

PRAISE FOR THE NUBBLE LIGHT
SERIES

“The author has a unique style of writing. She has her story development under control, no matter the twist that she adds at any point... I’d rate it **four out of four stars.**”

— -ONLINE BOOK CLUB

Lee offers skillful plotting that unveils several surprises readers won’t see coming, both in the thriller and romance departments.”

— -KIRKUS REVIEW

“I could see the Nubble Lighthouse in the distance. When the characters walked through the sandy beaches falling in love or experiencing heartbreak, I, too, could hear the music wafting over from the nearby piano bar.”

— -ALLISON NOWAK- REEDSY

“I was so engrossed in this book that I forgot to eat. The suspense it contained is top-notch. I must commend the author for this masterpiece.”

— - ELENDU EKECHUKWU- READER

NEVER IN A BILLION

A NOVEL



STACY LEE



The characters and events in this book are fictitious. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Never in a Billion by Stacy Lee

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For my husband, Paul. You are my one in a billion.



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Of course, I need to thank you, the reader! Thank you for reading my novels and for all of your feedback. It brings such joy to my heart that you are falling in love with the characters just as I have. May you continue to love without hesitation and dream the biggest dreams... Remember, nothing is impossible. There is always a way. I hope you enjoy book three of the Nubble Light Series. Thank you, and God bless!

A NOTE TO THE READER

This is the third book in the Nubble Light Series. The first book, *The Hundredth Time Around*, was published in January of 2021. *Future Plans* is the second book in the series and was released in April of 2021. *Never in a Billion* is the third book, and book four is already in the works! Although each book in the Nubble Light Series can stand alone, I highly encourage you to read them in order, beginning with *The Hundredth Time Around*.

The Nubble Light Series was inspired by my visit to York Beach in 2020. My mother-in-law, Shirley Barbagallo, brought me and my family to visit during what ended up being some of the last months of her life. During this visit, we fell in love with the beaches of York, Maine, Cape Neddick, and the Nubble Lighthouse. Because of this, the Nubble Lighthouse holds a special place in my heart.

Also, please be on the lookout for a special miniseries I am writing for elementary-aged children from the point of view of dogs at daycare. Please email stacybarbagallo@gmail.com or check out Facebook for more information.

PART ONE

PROLOGUE



ONE WEEK BEFORE THE BIG DAY

*D*efinition of never/not in a thousand/million/billion years—

used as a strong way of saying that something is **extremely unlikely or impossible**. —Merriam Webster

IMPOSSIBLE. Such a crummy word. The mere principle of identifying something as extremely unlikely, or not going to happen, disturbs me in ways that are unexplainable. I often come across as overly optimistic, naïve, or even childish at times, simply because I truly believe that nothing is unattainable or unsolvable; there is simply always a way.

Consider the New England Patriots in Superbowl XLIX. My party guests vanished back to the comfort of their own sofas long before the end of the game. Although I insisted that two minutes was plenty of time to pull around, they disagreed, leaving me to witness the greatest comeback of all time unfold before my very eyes—victory.

A simple Google search will reveal concepts throughout history that were once considered impossible. Automobiles, lightbulbs, air

travel, television, and computers for starters. I sometimes chuckle to myself when I think of the satisfaction that must have amounted when award-winning inventors or well-educated scientists stared down their critics with glee and gloated, "Told you so." And what about those that allowed their dreams and greatest desires to be oppressed by others? Imagine the billions of ideas, successes, and relationships that could have been?

So, if that's the case and impossible things can be possible, then why is it that we get so irrationally stuck and paralyzed with fear when we consider what we desire to be unlikely, impossible, or in simpler terms... not going to happen? I, for one, will jiggle that Magic 8-Ball until as I see it, YES, appears in the blue triangle, securing my destiny in my own hands.

What I hope you can take from today's article, dear reader, is never give up hope. Just because the thing (or person, for that matter) you desire seems remarkably out of reach doesn't mean it can't happen. The only thing worse than giving up hope on something you want more than anything... is regret.

"Never in a million years will that happen," you say... never in a billion? Well, my friends, you just might be that one in a billion. Never give up hope.

UNTIL NEXT TIME,

Miss Taken

Xoxoxoxoxo

CHAPTER ONE- NOW



MAGGIE

ONE MONTH BEFORE THE BIG DAY

The familiar click-clack of my black Jimmy Choos against the newly paved parking lot provides an unexpected sense of comfort as the last drop of my morning coffee trickles down. I nod and smile at the familiar faces of my coworkers and stop only to toss my coffee cup in the nearest waste basket. I am already running twenty minutes late this morning, and an overwhelming sense of panic ripples through me. *Today is the day*, I think.

I reach for the metal handle of the front door to Wells Valley Cove and Retirement Center, but it swings open before I even make contact.

“Morning, Miss Thatcher,” Seth greets me.

I roll my eyes and adjust my burgundy Kate Spade tote bag with one hand and fix the collar of my black suit coat with the other. “Seth,” I snarl, determined to avoid eye contact. “We dated for like three years. I’ve told you before—you don’t need to call me Miss Thatcher.”

“Just doing my job, *Miss Thatcher*.”

I cave and unglue my gaze from the floor and make eye contact with him. He smirks at me, and it doesn’t take long

before my insides tingle, and I am immediately sucked into another universe through his irresistible baby blues. *Of course, my ex-boyfriend must be Zac Efron's doppelgänger.* I pause and make a mental note to keep my next relationship out of the workplace. "Have a nice day, Seth," I state politely, just as I have practiced every day for the past three weeks and two days since our breakup.

I squeeze by him, allowing the sides of our bodies to touch, and collect my ash-blond hair awkwardly over one shoulder.

"You look nice today, Maggie."

I stop short and turn toward him; the warmth of his breath against my cheek weakens my knees. I pause, face him again, and wonder if he means it or if he is simply kissing my ass. "Thank you."

He sticks his hands in his pockets and looks me up and down. "Interview day?"

I feel blood rush to my face and pray that he can't see the effect he has on me. "It is," I say, rummaging through my bag and retrieving my favorite berry lipstick. I pop it open and begin reapplying, a nervous habit of mine.

"Maggie, I—" he starts but stops because a family is entering the building and he needs to open the door. I use this opportunity to deposit my lipstick back in my bag and scurry away.

"Welcome to Wells Valley Cove and Retirement Center," he says, his voice fading slowly from a distance.

I retrieve my phone from my pocket and sneak a peek at the time; there are two hours until my big interview.

"Maggie!" he shouts. I stop in my tracks and spin around once more.

I raise my eyebrows, clearly annoyed, and mouth the word *What?*

"Happy birthday!" he hollers.

I shake my head and sigh, annoyed because Seth knows how much I *hate* my birthday. “Thanks, Seth, really.”

“Twenty-eight has never looked so good!”

I cringe and pick up the pace as I hustle down the carpeted hallway toward my office, trying my best to disregard the happy-birthday wishes from those around me thanks to Seth Jenson and his pathetic attempt to win me back. I grasp the brass doorknob and pause for a beat. My lips form into a soft smile, and for some reason, I can’t remember why we broke up in the first place.

* * *

MY FINGERS TAP briskly against my laptop keys as I finish my last email response of the morning. The clock on the upper-right part of my screen is taunting me. My interview is in exactly one hour. I sigh and reach my hands up overhead in a long and extended stretch. I inhale, exhale, and reassure myself that this will be a piece of cake. Although I love my job as director of activities and wellness, it has been my dream to be promoted to an administrator position. My experiences and my time at WVC ensured that I would be a perfect fit for such a position, but until now, I didn’t have the necessary degree to back that up. However, my newly completed master’s degree in the field is sure to seal the deal; the opening as nursing home management and administrator is sure to be mine... I just need to make it through the interview in one piece.

I close my laptop and nervously spin from side to side in my office chair before rising from my seat and checking my skirt for wrinkles and evidence of dog hair in the mirror. I don’t always wear suits to the office, but this is in fact interview day, and my father instilled in me the importance of dressing for success since my kindergarten graduation.

The buzzing of my cell from my mahogany desk startles me, interrupting my thoughts, and I smile when I see a text message from West on my screen. I lean against my desk and swipe open the text.

West: *Happy 28th to my best friend (insert inappropriate shirtless strippers in party hats)*

I smile and shake my head, realizing that he is the only person in the entire world who could wish me happy birthday and live to talk about it.

Maggie: *LOL. Thank you.*

West: *Any big birthday plans?*

Maggie: *Nope. Just here at work, hoping everyone forgets that it's my birthday.*

West: *Don't you have your interview today?*

Maggie: *Yup... soon actually (insert scared emoji)*

West: *You are going to crush it, Mags. You always do.*

I start to type back, but my screen is taken over by an incoming call. Kendra's name appears on my screen, and my heart crumbles. "Not today!" I plead with the universe. "Please, not today."

I shake my head from side to side and answer the phone on speaker, kicking off my shoes before I start to speak. I already know this is bad news because Kendra Ferguson only calls me during the day about lunch—or if Art Young has gotten into trouble again—and it isn't time for lunch.

"Please tell me this isn't what I think it is," I beg into my cell.

"Oh, I *wish* I were calling for your Chipotle order."

"What happened?"

"Art is down at the water, and he is refusing to come in. I can get someone else to handle it, Maggie, you have a big day today. It's just that you told me to always call you first... you know... when it comes to *Art*."

I dash over to the large picture window that overlooks

our private beach and pull back the turquoise curtains. The view from my office is truly breathtaking. The sunlight resonates against the dark surface of the ocean water under almost-cloudless blue sky. When I arrived this morning, it was low tide, the sand extending out for what seemed like miles. But now, the tide is coming in, leaving a significant amount of ocean and very little beach.

“I don’t see him, Kendra,” I groan. “What happened this time?”

Kendra sighs, sounding openly frustrated. “He just really wanted to go to the beach. I explained to him that our day is structured now that he is no longer in independent living... but he just barked at me like he was some kind of... I don’t know... animal or something.”

I shield my eyes from the sunlight with my palm and scope out the area, searching for Art Young, my eighty-two-year-old beach-going fugitive. “I still don’t see him. Are you sure he went outside?”

“Yes, I am sure.”

I switch my gaze from the shore and scan the ocean. Sure enough, Art Young, fully clothed in his khaki pants and Hawaiian shirt, is wading knee-deep in the Atlantic. “What the—”

“What is it?” Kendra asks.

I reach for my bottom desk drawer and grab the flip-flops that I keep for times such as these. “He’s in the freaking water!” I squeal. I toss my suit jacket onto my chair and head out of my office, phone in hand.

“Oh, no, Maggie. Why don’t you let me handle this? Or security, even? You have your interview.”

My hand slides along the banister as my feet flip and flop down the concrete steps. “Because.” I sigh. “It’s Art Young we are talking about. You *know* how important he is to me.”

* * *

I CHECK the time on my cell phone, realizing that I only have forty minutes until my interview. I need to act fast; I fling my cell down on a blue-and-white-striped beach chair and begin rolling up my blouse sleeves. I'm about twenty yards from Art, who is now waist-deep in the water, floating over the waves like a pesky seagull, grinning from ear to ear.

I kick off my flip-flops and call out to him as calmly as I can in this moment. "Nice day for a swim?"

If he hears me, he is choosing to ignore me. I clench my fists by my sides and count to ten before calling to him once more. "Art! You need to come back in! Swimming time isn't until *after* lunch."

I'm not concerned about Art's swimming ability. Not only was he a lifeguard during his prime years, but he was also quite the surfer. I tighten my jaw and shake my head in aggravation. Of course, he can hear me; he is simply choosing to pretend I don't exist. I look around again, searching for signs of WVC Security. If Art gets in trouble with security, he could lose outside time all together or even get kicked out of the facility. *Not on my watch*, I think to myself. I tug my skirt up to my knees and begin to kick through the chilly ocean water. He peeks at me with one eye open and grins again, almost like he has planned this little excursion. "I have my interview today, Art! Why don't you come in, and we can talk about it?"

With this, Art lies down on his back and continues floating. His khakis have become transparent, and I can see the outline of his tighty-whities. His Hawaiian shirt sticks to his skin like a wetsuit, and his thinning silver hair glistens against the early-afternoon sun.

I side-glance over my shoulder and spot a security guard heading our way. I hold up a finger as if to say, *One minute*,

and turn back toward my friend, thankful for the positive rapport I have established with the WVC Security Team. But I know that I only have so long until they, too, will need to follow typical processes and procedures. “Art!” I snap, less patient this time. “You are going to get in trouble again,” I warn like I am scolding a four-year-old child.

Art shoots his eyes open just as larger waves crash over him. “That’s the problem, Maggie,” he barks. “I should be able to come out here whenever I damn well please.”

I nod my head in agreement, attempting with every piece of my soul to empathize with him. Art was one of the first residents at Wells Valley Cove. He came to live at the facility when he was in his early sixties. Back then, he started as an independent-living resident; basically, he was functioning on his own and could utilize whatever amenities at WVC and could come and go as he pleased. That was, until Art started to show signs that he couldn’t take care of himself like he used to. He had fallen in the shower, and it had been almost twenty-four hours before anyone realized. Transitioning into assisted living and needing more care than before was a tough pill for him to swallow. I, too, would struggle with my freedom being ripped away. The idea of needing to ask permission before taking a swim was enough to soften my tough exterior and genuinely level with him. I mean, the guy hurt himself in the shower, not in the ocean. “I know. Why don’t we go talk about it up on the beach?”

“Why don’t we talk about it out *here*?”

I sigh and shimmy my skirt up as high as I can without exposing my rear end to the audience of retirement folk that has gathered on the beach around us—most of them being from the crew that Art was spending most of his time with prior to his transfer to assisted living.

I kick through the waves and shudder as chilly water splashes up around me, but I am no stranger to the sixty-

degree waters of the Atlantic. I cringe anyway, envisioning myself sitting before the interview panel, looking like a drowned rat.

“Hi, Maggie,” Art greets calmly.

I bite my lip and try to hide my aggravation. “What’s going on, Art?”

“Interview today?” He is speaking to me, but his eyes remain closed as he floats over the waves, happy as a freaking clam.

A large wave heads our way, and I turn my back to it, allowing the frigid water to smack my backside and lift my skirt. “Ugh,” I cry out. “I’m trying to help you, Art, but this is ridiculous.”

Art sits up, chuckles, and collapses into an incoming wave. He emerges from the tide and shakes the water out of his silver tresses and frowns. “I should be able to swim *when-ever* I want,” he barks. He sinks into the water and swims back toward me, his long strokes those of an Olympic athlete, not of a man in his early eighties.

“Okay,” I respond. “Like I said, we can talk about it on the beach. Maybe... maybe I can even talk to my father about it.”

I hate to play the dad card, but there is no better time than the present. My father, Gary Thatcher, purchased WVC back in 1999. He is known throughout the Maine community for one thing and one thing only: investing in and remodeling one of the most successful retirement communities and nursing homes in New England. Not only did he purchase the land and the original facility, but because of the large sum of money my grandparents left him in their will, he was able to invest in the project on his own, creating a luxurious and affordable way for the southern Maine folk to retire together, by a place dear to their hearts—the ocean. The truth is, however, that he won’t have much leverage when it comes to Art’s privileges. I

know this because it won't be the first time I bring up Art Young with my father.

Art hesitates for a moment and studies me carefully. "We go way back, you and me," he reminds me, his tone solemn and steady.

"Yes, we do."

"Don't you remember what I taught you? All those years ago?"

I examine him closely, and for a moment, I am not twenty-eight-year-old Maggie Thatcher anymore. I am a naïve and vulnerable seventeen-year-old girl, a troublemaker who got caught up with the wrong crowd. Standing before me is Art, my friend and mentor, and I realize that although this whole situation is silly, he isn't entirely wrong. Art should be able to go to the beach whenever he damn well pleases. Art needs the ocean like most people need air. "Yes," I state firmly. "I remember what you taught me."

"Then why, after all this time, do you need a new job? Why would you leave the activities department? Why would you leave *me*?"

My heart all but shatters into a million pieces as I realize that this isn't about Art and his recreational swimming restrictions; this is about *me*. Art is afraid of losing me. This isn't completely a surprise, as I understood that taking a position on the admin team would, in fact, mean less time with the residents. But I made a promise with myself to stay connected with them, even if I'm not directly involved with their daily living situations.

"You are a *people* person, Maggie. They are going to lock you up in a cubicle and put you on the Zoom all day. You know that, right?"

I chuckle at his comment as I wade through the icy water and take his hand in mine. "The Zoom doesn't scare me." I laugh. "Art, I'm not leaving WVC. I will still be working—"

Art holds his free hand up, stops me midsentence, and grins like a child up to no good. "Swim with me, Maggie," he pleads. "Swim with your old pal Art."

Something about the urgency in his voice causes me to plop down next to him without hesitation. My body temperature is finally regulating, but now the water is causing my new and very expensive skirt to float up over me like a parachute. But Art is right. As I lay my head back, allowing my hair to flow freely over each breaking wave, an unexpected sense of peace surrounds me. Art Young has a way of reminding me who I am and where I come from. If he needs me to swim with him, then, well... I am going to swim.

We lie there, Art and I, floating for what feels like hours but is probably just minutes, and I am reminded of some of the life lessons and principles he has taught me over the years; suddenly, my job interview is the farthest thing from my mind... which is good, because I don't have anything to wear.

"Hey!" A familiar voice jolts me back to reality, and my eyes snap open in surprise. "Nice day for a swim, or what?"

Standing over me is the tall and handsome figure of West Young. I shriek, unable to believe my own eyes, forgetting for a second that I am swimming in my interview clothes. I carefully remove my hand from Art's as he struggles to rise to his feet. My attempt to stand fails, and after two awkward steps backward, I am trapped in an incoming wave. My skirt puffs up around me once more as I flounder to regain my balance, wiping the water out of my eyes with my fingers. My vision is blurry, but when he comes into focus—his brunette hair, dark eyes, athletic build, boyish grin... I realize I'm *not* dreaming. West has come home.

"What are you doing with my grandfather?" he chuckles.

"West! West! Is it really you?" I shriek.

"Westly," Art stammers. "Westly, you're supposed to be in

Arizona.”

West kicks through the waves, grabs my waist, and picks me up, allowing my toes to tickle the surface of the water. I wrap the soaking-wet sleeves of my blouse around his neck and kiss the side of his cheek as pure happiness floods my soul. “You’re really here!”

“I’m really here.”

“What are you doing here, Westly?” Art asks through his laughter.

West puts me down and turns toward his grandfather, drawing him close in a tight embrace. “I had to see my best friend Maggie on her twenty-eighth birthday,” he explains, turning to me and winking in the charming way he often does.

“It’s your birthday?” Art asks, mouth gaping wide.

“Yes,” I say, gathering my blond tresses into my palm and squeezing the water out. But it has been years since West has come back to New England. Surely, he is not only here for my birthday. “But that *can’t* be why you flew across the country.”

I canvas his eyes for answers but come up empty. He sticks his hands in his back pockets and hesitates for a beat. “Catch up after work?”

I’ve known West long enough to know he has something important to tell me, and my stomach flips in a way I hadn’t expected. “Yes,” I affirm, turning toward Art. “But can we get out of the water now? I have an interview I need to get to.”

West looks from me to his grandfather and back again, his eyes wide. “You haven’t had your interview yet?”

I smile and throw my hands out by my sides. “Nope.” I laugh because there is really nothing else to do but that.

“Yes.” Art nods. “We can get out now, Maggie. But only because it’s your birthday. Why didn’t you tell me that in the first place?”