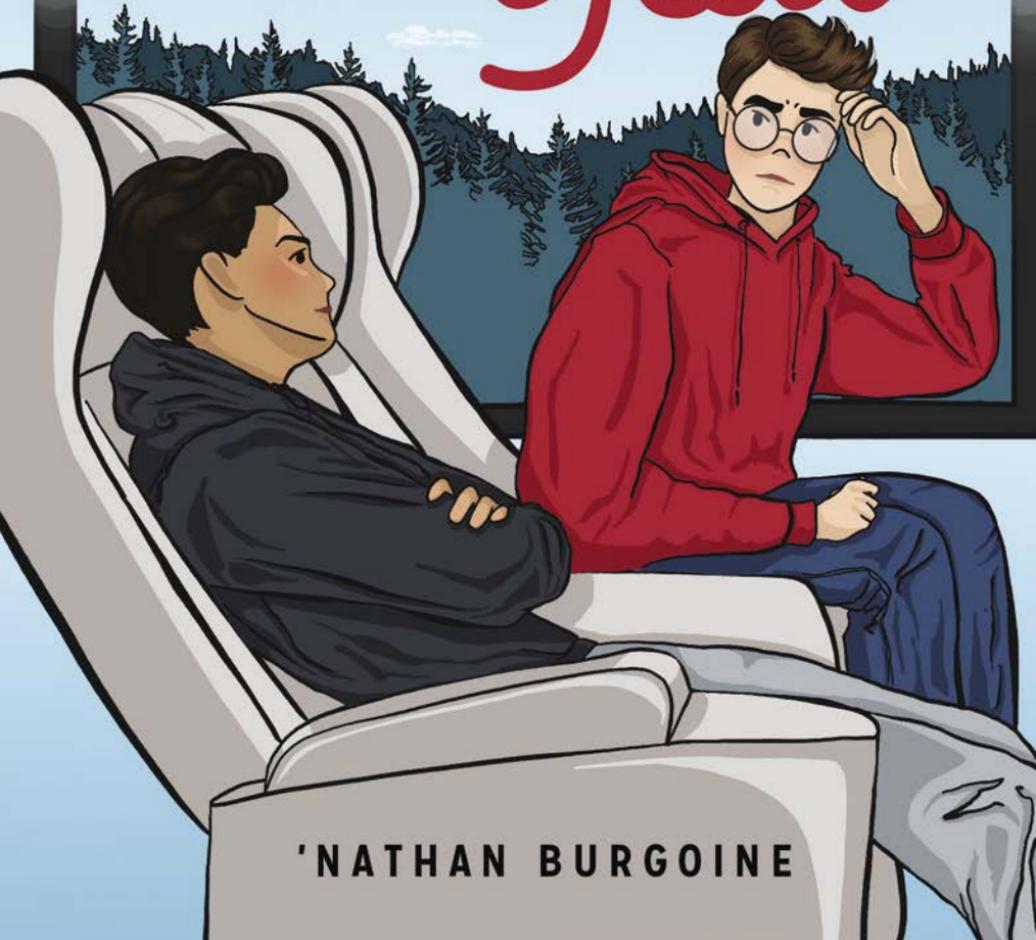


# Stuck With *You*



'NATHAN BURGOINE

*It's a long, strange trip stuck on a train with a frenemy who both bugs and attracts you. . .*

Ben is on a train back to Ottawa after a visit with his dad in Toronto when his seatmate is the last person he wanted to see: Caleb, the handsome, confident boy who recently, and accidentally, broke Ben's phone. Preoccupied with worrying about whether he should take a gap year, Ben has little time for Caleb's jibes.

But when they start talking, not only does Ben find himself won over by Caleb's roguish charm, but he also learns that his seatmate is bisexual.

There's a lot more to Caleb than meets the eye, and as the trip continues, feelings begin to grow...

**NATHAN BURGOINE** is the author of the queer young adult novel *Exit Plans for Teenage Freaks* (finalist for the Prix Aurora Award for YA Novel) and queer young adult novella *Hope Echoes*, included in the collection *Three Left Turns to Nowhere*. He, his husband, and their rescued husky live in Ottawa, Ontario.



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'NATHAN BURGOINE

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*This book is for all the young queer kids  
who don't have an answer for  
"What do you want to be when you grow up?"  
Me neither.*



# 01 Caleb Khoury Ruins Everything

I USUALLY LIKE taking the train. I don't even mind Toronto Union Station. It's a maze that seems to always be under construction, but I've been here a lot. I know my way around and I like it when I know where I'm going. Which I guess is also why I like trains. My best friend, Raj, says my comfort zones are all about not having to worry about surprises. I don't think they mean it as an insult, and I don't take it as one. It's true. I like knowing what's going to happen. I read spoilers

before I watch movies. Once I find something I like at a restaurant, I order it every time.

So when I'm in Union Station? I'm usually in a good mood when I'm waiting for my train. Or I'm in a better mood, anyway. I usually look forward to having four and a half hours to come down from a week in Toronto with my father. I don't hate Toronto or anything, but I didn't grow up here. My three weeks a year are more than enough. There's only so much fun I can have watching my father look like he'd rather be working, or listening while he talks at me about what I'm going to do after school.

Not *to* me. *At* me. There's a difference.

My father thinks if he tells me enough times I should know what I want to do for the rest of my life that somehow I'll just pick something. He thinks I could do accounting, like him. Or teaching, like my mother. He doesn't get that I barely managed to get a B in my math classes. I'm pretty sure accountants need to do math. And the idea of going to school for the rest of my life, even as the teacher?

So much no.

Normally, though, I wouldn't be sitting here thinking about all the stuff my dad didn't understand. Usually, at this point, I'd have my earbuds in and be listening to whatever playlist Raj has sent my way, and already feeling the nine days with my father wearing off. I'd text Raj what I thought of each song as I listened. They make the *best* playlists. And before I knew it, it would be time to board, and I'd be on my way home to Ottawa.

Back to my friends. Back to my mom and my stepdad and my sisters. Back where I have a bedroom, not a pull-out couch in my father's office. Back to where I belonged.

Unfortunately, this year was different. This year, I was sitting on the bench in Union Station without my earbuds, because my phone was in my backpack with a completely shattered screen. I had no way to listen to music, no way to text Raj or any of my other friends in the Rainbow Club, all thanks to Caleb Khoury's damn basketball.

It had been the same on the ride up to Toronto, only worse. Because on the way here, those nine days with my father were still ahead of me, and the loss of my phone had been so fresh.

Ugh.

Whatever. Raj would tell me I needed to lose this mood. The week with my father was over. Soon they'd call for boarding, and I'd be on my way home. I could sketch on the train, even if everything would turn out a little bumpy. Also, this was the last March Break of my life. I never had to do this again.

There. I'd found a positive mood. Raj would be proud. They'd have offered me a fist bump. They were all about finding positive moods.

Thinking of Raj made me think of Prom and how our plans for everyone in the Rainbow Club to head to Prom as a big friend group had gotten *complicated*. Lin and Jasmine's breakup at the end of February had been unexpected.

Jasmine dating Roy less than a week later?

That had been huge. Lin was hurt to be so quickly

replaced. Grayson had said Jasmine shouldn't come with us to Prom anymore, and everything was a mess now. I hated that the group seemed to have decided picking sides was so important, when as far as I could tell this wasn't about sides. It took a week or two, but Lin admitted she and Jasmine weren't right for each other. Lin wasn't holding any sort of grudge. But half the club seem to have decided Jasmine didn't belong anymore. And when I tried to talk to Grayson about it, he'd gotten mad.

I backed down like I always did. I'd told myself I'd text everyone over March Break. I figured between Raj and me, we'd figure something out.

Except, thanks to Caleb Khoury, I couldn't text anyone. I couldn't find out what was happening. I couldn't try to fix anything.

Fixing things was my other comfort zone, Raj said. I didn't like it when people were upset. If there was something I could do to make my friends happy, I'd do it.

But instead, I'd been pretty much cut off for nine days and it felt like forever. I'd had to resort to email

and direct messages on my father's computer whenever he wasn't working or telling me I needed to have a plan for after high school. Which wasn't often.

I hadn't told my father about my plan to take a gap year. I knew he wouldn't like it.

My positive mood crashed and burned.

They announced the first boarding for my train, and I pulled the printed page out of my hoodie pocket, complete with the QR code I'd normally show them on my phone. I walked to the front and the little scanner thing the guy in the vest used didn't work the first two times he tried. The third time it finally pinged, and I made my way up the escalator, and then along the tracks where my train waited for me. My train car was pretty close to the front, so I carried my bag and my backpack and made my way.

Ahead of me, a guy in a suit was already on his phone, talking. I couldn't imagine being on a train in a suit. I'm definitely happier in my hoodie and jeans. It's four and a half hours, and I'm going to wear something comfortable.

Also, it's not like I have a suit. Although I really needed to figure out what I'm going to wear to Prom.

Assuming we were all still going to Prom.

Man, I wished I could text Raj. I was sure they already knew what they were planning to wear. I wanted to text Lin, too. I wanted to check in with her and see if she was feeling any better. I bet she'd also have her outfit picked out.

I found my seat about two-thirds of the way down the car and took a few seconds to put my coat and bag in the overhead compartment. I slid my backpack into the space under the seat in front of me, so I'd have my stuff at hand. I had the window seat, which was nice. By the time I sat down, I could feel Toronto already getting left behind, even though the train hadn't started moving yet.

There. I'd found a positive mood again. I gave Raj another imaginary fist bump.

I watched the people boarding while I waited for the train car to fill up. Mostly older people, about half in couples, and only a few kids. No one took the seat

beside me. As more and more people climbed on board, I was starting to think I won the train lottery. Having an empty seat beside me would be awesome, especially since I didn't have a way to tune out any noise. On the ride up, the man beside me had spent the whole trip using his laptop, typing up a report or presentation or something. He'd worn earbuds, which meant he didn't have to listen to his own tap-tap-tap, but I did.

I waited, and waited, and no one else seemed to be coming onto our train car. Was I going to have an empty seat? From the looks of things, it was only one of two empty seats left on the whole train car.

This was great.

Then one more person climbed aboard. He had a black hoodie on, hood up, and grey sweatpants. He walked right past the first empty seat. Damn. He'd be sitting with me, then. He wasn't in a suit at least, which might mean no typing. The guy kept coming down the aisle and I stared.

Oh no. Oh *please* no.

I knew that face. I knew the chin with the dent in

it. And I knew the black hair cut pretty short and yet still just a bit messy. I knew the dark brown eyes and the big smile. The *annoyingly* cute smile. Beneath the loose black hoodie, I happened to know he was stocky and had nice arms. All the better to throw a basketball.

I barely stopped myself from swearing out loud.

The guy in the black hoodie?

Caleb freaking Khoury.

This couldn't be happening. This had to be a joke.

But it wasn't a joke. Caleb walked all the way down the aisle looking at the little numbers printed above the seats and stopped right beside me, his duffel bag in his hands. He blinked when he saw me.

"Oh," he said. He smiled, even. "Hey, Ben."

I glared at him. *Really?* After the last nine days, after *everything* he did, all he was going to do was smile and say "Hey, Ben"?

Caleb's smile faded when I didn't answer, and he opened the compartment to put his duffel away. If anything, he seemed a little confused. But mostly he didn't seem to care.

Typical.

Okay. I needed a plan. If I was going to have Caleb Khoury beside me for the next four and a half hours, I'd lose my mind.

The only plan I could think of was to ignore him. I'd pretend he didn't exist.

He had a backpack on as well, which he pulled off and put under the seat in front of him. He closed the compartment and sat down beside me, tugging his hood down and turning to face me. His hair was doing the messy-but-cool thing. I had to use so much hair gel to make my hair look even close to that good.

So annoying.

"You okay, man?" Caleb flashed another one of his smiles.

That was it. I'd spent the last ten days cut off from my friends while my entire friend group fell apart, listening to my father list all the things I was doing wrong, and now I was going to have to sit beside the guy who'd made my March Break suck even worse? Every plan I had to ignore him went right out the window. He was

acting like nothing happened. Good hair or not, Caleb Khoury was a complete and utter *asshole*.

“Are you kidding me?” I snapped. “Of course, I’m not okay. *Man*.”