THE GRAVITY OF US

PHIL STAMPER

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY YA
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY YA and the Diana logo
are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in the United States of America in 2020 by Bloomsbury YA
First published in Great Britain in 2020 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Text copyright © Phil Stamper, 2020

Phil Stamper has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying,
recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without
prior permission in writing from the publishers

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-1994-5; eBook: 978-1-5266-1993-8

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Westchester Publishing Services

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters.



CHAPTER 1

At home, I'm invisible. At school, I'm bizarre. But to the rest of the world, I'm a journalist.

I get this specific feeling—a tug in my gut, a hitch in my breath—every time I craft a news story, open the FlashFame app, and broadcast live to my 435,000 followers.

When I step off the Q train at the Times Square stop and shoulder my way to the exit, I take a moment to collect my thoughts. I pull in a hearty breath and smile. Holding the phone in front of my face, I go over the plan in my head for my weekly New York City update. What to cover, where to walk.

"Hiya!" I shout into the phone and smirk as the commuters behind me dash out of view. "I'm Cal, and welcome to my weekend update. New York's been slow on the news front—murders and Amber Alerts, all normal stuff—but in national news, one thing is a standout: the search for the twentieth and final astronaut to be added to the Orpheus project."

In the front-facing camera, I see the city scroll by in a mass of billboards, shops, cabs, and bikes. I try not to show the strain in my smile, and remind myself that even the most seasoned reporters have to report on what their viewers want to hear most. And according to my comments, there's no contest: people want to know the latest. It's not like I'm surprised—it's all anyone can talk about right now. Six humans will be setting foot on Mars, and it's ignited an interest the space program hasn't seen in decades.

"The astronaut in question will be chosen in the coming weeks, after which they will relocate to Houston to vie for a spot on the Orpheus V spacecraft, the first crewed mission to Mars."

If this performance doesn't win me an Emmy, I will throw a fit. You ever tell someone you're overjoyed by something, when secretly you'd rather vomit in a bucket than talk about it anymore? That's me with the Mars missions. I hate the hype.

However, people are so wrapped up in the drama around this Mars mission, you'd think it was the latest *Real Housewives* installment. Therein lies my dilemma: Do I want to report on things people care about? Yes. Do I want more followers and viewers? Also yes.

"A representative of StarWatch spoke about the search today," I continue, "but the cable gossip network didn't offer any new information about the candidates."

After my brief, obligatory NASA report, I bring the stream back to New York City by offering recommendations for the

biggest events of the weekend: parties, farmers' markets, and everything in between. All while watching the live viewer count climb.

I've done local stories, national stories, worldwide stories before. I covered a full midterm election year, attending rallies for Senate and House candidates in the tristate area, even the severely inept ones who thought microwaves gave you cancer.

I used to feel helpless every time I opened up my news aggregating app, but reporting gave me a platform for my voice, and that resonated with people.

While cable news angled stories to fit their followers and pushed sensational bullshit—*Is Trump homophobic? We interviewed this homophobic Trump voter to get his thoughts!*—my reports covered the *real* news. Raw and unbiased.

Like when the Republican candidate for New York senator fell off the grid and refused to debate or see the press until election night . . . but had no problem attacking his opponents on Twitter. One day, it slipped that he'd been seen in the city, so *I* slipped out of school and waited outside the restaurant where he was.

I started incognito with my phone in my chest pocket and asked him some light questions. He obliged, until I brought up his pending embezzlement investigation, charges of sexual harassment, and the recent staffing shakeup that could have been related to either.

In the end, I chased his limo up Fifth Avenue, where he cursed me—and the fifty thousand viewers—out, live.

Needless to say, he did not win the election.

Nowadays, I carefully plan my videos for the week. National news updates one day, a focus on teen issues another, with a few personal stories sprinkled in. Then, there are my NYC updates. Even if they don't get the most views, these streams are my favorites. It's me, the city, and quadrillions of New Yorkers and tourists in the background.

The front-facing camera starts to show just how much the humidity is taking a toll on my once perfectly coiffed hair, and if I don't sign off soon, I'll look like a frazzled maniac.

"Wow, I guess there was a lot to talk about, because"—I flip away from the front-facing camera and give my viewers a panoramic shot of my surroundings, and the tall buildings on all sides blend into a mix of brick and concrete—"we're already at Thirty-Eighth and Broadway."

These updates always start at the northern tip of Times Square, and I usually just walk down Broadway until I run out of things to say, or until my voice starts to crack. And even in the latter case, I've been known to subject my viewers to the true New York experience: buying a seltzer on the street—after haggling the price down to a reasonable amount, of course.

"And that's all I've got. Keep an eye on my FlashFame story to see why I'll be scouring the streets of the Lower East Side." I flash a smirk as I end the transmission, and release a deep sigh as I shed my journalistic brand.

I catch the F train at 34th toward Brooklyn, which is about the only way to get to the Lower East Side from where I'm at. The flair of the city dims as tourists block the subway doors, as

the train stops between stations for three minutes at a time, as the air-conditioning breathes lukewarm air down my neck.

The notifications roll in from my video, which was watched live by around eighty thousand people. But somehow, FlashFame knows which comments to highlight, specifically the one that will slash deepest into my heart.

JRod64 (Jeremy Rodriguez): Love this! ❤

How long does it take to get over someone you barely even dated? The irony of him "loving" my posts when he couldn't even commit to "liking" me is at the forefront of my mind, and a rage burns inside me.

The anger ebbs as I walk the streets of the Lower East Side, where the tall buildings of midtown have disappeared, replaced with short brick apartments with fire escapes, towering over everything from abandoned bodegas to artisan vegan bakeries. I double-check the address and take the stairs down into a dark, windowless shop.

"Jesus, Calvin, there you are," Deb says. She always uses my full name. She full-names everyone but herself, really—but that's because she says Deborah is a grandma name. "I've been in this store since you signed off, and the owners of this cassette shop *really* like to talk about cassettes, and I didn't have the heart to tell them I was only here to be your cassette wingwoman. I think they know I'm a fraud."

"I would pay to see you pretending to be a cassette fangirl." The thought makes me laugh.

"It's not hard. I just repeated the bullshit you say—'the sound is much smoother' or whatever. It was going fine until he asked me the model and year of my boom box."

I browse the collection while Deb impatiently waits behind me. I promised her a vegan doughnut—or twelve—from the bakery across the street in exchange for making the trip to browse cassettes with me. Unfortunately, nothing here catches my eye.

I raid a few tapes from the dollar bin based on their covers alone—guys with beautiful, flowing eighties hair, movie soundtracks with old VHS-style covers—and unironically pay for my retro tapes using my iPhone.

"Finally," Deb says as she busts out of the record store. "That place was weird. You're weird."

"I'm well aware of both, thanks."

We meander through the Lower East Side, which isn't all that different from our neighborhood in Brooklyn. Okay, it's a little bit dirtier, and there are fewer toddlers getting in my way, but otherwise, I see the similarities.

"I love this area," Deb says.

"Yeah, it's okay for things like that random pop-up cassette shop," I say with a shrug. "I hear they're putting in a Trader Joe's here."

"Jesus," she swears. "Of course they are."

We duck into a tiny bakery with no more than five stools of seating. The two bakers are cramped behind the counter, and I start to get claustrophobic on their behalf. But as I look around, I see glimpses of the neighborhood in notices plastered

on the walls. Yoga classes, babysitting offers, piano lessons, writers' groups. Panning out, I see protest signs, queer pride flags of all varieties, old campaign stickers from the past couple of elections.

New York has a way of making you feel at home, no matter where you're at. You just have to step off the street, and some neighborhood will claim you as one of their own.

"Exactly how do you make a vegan lemon curd?" Deb asks, fascinated, and I realize I'm missing her in *her* element. Before the baker can even answer, she rambles on. "This place is amazing. I'm going to get a dozen, but I think I want literally one of each flavor. Is that too much?" she asks no one in particular.

I'm a vegetarian, but she's a full-on vegan, and she's in heaven. Vegans get a bad rap, but Deb's always been down-to-earth about it. She embraces it, but not to the extent where she's treating it like a cult.

This also means we *have* to go to every new vegan restaurant, bakery, pop-up, and festival the moment it opens, and I am not complaining about that.

"You're sharing these with me, right?" I ask.

"Oh dear sweet Jesus in heaven," she says after biting into a doughnut. "Not if they're all as good as this lemon curd."

We take our time walking toward Brooklyn, with no real destination in mind. It's too far to walk all the way, but it's a surprisingly nice day, and I'm not in a rush. I *know* Deb's not.

"You shouldn't have paid for these," Deb says. "I have a job, dude. You don't need to jump in and save me anymore."

I blush. "I know, it wasn't that. But I left you alone in that

cassette pop-up, so defenseless you had to pretend you were one of us to fit in. The horrors you must have overcome. This is the least I can do."

What I don't say is, I know she's saving every penny from her job. Deb works harder than anyone I know. If I could fix her home life, I would. But until we can flee our respective coops, all I can do is pay for her sugar high.

"One World Trade. We're approaching tourist central," I say. "I'll take a few pics for my Flash story, then we've got to get a train."

The sun's nowhere to be seen, but a series of low clouds pass by, getting split in two by the shining tower. It's a perfect New York afternoon, but I feel the tug in my chest that reminds me what's waiting for me at home. As we hop on a train and make half smiles at each other, I can tell we're thinking the same thing. There's a pretty high chance that one or both of our nights are about to be ruined by our parents.

— ——

We make it back to Brooklyn in record time. Anxiety grips my chest as I take the stairs up our stoop, and I know Deb usually feels the same. To be quite honest, I would have been fine spending a few more minutes delaying the inevitable awkward conversations and heated fights that wait for me at home. Not like the arguments are ever directed at me, but they're still all around me. Lingering.

Wearing our family down.

I part ways with Deb at the third floor of our apartment

building, and a tightness balls up in my shoulders—clenching, constricting—when I launch up the stairs to my apartment, taking them two at a time. Before I even reach my door with the shiny 11 on it, I hear the shouts.

It wasn't always like this.

I put the key in the lock, and with a heavy sigh, I turn it.

A frown falls over my face almost instantly. I slam the door to make my presence known, but it doesn't fix things, it doesn't stop them. I want my being home to *mean* something. I want . . . I don't know what I want—to not feel helpless when they're like this. I try to escape into my phone, but my notifications are once again flooded with questions about . . . the astronauts.

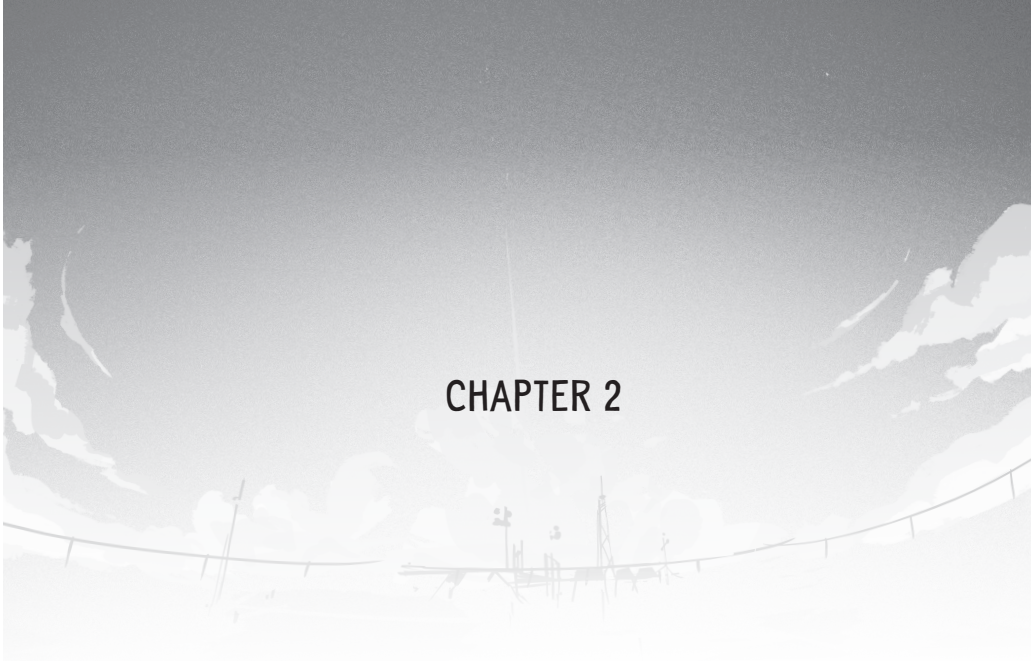
I sigh as I scroll through.

kindil0o (Chelsea Kim): Hi, big fan. Um, is it just me or have you stopped profiling the astronauts? I used to love your streams, and I still do, but I'd like to see more of your old stuff. Are we getting to Mars or not? You only spent like 30 secs on the new astronaut search??

I mute the notification. Of course my followers would notice how short my NASA segments are, how my eyes dart away from the camera when I mention the search for the newest astronauts.

Everyone wants to know why, and I'm staring at the reason: my dad just flew back from Houston from his final round of interviews with NASA.

If he has it his way, I'll never escape this mission.



CHAPTER 2

"Stop waiting by the phone," my mom shouts. "They said they'd call you today if you were chosen. It's five thirty. You've used all your vacation days and it's barely June; you're flying back and forth from Houston every few weeks—it's taken over your life. It's taken over *our* lives."

She points to me, and just like that, I'm a part of their game. A pawn left out conspicuously to lure a bishop and set up a checkmate. She makes eye contact with me, and I briefly see the exhaustion on her face. The panic, the stress. But my gaze darts away. I won't give her that power. I won't be a part of this.

"I'm sorry, but it's time to drop this fantasy," Mom says, turning her attention back to Dad. "Just . . . think about it practically. We can't relocate. I have a life, a job."

"Does this really have to happen *every other* day?" I say as I rush down the hallway toward my room.

"It's only four thirty in Houston." Dad clears his throat,

almost nervously. "And you work remotely. You could code anywhere. I know you don't want to hear it, but there's still a chance. A *real* chance this could happen."

"What about Calvin?" she snaps back. "We'd pull him from his school just before his senior year? Did you ever tell him about what this would mean for his videos?"

"Wait. What about my videos?" I spin back toward them, but as I do, the pieces fall into place. If he got the job, we wouldn't only be moving to Houston, we'd basically be stepping onto a TV set.

Every moment of our lives would be monitored, recorded by StarWatch for their annoying *Shooting Stars* show.

They're both avoiding eye contact.

"Well, we don't know anything for sure," Dad starts, "but there was a clause in the paperwork."

"A *clear* clause," Mom says as she slowly massages her temples, "that said no other public video transmissions can be made including people involved with the mission. And as family, they would consider us a part of the mission."

And I'm gone.

"Cal, wait!"

I slam my bedroom door and lean against it.

Within seconds, my parents are back at it, and there's a part of me that wants to turn around and fix this. To make things right again. They still fought before the astronaut thing, but rarely, and not like this. My fists clench as I argue with myself, wondering whether it's worth sticking my neck out, trying to help them, trying to *stop* them.

But that's never worked.

"You're making me dread coming home, Becca. Every time I come back with good news, you fly off the handle!"

"I've lived here my whole life." Mom's hurt voice creeps through my door. It's like they're having two separate conversations. Neither's listening to the other. "This was our first home. I was born here, my . . . family was born here."

I hear what she doesn't say—my aunt was born here too. She lived down the street from us for years. This street, this neighborhood is all tied up in memories of her. No wonder Mom doesn't want to leave.

"You didn't have the decency to run it by me before you—"

That's all I let myself hear.

This is another reason why my dad can't be an astronaut: we're clearly not fit to be an astronaut family.

NASA picked their first astronauts for the Orpheus missions three years ago, in small groups—three or four added each time. Orpheus I through IV tested individual components of the spacecraft, each test more successful than the last.

The families, though, became stars. What they have is flawless; their personal and professional stories follow a story arc that even I couldn't write. It's hard to look at them and not think they have everything my family doesn't.

The astronauts have heated arguments that line the pages of *People* magazine, and sure, sometimes one of the spouses will have a little too much to drink during brunch. But they still smile for the cameras. They know how to make their imperfections seem . . . perfect.

In the end, they stay happy and supportive—two qualities my parents haven't shown in a while.

— ——

I plug my headphones into my retro tape deck and put them on. I add my new finds and sort through the rest of my eclectic collection of cassettes: Nirvana, Dolly Parton, Cheap Trick, bands and artists I only know thanks to my thrift store finds. I settle on Cheap Trick and jam it in, and let the guitar overtake the voices.

Dad wants to be one of them. The astronauts, that is. Way more than he wants to be who he is now—an air force pilot turned commercial air pilot who wants to ditch the 747 for a spaceship. NASA announced they'd be hiring the final five astronauts for the Orpheus project. He applied months ago, when most of the spots had already been taken up.

I didn't have the heart to talk to him about his chances. I covered them all in my reports: one of the new recruits was an astrophysicist with a social media following nearing Kardashian levels, another a geologist/marine biologist who'd won two Oscars for her documentaries and even a Grammy for a spirited reading of her audiobook—which was a best-seller, of course. And those weren't the most impressive ones.

Dad's a good pilot, I'm sure, but he's not like them.

He's angry. Impatient. Surly. Okay, I'm not painting him in the best light. I mean, he is an okay dad in other ways—he's super smart and gives killer advice on my calc homework. But it's like everything my mom says hurts him like a physical

attack. He snaps back, which triggers my mom's anxiety. Their fighting isn't camera ready. It's messy, it's real, in a way that's too raw to be captured by a camera.

If they can't put on a show for me—at least pretend that everything's okay, like Deb's parents do—how can they put on a show for the world?

I get through a few tracks while I sit on the floor and close my eyes. There's nothing else but the music. And a few cars beeping outside. Okay, more than a few. This is Brooklyn, after all.

After a while, a calmness pours over me, drowning out the fear. I feel . . . at peace. Alone and no longer worried about my future plans. Not worried about the BuzzFeed internship I start next week. Not worried about the hundreds of messages in my inbox—replies to the weekly Cal Letter (I couldn't think of a clever name, don't judge)—where I link to my videos along with important news stories, geared toward those who give a shit about the world.

I think about these things, but I'm able to push them out of my mind for a few minutes, then a few more, until I have to get up and switch cassettes. The tension in my chest eases. It's meditation. For me, it's the most effective self-care system in the world.

That is, until I hear a knock.

Through noise-canceling headphones and blasted music, I hear it. Which means it's less of a knock and more of a pound, but regardless, I take off my headphones and shout, "Yeah?"

My mom peers into the room—she's always afraid she'll

catch me doing "something," and we all know what that "something" is, but I'm also not an idiot and can figure out how to do said "something" twice a day having never been caught thank you very much.

But then I notice her expression. She's tearing up, which is not good.

See, she doesn't cry. They fight, they yell, they make things seriously unpleasant for everyone in a two-apartment radius, but they don't cry. They shout, then Mom retreats from the world and Dad goes for a walk. It's how they process. Getting at each other's throats, but not offending the other bad enough to let them carry their hurt to the next hour.

And . . . here she is, crying.

"I, um." Mom comes into the doorway now. I scan her for bruises, for covered arms, for anything—though I know Dad would never hurt her like that, I never see her upset like this, so my mind reaches for options.

Until she speaks.

"Come into the family room. Your father has news."

News.

My mind freezes. Did the phone ring sometime in the past hour? Did NASA interrupt their fight to tell Dad he was chosen for . . . ?

But that doesn't make sense. We're not like them. We're not ever going to be like them. NASA should be able to figure that out, right?

Before I get too far ahead of myself, I stop the tape and make my way to the door, seeing the empty space where my

mother just stood. She turns the corner quickly, leaving just a fluttering patch of fabric in her wake. She's running away from this conversation, and away from the face I know I made when she said "news."

Like it could mean anything else.

I make it halfway down the hall when, *pop*, a champagne bottle confirms the fears flowing through my body. My gut turns to mush. My heart rate doubles. I feel it all over my body like an electric shock, but instead of causing sudden jerks of movement, everything is slow. My nerves dance, but my limbs won't cooperate. All is ash and tasteless, and smells are weak, and I can't even come up with metaphors that make sense because . . .

"A glass for each of us—even for you, Cal. It's a special occasion." Dad hands them out, his happy face immune to the terrified, broken expressions on ours. "And a toast, well, to me. NASA's newest astronaut."

It takes a few seconds for the words to sink in, and it's like my brain is the last one to this party. My fists clench. Breaths won't come. I feel the pressure building everywhere, in my back, my sinuses, my stomach. My legs ache as I repeat the word in my head: Astronaut. Astronaut.

Astronaut.

You know how sometimes you say a word so often it loses its meaning? That doesn't happen. The definition sticks in my brain—and it's even in the etymology. Astro-naut. Space explorer. What every three-year-old kid has not so secretly wanted to be since the sixties.

I slam my champagne glass down with a clink and push past my mother. The hallway blurs by as I barrel into our bathroom. I don't know what this means for my dad, my mom, or me. But I do know one thing:

I'm going to be sick.