a strong, coolheaded guy inside of you somewhere!" Nope. No one says that.

By Monday, I've had it with the adults' nervous glances and Simon's annoying jokes ("Hey, Joey, what's up? Oh, it's your breakfast!"). I'm more than ready to leave my grandparents' house in Margate, which my parents and my brothers and I take over for the month of August, and go back to my nonpaying job as a waiter-in-training at the hotel.

I work the breakfast shift in the dining room with Reuben and Simon. They're seventeen and sixteen, so they're real waiters. They talk to the guests; I assist. This basically means I follow them around the dining room and pick up all the stuff that the guests drop on the floor. The dining room empties out by nine thirty. The guests go off to do whatever it is old Jewish people do in Atlantic City. They'll all be back for lunch at noon on the dot. I don't have to work until the dinner shift, so I have the whole day stretching out in front of me. It's time to get out of here and hit the arcade.

Which means I need some money.

I swing through the lobby, over the scuffed black-and-white tile floor, and past the round, stone fountain with the four ceramic frogs shooting water out of their upturned mouths. I rub one of the frogs' heads, like I

always do, and approach the front desk. Uncle Sol is there working with an adding machine and a ledger. His fingers fly across the keys, and the printed tape spills over the counter and curls in on itself like a ribbon on a present. He wears a red sports jacket and a dark blue tie, so he looks kind of like the guy who does the play-by-play for the Phillies games on TV. A pin on his lapel announces him: *Solomon Broder, General Manager*.

Here we go. Uncle Sol and I fall into the same routine every August. Sometimes he ends up giving me some money, and sometimes he doesn't. But we always start with small talk. I dread this.

"Uncle Sol?"

He glances up for a moment, then returns to his calculations. "Yes, Joey?"

I'm going to ask him some questions I already have the answers to. "Uncle Sol, do you know where my dad is?" It's Monday. Dad's at work back in Philadelphia, which is where we Goodmans live eleven months of the year. In August, when the rest of us are helping out at the hotel, Dad goes to work from Monday through Thursday, and then he joins the rest of us down the shore for the weekend.

"He's at work, Joey. It's Monday." Uncle Sol's shirt is too tight, and I watch his potbelly expand and contract with his breathing.

"Oh, right. I knew that." I pick at some pretend lint on my shirt. Then, "You know where my mom is?" Mom's not here either. She drove Ben to Philly for a TV commercial audition.

He narrows his eyes at me over his glasses, like he's thinking. Even though we both know that we both know the answer. "She took Benjamin to an audition. She'll be back later." Then he gives me his "I'm trying to be patient with you" look. Our shtick is in full swing now. "Joey, do you need some money?"

I pull my kippah off my head and scratch at my mop of curly black hair just to have something to do. "Maybe a little. You know, for the arcade? Skee-Ball or something?"

I know what comes next, and I brace for it.

"Money doesn't grow on trees, you know." Uncle Sol stops pecking at the adding machine. He leans across the front desk on his elbows so his face is close to mine. "The arcade is a waste of money. You know that, right? No return on the investment."

I chew my bottom lip for a moment. "I win lots of prize tickets, though. If I win enough of them, I'll be able to get a really good prize."

He shakes his head slowly. "Like what? Those prizes are all junk."

Uncle Sol isn't married, and he doesn't have any kids. Dad says, "Sol has plenty of money to keep him warm at



night,” but my uncle has lonely eyes. If he wants to act like he’s my father every once in a while, I don’t mind it so much.

“I really want a camera,” I tell him. “I can get a Kodak Instamatic if I win ten thousand prize tickets.”

“And how much money do you end up spending to win all those tickets? Did you ever think about that? What do you want a camera for, anyway? I didn’t have a camera until I was thirty years old.”

This conversation is going south quickly. I don’t have much of an answer for him. I want a camera because I want to take pictures of stuff—my friends and baseball games and bugs and nature. It just seems like a cool thing to do. But *cool* is not a concept my uncle understands. Looks like this is going to be one of those times when I walk away without a cent.

But in an unexpected turn of events, Uncle Sol reaches into his inside jacket pocket and pulls out his billfold. His brow is wrinkled, as if he wants me to know how troubling this decision is for him. He takes out a ten-dollar bill and displays it for me, holding it with his thumbs and index fingers. “This ten has to last you all week, Joey. And you should think about putting some of it aside if you really want to buy a camera.” Uncle Sol would be a good Jewish parent. He really knows how to lay on the guilt.

I nod. “Thanks, Uncle Sol.” And he hands me the ten.

An old man with wisps of powder-white hair appears beside me. “The television in our room isn’t working right.” He has a thick accent, Russian or Polish, like a lot of the guests. “My wife can’t watch her stories in the afternoon if the television doesn’t work.”

Uncle Sol turns his attention to the guest, and I back away from the front desk, the ten-dollar bill heavy in my hand.

But at least that scene is over. Now I have ten bucks, and I’m free for six hours.



The Boardwalk is mostly empty at this time of day. The tourists will start dribbling out onto the boards soon with their gargantuan ice cream cones and their sunburned shoulders. But for now, it’s just me, a bunch of local boys throwing clumsy karate kicks at each other outside of Woolworth’s, and the disinterested seagulls. I have my favorite book, *The Once and Future King* by T. H. White, in one hand and a grocery bag full of my arcade prize tickets in the other hand. I’ve changed into a tank top and shorts, but I’m sweating up a storm just putting one foot in front of the other. I think they said on the radio that it’s going to top a hundred degrees today. I already want a soda.

To get out of this heat, I plan on stepping into every third or fourth storefront and soaking up the air-conditioning. I go into a big sundry store first, and the guy behind the cash register watches me meander up and down the aisles. He leans his body over so I stay in his line of sight as I go from section to section. I put my head down at first, but that might make me look like I'm going to shoplift something, so I end up concentrating too hard on stuff on the shelves in front of me. Now I look like I'm overly interested in suntan lotion.

The guy up front is wearing one of those short-sleeved, button-down jacket things like a pharmacist wears, and he's got his hands shoved in the pockets. He has empty eyes, a long, sunken face, and a needle-thin mustache. If I saw him on the street, I'd probably think *he's* a shoplifter. That or a murderer. He musters every ounce of energy he has just to watch me wander around, and I wonder if he's hiding a knife or something in those pockets.

I go rigid when I hear his creepy, low-pitched voice. "You gonna buy something or what, kid?"

This day is off to a very shaky start. I draw in a deep breath and approach the counter. "Got any cold soda?"

With his chin, he indicates a refrigerator case to his left. All they have in the case is Fanta. I don't drink Fanta because Uncle Sol says it was invented by the Nazis, but I

have no choice at this point. I'm fully committed to buying a bottle of soda in this store now. I sigh and stare at my options: Fanta Grape or Fanta Orange. Does it matter which one I pick? I grab the closest bottle, and Uncle Sol's face flashes across my mind. He's wincing.

When I give the guy the ten-dollar bill, he mutters, "Got anything smaller than a ten?" He mumbles like we're doing something illegal. He's got a cigarette burned almost to the filter sitting in a little blue ashtray next to the cash register. A reed of smoke curls through the air and into my nose. A cough tries to escape, but I shut my mouth tight and just shake my head. He squints at me. "Where'd you get a bill this big?" he asks. "Did you steal this ten?"

I blink at him. I just want my change. And now I need to use the bathroom. "I didn't steal it. My uncle gave it to me. At the St. Bonaventure, a couple doors down. My grandparents own the hotel." He raises one eyebrow. "Well, my grandparents and my uncle. The one who gave me the ten." Where did that come from? Why am I telling this weird guy my life story?

My open palm hovers in the air between us. He takes his sweet time fishing in the register for my change. "I know about that hotel. That's the Jew hotel." He puts the bills on the counter instead of in my hand and drops the coins on top of them.