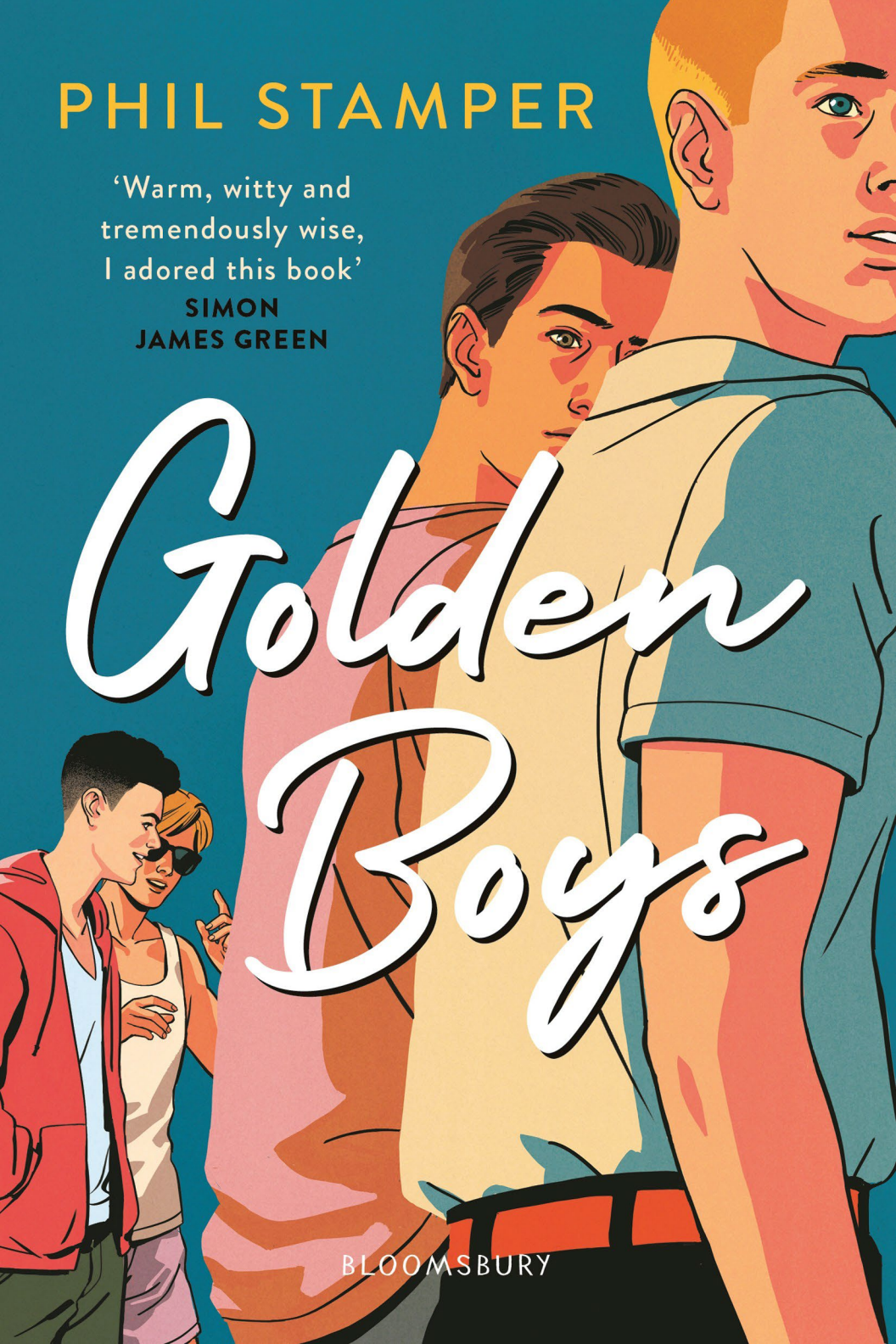


PHIL STAMPER

'Warm, witty and
tremendously wise,
I adored this book'

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To teenage Phil, who was always looking for himself on the shelves. A little late, but you're here now.



CHAPTER ONE

GABRIEL

BEING THE BIG SPOON is such a chore. Don't get me wrong, it's nice having Sal curl into me. The warmth coming off his body is calming. My heartbeat thrums through my chest, but I feel my heart rate slow.

Breathing is a bit awkward, though. First, his lightly tousled blond hair keeps getting in my mouth. Second, it's like I can see my hot breath curl around his neck—is it uncomfortable for him? How fresh *is* my breath, exactly? And how does Sal not worry about all this when our roles are flipped.

Mentally, my body's suspended in this kind of light, peaceful state. Physically, I'm *sweating*. We've kicked off the blankets, but not even the constantly running air-conditioning his mom insists on can combat this heat wave. My left arm is fully asleep, and I'm not sure where to put my other one. Right now, it's draped awkwardly around him, rising and falling slowly with his breath.

Every time I shift my body, my skin peels lightly away from his. Normally, this is when I'd call it quits and roll over, but if this is the last time . . .

I can't think about it. So I think about him.

He seems comfortable and safe in my arms, in his bed, in his house. His confidence claims ownership over everything in his sphere, and sometimes I feel like I'm pulled into that, even if we're not actually, officially a thing.

Something in the way he softly presses his hips into mine and arches his neck back reminds me he's in control of this situation, even as the little spoon.

I place my lips on his neck, then give it a playful bite. He laughs and jerks his head away from mine.

Sometimes it feels good to remind him that, of all the things that are his, I am not one of them.

"What's up?" Sal asks, rolling over to meet my gaze. Our foreheads touch, and a smile pulls at my lips. My breaths grow longer, smoother. "You're stiff today."

I arch a brow, which prompts him to say, "Ugh, not like that. I mean it, though. Are you worried?" he asks. "About this summer?"

"I'm worried about a lot of things," I admit. But it doesn't exactly take a mind reader to figure out what worry is at the top of my list. "Don't get me wrong, I'm excited to volunteer with them. And it'll look great on my transcript. And I'll help save the trees, which is cool."

Sal pulls me in for a kiss. "Are you worried you'll miss me too much?"

“Right,” I say with a laugh. As much as I do love this thing we’ve had going on for years, I don’t love *him* like that. “We could probably use the time apart anyway. Give me a chance to find a boy who doesn’t consider political commentary to be pillow talk.”

“Ah. I see. You want the good stuff.” He pulls closer to me, and the chills fly up my back and settle uneasily into my shoulders. “Don’t make me use my secret weapon.”

“Oh my god, don’t!” I shout, slapping him away while holding in a laugh. But he leans into me. His voice drops to a whisper, and his breath on my ear sends shivers down my whole body. I pull up the blanket, despite the heat. “*Où se trouve la station de métro la plus proche?*”

My heart plummets into my stomach, and I hate myself for being so basic. I mean, he’s saying nonsense he picked up from French III, I know this. *But*. He says it so directly, so boldly, that I almost see myself falling for him in a real way.

“*God*, why didn’t I end up taking French?” I say. “What the hell are you even saying?”

“Oh, you know, romantic stuff.” He clears his throat. “*Je voudrais acheter un billet.*”

Despite myself, I shudder. “Sounds pretty romantic,” I say dryly.

“Ms. Brashear always said I had the best accent of the whole junior class. Reese hated that, but maybe he’ll pick up the accent after living there this summer. A few of us might get to go on a trip to Paris next year for French IV, so I’ve got to keep practicing. Wouldn’t that be freaking awesome?”

“Wow. The Village of Gracemont, Ohio. Taking over Paris.” I pause. “I kind of feel sorry for them.”

He laughs, and I do too. But when the laughter stops, an unsettling silence replaces it. Without thinking much of it, I roll away and stare at Sal’s room. It’s so tidy you’d think he doesn’t have any stuff. But there’s hints of his personality throughout the space. A ring light and a selection of makeup in one corner. A tie rack filled with bright bow ties, most with price tags still attached. A large desk with a spinning chair and laptop, adorned with academic medals, trophies, and one term paper. He’s got his good grades pinned to a corkboard like he’s his own proud parent.

“I’m excited to go to DC this summer,” Sal says. “But I’m almost more excited for you to go to Boston. For Reese’s design school in Paris. Heck, even for Heath to get to Daytona.”

“Heck?”

“An upstanding young gentleman never curses.”

Simultaneously, we roll our eyes. He’s quoting his mom right now—she was bad before, but she pivoted to full helicopter mode the moment he got the call about his summer internship with Senator Wright.

He reaches around and pulls me into him, and a rush of calmness floods my body. He never wants to be big spoon, so I savor every moment. “I mean it, about all of us. We’ve been inseparable for years, but . . . there’s only so much we can do here, you know? Mom’s always pushed me to do this kind of stuff. She was always making time to take me away from here, to show me what life is like outside Gracemont. She even opened this particular door for me, by helping me get this internship. I know I can pick up where

she's left off and turn this into my life." A darkness fills the silence. "We need to get out of here."

"That's so easy for you to say." I push back. "You're comfortable in big cities, you fit in everywhere. Nothing scares you." I don't mention that he also has the money to do these things, while my parents are eating into their savings to send me to Boston. "But it's hard for me to even think about. I want your confidence, you know?"

"You still *did it*, Gabe. You have to be confident and brave to make these plans—to apply, to tell your parents, to actually commit to this bonkers save-the-trees passion. You saw the opportunity, and you said yes. That's brave. Don't let your anxiety overshadow everything you've already done."

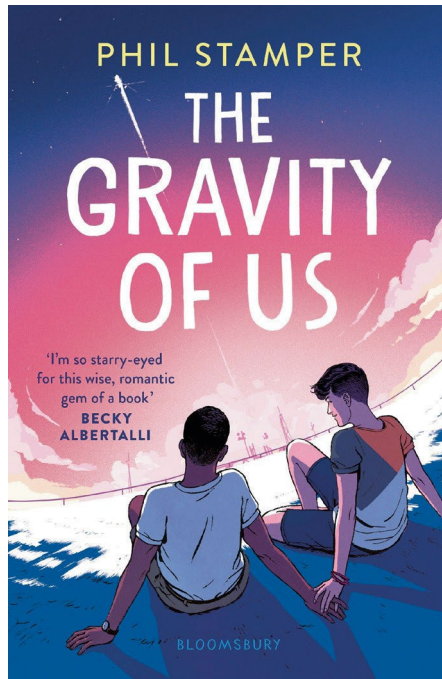
I sigh, long and slow, as he holds me tighter. "I keep thinking of all the people I need to impress, all the crowds I have to deal with. I'm going to hate Boston, I know it. Seriously, what the 'heck' did I get myself into?"

He laughs, then mumbles something about how I'm going to do great. He's so casual with how he holds me right now. His sticky body is pressed to mine, and he's not even doing anything, but his intensity still radiates. It's addictive . . . his energy, his confidence, his drive.

He's always striving for more: better grades, more accolades for his desk, but he's somehow as content with me as I am with him. I can't help but think we both deserve better than content, though. So, maybe this summer apart will be good for us.

He holds me close, and I breathe him in. I ignore the part of me that never wants him to let go.

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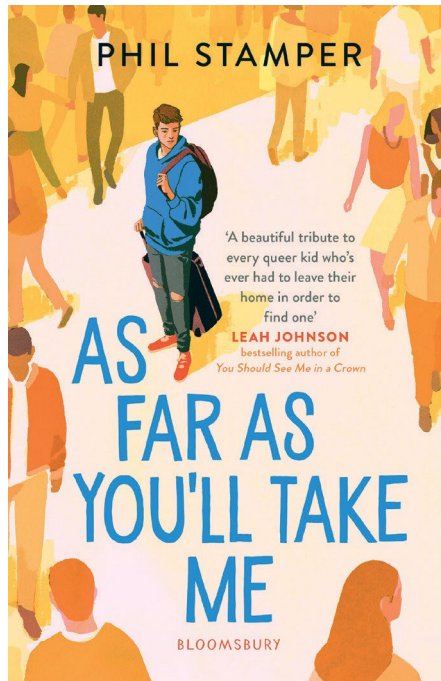
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