

Afterglow

Books by Phil Stamper

The Gravity of Us
As Far as You'll Take Me
Golden Boys
Afterglow

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To Caitlin.

A thousand thank-yous doesn't come close.

• The Story So Far •

GABRIEL + HEATH + REESE + SAL

Activity time!!!!

Aaaaat the risk of being too sentimental... give me one rose and one thorn of the whole summer.

G

aw gabriel's getting sappy!!!

thorn: coming back from Daytona to a new apartment, my parents divorce being final, and no longer living on a beach

rose: coming back from Daytona with a hot new boyfriend

(thats you reese)

(in case you needed the clarification)

H

also! reconnecting with my cuz diana was great

To be fair you did kiss multiple boys in Florida so I appreciate the clarification 😬

R

That's my thorn. Lots of roses though... I loved learning how to sew, I think my designs got way better in Paris, also, you know, I got to live in Paris which is objectively the coolest of the cities we all went to.

Hey, Boston was fun! My rose was learning I could actually make friends who aren't you guys. I wasn't sure I could do it lmao. My thorn is coming back and still having 6.5 months before I find out if I got into Ohio State.

G

S

Pro: I figured out I really do like politics ... just not DC politics. Con: My spectacular breakdown.

its roses and thorns not pros
and cons

H you have no whimsy

Special bonus rose that
we're all still friends after
that wild summer. But also
a thorn because we weren't
really great at keeping up
with each other.

And that kinda scares me,
since this is probably our
last year living in the same
town... ever.

G



CHAPTER ONE

REESE

OCTOBER'S ALWAYS BEEN MY favorite month. There's a hint of change all around me—the breeze becomes slightly cooler, the trees change color, my allergies finally chill out, and high school football season gets into full swing.

Well, okay. That's a Heath thing. For me, that means high school football *concessions stand* season starts, and I get to have cheesy fries every Friday night.

After leaving Paris this summer, I came back with a strange new set of responsibilities. As the overall art guru, I've already been put in charge of designing this year's prom. I have a whole new set of classes, each of them more challenging than the last. Also, for the first time in history, I get to play the role of boyfriend.

I'm someone's boyfriend, I think as I slip on a chunky knitted sweater. I'm Heath's boyfriend!

Outside, I hear the crunch of gravel followed by three sharp

beeps, Heath's code for *I Love You*—specifically, code for “I love you but will not be coming up to the door to pick you up.”

I throw on my shades, say my goodbyes to Mom and Mamma, then walk out the door into the fading sun.

From the moment I step into his truck, the scent of Heath's deodorant hits me, and I know that if I were standing, I'd go weak at the knees. It's marvelous and ridiculous and dangerous the power this perfect boy has over me.

“Mi amor,” he says, in a bad French accent, in place of hello.

I cringe. “I think you mean *mon* amour?”

He winces. “Ah, right. Guess that's what I get for trying to impress my well-traveled boyfriend.”

“Yet, somehow, I'm *still* attracted to you,” I say, flipping my scarf over my shoulder.

As we make our way to the high school, we talk like that—inside jokes and conversation that wouldn't make a bit of sense to any passersby, in our own language. Two months in, everything with Heath still feels new and tentative, but simultaneously old and safe.

I look at him, but his eyes are fixed on the road.

“What're you thinking about?” he asks.

“Honestly? How this still doesn't feel real. You and me.” I pause. “After all this time.”

He pulls the truck to a stop and grips me smoothly under my arm. He pulls me toward him while leaning in, and our lips meet. It's a quick kiss, but it's firm too. It tells me one thing: *I'm here, and I'm not going away.*

“Did that feel real?” he asks.

My lips still tingle. “It’s feeling realer by the second.”

“Good,” he says, giving me a beaming smile.

We drive the rest of the way in near silence, until we start to approach the school. Through the open windows of the truck, I hear faint echoes of our fight song being played by the band, and as we pull into the parking lot, I hear the commotion of the crowd. Their energy gets absorbed into me, and my heart rate spikes in excitement.

Gabriel, Sal, Heath, and I have been so busy since the school year started. Heath with weight training, Gabriel with his new LGBTQ+ Advocacy Group, and Sal with student council, that some days even our group chat falls into silence.

But at the homecoming game tonight, the four of us will be inseparable.

• • •

Heath and I walk into the field hand in hand, and I observe my surroundings keenly. In Paris, no one would’ve batted an eye at us, but in Gracemont, Ohio? Things are a little different here.

We pass a ton of people, parents I know, old teachers, I even give a polite smile to the middle school janitor. Her eyes flick to our clenched hands before meeting my gaze, and as I feel my breath get stuck in my throat, she gives me a look that can be only interpreted as: “*oob la la!*”

I blush and lead Heath toward the bleachers.

“The guys are over there, but I’ll catch up with you in a

second,” Heath says, walking backward and pointing to a few of his baseball friends. “Gonna say hi to them first. Want anything from the concessions when I come back?”

Cheese fries, I answer in my head. But then I remember that if I get them now, I’m going to also get them in the third quarter when I start to get bored, and my stomach is going to hurt.

“Just a Sprite?” I say unconvincingly.

He narrows his eyes. “Right. Cheesy fries and a Sprite, coming up.”

I head up to the bleachers, and the cool breeze on my freshly un-held hand makes me kind of miss Heath. I shake my head. After all that yearning, actually having someone plays with your brain just as much, and I curse my silly little brain for being so cliché.

“Reese!” Gabriel shouts as he comes down the stairs, phone in hand. “Say hi to Matt!”

I lean back against the chain-link fence, a little disoriented, as I force a smile and wave to the guy on the other side of his Face-Time call.

“Sal’s up there,” he says. “I’ll be back in a second, service is terrible.”

I wade through the crowd, eventually spotting Sal looking bored out of his mind, scrolling some sort of social feed, his face softly reflecting his phone light. I squeeze past a couple of first years and take a seat next to him, nudging him softly with my shoulder.

“Reese,” he says. “Where’s Heath?”

“With his baseball friends,” I say. “Why’s Gabriel choosing right now to FaceTime his boyfriend?”

“They’re in love, or something.” Sal just shakes his head.

The two of us sit there, not really talking, just scrolling our Instagram feeds. While everyone around us is clad in school hoodies, varsity jackets, and the rare T-shirt and shorts combo of the midwestern teen who swears he’s “never cold,” Sal’s in a button up and slacks, and I’m in a fashionable sweater and jeans.

“Do you ever get the feeling we don’t really fit in here?” I ask finally.

He sighs. “Every single day.”

We sit in silence after that, while the crowd around us comes to life. We go through the motions, standing for the national anthem, cheering as our team receives the opening kickoff and charges toward the 40-yard line, singing the fight song.

Eventually, Sal nudges me. There’s a smirk on his face when I turn to him, but his gaze is focused on something in the distance. Gabriel and Heath, laughing, push their way through the crowd to get to us, giant sodas and mountains of cheesy fries clenched precariously in their grasp.

They take their seats by us, and for as “othered” as I felt minutes ago, it really feels like home when Heath hands me my soda and puts his arm around me. Gabe instantly launches into a story about how his sister was able to sneak booze into an Ohio State game, and we listen intently between bites of food and the random obligatory cheer.

For so many years, the four of us actively rejected activities

like this, but now that our days here are numbered . . . it's like we all feel this drive to make the most out of this year.

Gabriel and Sal are laughing about something so hard it looks like their eyes are starting to water. Meanwhile, Heath tries to feed me a cheese-covered fry, and drips a little on my lips—maybe on purpose—and uses that as an excuse to kiss my lips clean.

So many things changed this summer, but the four of us fall right back into the rhythm we've had since preschool. I might feel out of place in Gracemont, Ohio. But right here, surrounded by my friends, I wonder how I ever felt like I didn't belong.