

The Summer Between Us



“A joyfully rebellious
love letter to racialized
teenagers.”

— Chad Lucas,
Thanks a Lot, Universe

Andre Fenton

When your heart is at a crossroads,
the path forward can be hard to see

High school is over, and eighteen-year-old Adrian Carter is facing decisions that will change the course of his life. With two clear paths before him — to go to business school like his father wants, or to follow his long-time girlfriend Mel Woods on a cross-country tour with her band — Adrian is having a hard time figuring out whether he wants to choose either of them.

Can he find common ground? Or will he end up disappointing those who matter most? Adulthood is turning out to be far more complicated than he ever imagined.

ANDRE FENTON is an award-winning young adult author, spoken word artist and arts educator. He has written two previous novels, *Worthy of Love* and *ANNAKA*. Andre's work focuses on race, self-esteem and creating more representation and diversity in young adult fiction. He lives in Halifax.

"Crackling dialogue, crisp, poetic language and engaging, memorable three-dimensional characters that readers will root for . . . Exactly the kind of book I never want to end."

— Sheree Fitch, author

"With palpable empathy and a profound understanding of the complexities of relationship dynamics, Fenton navigates race and racism, desire, belonging, community, and family tensions. A moving and victorious coming of age story."

— Francesca Ekwuyasi,
author, *Butter Honey Pig Bread*

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*For the Black and Brown kids trying to find a place in a world
that doesn't always feel like it was made for them.*

This place is so much more illuminating with you in it.

This is for you.

CHAPTER 1

Prom Night

Everyone thinks prom night is like the movies. It's less dramatic, trust me. Once you get to the end of high school, you begin to realize there is no secret ending, or a definitive experience. It's multiple choice at best. I can say more often than not, it's a whirlpool that makes you hold your breath. For the past three years, I've been stuck with the feeling of holding in a breath that I wanted anywhere but inside of my chest.

If you're new to this group, let me introduce myself. My name is Adrian Carter. I'm eighteen years old, and I'm graduating high school with honours. I have great friends, and an experience that's similar to yours.

When I was in grade ten, I developed an eating disorder. Guys with eating disorders!? Weird, right? Not really. It's more common than you think. One thing I learned is just because I lost weight, it didn't mean my problems were

solved. I was yet to grow into the best parts of myself. I'd like to think that I'm closer than I was before, but the future is still to be determined.

I'm lucky enough to be surrounded by supportive friends, to have had wonderful mentors and to be part of groups like this.

So as my first post as a "mentor" (I'm sorry. That still sounds weird to say), I want to leave you all with this:

You are worthy of the love, healing and support you seek. You always have been and always will be.

Yours truly,

Adrian

I hit enter and finally exhaled. "Not a bad start." My moment of bliss was interrupted by a knock on my door.

"Adrian. Your mother wants photos of you in your suit five minutes ago," Dad called into my room.

"Yeah, one minute." I put on the blazer and took a quick look in the mirror. I had to stop and take a second look. It felt weird. I never really had a suit before. Most of the time, clothes either felt too big or too small. I think what freaked me out the most was knowing that this was a . . .

"Perfect fit," I said out loud. I looked back toward my laptop to see the post already getting some love. When I tried to peek at some replies, I heard a car horn outside.

"Damn, Donny's here early." I shut the laptop. "Don't worry about the pictures, I'll get tons tonight." I opened my door and saw Dad.

"Whoa, whoa, not so fast." Dad blocked the way. It wasn't that I was short, it was just that Dad towered over

me. “Look at you. I bet you must be surprised you can fit into one of these, huh?”

I sighed. I really wish he hadn’t said that.

“Besides the tie.” He pointed. I could tell he was judging me because it was purple, even if he didn’t say it.

“Dad, you don’t have to —”

“So . . . you hear anything back from Cape Breton University?” He started fixing my tie and making it look worse than before.

“No.” I sighed again. “I was wait-listed, remember?”

“I remember.” Dad sounded a little disappointed at the news. “Hey, you never know. You could be next on the list if someone drops out. You gotta use that scholarship for something.”

My least favourite thing about grade twelve was the idea that we were suddenly supposed to know what we wanted to do with the rest of our lives. Spoiler alert: I didn’t. That didn’t stop Dad from pressuring me into applying for a business administration program way back in November, and of course, programs like those fill up fast. I applied knowing full well I’d hit the waitlist. What I hadn’t expected was that somewhere along the way, I’d find something I was passionate about: working with youth. Last year, Mom had wanted me to help with a group for young men at the library where she works. I was hesitant at first, but next thing I knew, I started to enjoy it. Eventually, I built up the courage to apply for another program at Cape Breton University: community studies. Nothing really says maturity like becoming the person you needed when you were younger.

I never told my parents about it. Just like I hadn't told them I was in an online eating disorder recovery group, or that I even had one. As much as I advocated online, I wasn't ready to speak to my parents about it.

The big reason they were on my back was because I received a scholarship from my high school based on academic achievement and transformation. It's hard to believe I'm the same person who started high school three years ago. That didn't automatically translate into confidence though.

"Yeah, maybe. I mean, who knows? I might not even hear back until next year." I shrugged while walking downstairs. Before I even got to the bottom, I was met face first with a flash.

"Mom?" I rubbed my eyes. "You don't need to use flash indoors."

"Oh, hush," she said, taking another. "I gotta get them while I can. Where's Mel? I want to get her too."

"Trust me, Mom. You'll get enough pictures of me and Mel," I told her.

"Yeah, but she takes poto-roids. It isn't the 1980s. Why doesn't she get a digital camera?"

"Polaroids, Mom. And most people just use their phones these days," I said under my breath.

"I have an answer for that, Ms. Carter." I looked up and saw Donny already making himself comfortable at the kitchen counter. "She's a hipster."

"She isn't a hipster." I shook my head.

"Sure. She just has a hipster name, listens to hipster music and is in a hipster band."

I rolled my eyes almost immediately. It was true — not

the hipster part. Mel was part of a punk band called Brown, Black & Infamous with her friends, Kara, Azra and Jade. They were getting their name out there around Halifax, and Mel was hoping to leave for a tour at the end of the summer, meaning we had a lot to talk about.

“C’mon, Donny. We have work to do.” I dragged him outside while he grabbed a cookie from the jar on the kitchen counter.

“You have everything?” I asked as he scoffed it down.

“Yep. Been sitting there since Monday.” He opened the trunk. Inside were balloons, a stepladder, tape and a banner which read: *Happy Birthday Mel!*

“You know you’re the corniest dude I’ve ever met, right?” Donny grinned.

“Just shut up. Let’s go.”

The plan was simple. We were throwing a surprise birthday party for Mel. It seemed easy enough: get the house keys from her dad, grab the supplies and keep her away.

The last part was easy. Azra and Jade took Mel out for dinner while Donny and I planned to meet Kara at her place and set up a surprise before we headed to prom.

When we got to Mel’s, there was no sign of Kara, so I sent along a text.

Me: Hey you coming?

There was no reply. I searched for the keys while holding most of the supplies, as Donny had the banner.

“Hurry up,” Donny sighed, looking annoyed at me.

“Dude, if I wasn’t carrying everything, I’d have it open.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Where’s Kara?”

“Don’t know. She didn’t text back.” I stuck the key in the lock.

Eventually I felt the door unlock and entered the house. It was complete darkness, and I searched aimlessly for the light switch. I found it and turned on the light to see Mel sitting with her feet up on the table, blowing into a birthday kazoo and wearing a cone hat that read: *Birthday Girl*.

I looked over at Donny and mouthed, “Why is she here?”

Donny shrugged as Azra walked into the room. “Sorry guys. You know how easily a Gemini can change plans.” She shrugged.

“Sounds about right.” Mel smiled as she stood up, walking toward me.

“Sorry your plan didn’t work out, babe.” She kissed my cheek. “I appreciate this so much.” She wrapped her arms around me. I smiled and held on. She was in a purple prom dress and had her hair all done up.

“You look really beautiful, Mel,” I said in a shy voice.

“You’re not so bad either,” she observed. “Besides the tie.”

“Yeah . . .” I began fidgeting with it again.

“I can help.” She took it from my hands and got it done up properly. “You just gotta be a little patient is all.”

Jade left the room, and I watched Azra snatch Donny in the background, dragging him upstairs, giving us some alone time before the actual party started.

Mel smiled when she heard the door shut. “I can’t believe you put all this together.”

“I tried. I mean, you’re not exactly easy to surprise.” I grinned.

“Don’t worry, you’re doing great.” She pulled me in for a kiss.

“Oh!” I stepped back, thinking out loud. “I have your flower thing.”

I reached into my blazer’s pocket.

Mel laughed. “My flower thing?”

“Yeah, you know the thing the guy usually puts on their prom date’s dress?” I pulled out a plastic case with a purple flower inside.

“Yes. That’s called a corsage, Adrian,” she laughed.

“Can I?”

“Get over here.” She pulled me toward her.

I put the corsage on Mel’s dress, and she giggled at my goofy face. Even after three years of being in a relationship, it was only getting better.

“Dammit. Is she already there?” I heard Kara’s voice.

Mel snorted. “Yes, Kara, get in here!”

We all sat around in Mel’s kitchen eating the cake Kara had brought, that she didn’t trust Donny and me to handle. Mel and Kara met at a punk show a couple years back and connected easily.

“How ya feel, Mel?” Jade asked. “Ready to head out?”

“I feel like I just ate an entire cake, and now I have to dance. What is this?” Mel groaned but smiled.

“Girl, you know tonight is gonna be fire. C’mon, we can’t be late.” Kara got up.

“Ha, we’re already an hour and a half late,” Mel replied.

“Yeah, and do you really think we wanna miss Donny try his spit game on girls?” Azra said.

Donny shook his head. “Don’t roast the man who’s driving y’all there.”

“That’s exactly what we’re going to do.” Kara laughed.

“I’ll ride with Adrian. We’ll be right behind you,” Mel said.

The band, along with Donny, drove off shortly after. Mel and I sat in her car about to back out until another car came up the driveway.

“Ugh, that’s my dad,” Mel cut into my thoughts. “Hold on.” She took the keys out of the ignition.

I got out of the car with Mel. She drove a purple old school classic Camaro that her dad bought her for Christmas years ago. He always held very high expectations, but Mel wanted to be free and do her own thing. Mel never wanted to be in the elite level class at school. She joined because her dad pressured her to. I knew she resented him because of it.

“Melody!” Mel’s father greeted her with an enthusiastic grin. “My girl is all grown up.” He pulled her into a hug. Mel sighed and hugged him back.

“What’s up, Dad?”

“What’s up? It’s my girl’s birthday, and she’s going to prom on the same night.” He smiled, then looked over at me. “With Adrian,” he added not too enthusiastically.

“Hey, Mr. Woods.” I nodded.

“Please, son. You can call me Martin by this point.”

“Hey, Martin.” I tossed his keys over to him and he caught them.

Mel giggled while I tried to hide my smirk.

“Yes. Hello, Adrian. Give us a minute.” He frowned then turned and walked off with Mel.

I wasn't sure what they were talking about, but I watched Mel's shoulders tense up in the distance. As she walked back, I heard her say, "Listen, I just want to enjoy tonight. I'll focus on the rest of my life, starting tomorrow." She grabbed my hand and pulled me along with her.

"Sorry he's such a pain," she said as she got in the driver's seat.

"I don't think he likes me," I replied, shutting the passenger door.

"I don't think he does either. That's just more of a reason to love ya." She hit the gas.

"So . . ." Mel said, eyes still on the road. "Did you think about it?"

Then there's that. Yes, I thought about it. It was honestly a question I wanted to avoid, and we were inching closer and closer to the moment where I'd finally have to confront that elephant in the room.

"Silence? C'mon, scholarship boy."

As happy as Mel was for me, she sort of knew it wasn't where my heart was. Being stuck between a scholarship and a waitlist, the idea of the future was difficult to navigate.

"I'm still thinking on it." I swallowed.

Mel looked disappointed by my response, but she didn't push. She just kept her eyes on the road, focusing on the ride ahead of us.

I tried staying quiet for the rest of the ride, until I saw an envelope on her dashboard. There was a stamp on it and the return address said it was from Toronto.

"Who sent mail?" I asked.

“That was a great post you wrote, by the way,” Mel said, changing subjects.

“Wait, you read that too?”

Mel, like me, struggled with an eating disorder in the past. Her mom left after a bad divorce with Martin, and I guess, also like me, she turned to food for a lot of reasons. She was the one who told me about the youth eating disorder group. I’d been part of it for the past two years, but was about to age out of it.

“Of course I did.” She grinned. “I might not be active in the group but I still check in. They’re lucky you’re welcoming the new teenagers.”

I smiled after she said that.

When we pulled up to the school parking lot, it was full of students getting photos taken and making their way toward the entrance. Usually the school had prom at a hotel nearby, however this year it happened to be double-booked, meaning the school had to compromise by having our prom in the school’s cafeteria. It was supposed to be a fun time, until we saw Donny’s car getting towed.

“Where are you going with my car? We were gone for five seconds!” Donny was pulling his hair.

“Sorry, kid. It just got called in while I was nearby. You’re not supposed to park here,” an older man in overalls said while hopping in the front seat of the tow truck.

“What happened?” I walked up to Donny.

“Me and the girls went up to the entrance with our prom tickets, and next thing I knew Tyler comes up and

tells me he seen some guy towing my car.” Donny kicked a rock across the parking lot.

“Why? Everyone is parked here.” I looked around.

“I have an idea.” Jade pointed.

We all looked over to see a black SUV park in the spot where Donny’s car had been.

“For future reference, Donny. Don’t park in the reserved student union section.” Out came the student vice president, Shay, with a smug grin as he strutted toward the entrance.

Donny’s jaw dropped. “That piece of sh —”

“Mel, do you still have the keys to the greenhouse?” Kara asked.

“Yeah, in my bag.” Mel reached into her purse and fished them out. “Gotta give them back tomorrow.”

“Well, I’ve got a plan,” Kara said, as Shay disappeared into the school.

While Donny had a complete meltdown, Kara and Mel returned, dragging a hose toward Shay’s SUV.

“Wait, what are you doing?” I asked.

“Letting Shay know that nobody messes with us,” Kara told me as she put the hose through a crack in the SUV’s window. Of course, Shay was the only eighteen-year-old who had an SUV that I knew of.

“You wanna do the honours, Azra?” Kara asked while Jade shook her head.

“Already ahead of you,” Azra said, turning the tap on to let Shay know payback doesn’t take long to manifest.

Inside, the DJ played classic tunes and the blue lights made everything feel old-school.

I was drinking fruit punch, standing against the wall, watching Mel laughing and having fun with her pals. Donny stood beside me. He'd finally calmed down after Kara offered him a ride to Bayers Lake the next day to get his car.

"Aren't you gonna dance with Mel?" he asked.

"Probably."

"What are you waiting for?"

"The right moment." I was hiding my face with my cup. Mel was on the other side of the cafeteria, looking at me and making funny faces.

"All right, stand against the wall all night." Donny walked away.

Nobody wanted to be the first to slow dance at prom. It was awkward, and I didn't want to bring any more attention to us than we already had . . . Then I heard, "Adrian Carter would like to dedicate this song to his hipster girlfriend, Melody Woods." I looked up and saw the DJ reading a cue card with Donny laughing in the background.

"Oh no," I gasped as a slow song began to play. Mel laughed like thunder on the other side of the cafeteria.

She walked over to me, grabbed my hands and placed them around her waist.

"What were you waiting for?" she asked.

"Clearly not that." I moved with her toward the centre of the room.

"Well, I think that's the best we're gonna get." She swayed slowly back and forth. The lights went low. I felt so lucky being with Mel, and sharing that moment at prom was going to be something worth remembering.

“You still give me butterflies every now and then,” I whispered.

“I can tell.” She leaned her head on my chest. “I think it’s cute. You’re cute.”

I rested my chin on her head, and I looked across the room at Kara, Azra and Jade, who were smiling at us. We moved back and forth for a while, and soon other couples did too. Everyone kinda faded together slowly.

“I love you,” Mel whispered.

“I love you too,” I whispered back.

“Keep saying sweet things,” she said.

“Okay,” I replied. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” Mel buried her face in my chest. I knew she was going to hate me for saying it. She always hated me when I said it, but it was just too funny not to.

“Are you the circular land formation around one end of the ocean?”

Mel sighed, and I knew she rolled her eyes.

“Because I wanna call you bae.”

“Ugh. That’s the worst!” I heard Azra say to me from nearby.

“She’s right. You’re the worst.” Mel adjusted herself and moved her hands to my shoulders while looking into my eyes.

“I’m vaguely okay.”

“Worse than that.” She grinned.

“Oh, that’s hurtful.”

“I know.” She giggled.

Moments later, the music stopped, followed by a public service announcement by the DJ.

“To whoever drives a black SUV, it is currently overflowing with water.”

“Time to go.” Mel pulled my arm as we all ran outside.

Outside of the school, Shay flipped out as he opened the passenger side door and water poured everywhere.

“Are you kidding me!” He looked over at us and pointed straight at Mel. “You’re in charge of the gardens here. This hose is from the greenhouse. Why’d you do this!”

“Eh, don’t be a cop next time!” Kara laughed.

Shay wasn’t impressed. He stormed right toward us with his finger still pointed at Mel.

“How are you paying for this? With your dad’s shitty music shop?” Shay yelled.

Mel took one look at that finger and counted.

“Three . . . two . . . one.”

She grabbed it and twisted it backward, causing Shay to screech, then kned him in the stomach, bringing him to his knees.

“You put that finger in my face again, or ever raise your voice to me, I’ll show everyone what it looks like to get your ass kicked by a girl in heels.”

Shay got to his feet and looked at all of us giving him side eye. “I get it, six against one. Nothing new. Wait until everyone hears about this!” He shook his head.

“Nobody cares about the rich white kids you’re always trying to impress,” Donny growled.

Shay, like me, Donny, Kara and Jade, was Black. But you’d never see him hanging around with any Black folks.

“I’ll remember that, Donny.” Shay shrugged while fixing his tie.

“Yeah, and we’ll all remember this, Shay,” I cut in.

“Whatever.” Shay turned back toward his SUV. Bringing up Martin’s music shop was such an unnecessary move.

“You okay?” I looked at Mel.

“I would have dropped his ass ten out of ten times.” She let out a breath as we all walked away from the school.

“So what’s the plan?” Mel turned around. “Were y’all gonna drink?”

“I mean, there technically is school tomorrow,” I said.

Schools generally put prom on a Thursday night so kids wouldn’t get wasted afterward, and Friday was when we’d get our final report card.

“That doesn’t mean we can’t have a little fun . . .” Jade reached into her purse and grabbed a bottle.

“Oh em gee!” Azra was amazed. “You brought that to prom?”

“Of course.” Jade laughed. “Prom is something to remember, right?” She took a swig. “Any takers?”

“I’m driving,” Mel reminded her.

Kara grabbed the bottle and took a swig. “It’s the shy ones who surprise us.”

“I’ll give it a try,” I said.

“Pft,” Mel scoffed. “You never even drank before!”

Donny laughed so hard he clutched his stomach.

“Thanks for that . . .” I shrugged as Kara passed me the bottle. Everyone watched me. It was weird. Their eyes locked on me like I was everyone’s kid brother. I was the

shy kid. I didn't come out of my shell much. That was going to change. I was feeling brave that night.

So I took a large swig of the alcohol and felt my throat burn almost instantly. I managed to get most of it down, but I couldn't stop coughing.

"Whoa, slow down, AC." Mel put a hand on my shoulder while everyone laughed.

"That tastes like acid!" I gasped for air while Donny was cracking up.

Something did happen. I felt immediately at ease. Later I would learn it was the alcohol hitting my bloodstream, and I laughed just like everyone else.

★ ★ ★

We spent the rest of the night in the park. Kara and Azra sat on the swings, Donny sat on top of the jungle gym next to Jade and I was lying in the grass with Mel.

"How you feeling?" Mel giggled.

"Fine." I had the dumbest grin on my face. That night I found out I was a lightweight, and I felt real safe with the company I was with.

"Did you have a good birthday?" I asked.

"Yes," Mel said without a second thought. "I'm with the people I love, in some random park, everyone is dressed up and there's a full moon above our heads. The surprise may not have worked, but you still gave me a memory, so stay still." Mel reached into her purse to grab her Polaroid camera. She put it in position and snapped a shot.

“Not much is better than right now,” I said as the photo popped out with a whirr.

“It’s going to be nicer when I’m outside the city with these babes. We’re gonna kick ass at Battle of the Bands. We’ll win that tour money and make a real name for ourselves,” she said while shaking the photo. That was Mel’s plan, and she was intent on sticking to it. I wish I could make up my mind that easily.

“Yeah . . .” I replied. She handed me the photo to take a peek. Both of us smiling, my face a little drunk, and happy. I lowered it to see her looking directly at me.

“Your dad still after you about that business program?” Mel got straight to the point.

“It’s the only thing he ever wants to talk about. He’s like, ‘You hear from CBU yet? We have to schedule a tour!’” I imitated. “It’s like he forgot I’m wait-listed, and like that’ll somehow change.”

“Well, you know. That is a possibility,” Mel shrugged.

“You too?” I mock-gasped.

“I’m just trying to be realistic.” She took a breath. “Is that where you see yourself? Sitting in some cubicle? Running a business? Being a diehard capitalist?”

“Who says I don’t wanna be a weekend warrior?” I shrugged, then Mel jokingly punched my arm.

“I’m kidding,” I laughed. “No. Listen, I knew I’d be wait-listed in business admin. I just did it so Dad would get off my back.”

“Yeah, well, that’s the obvious part. I bet you knew you’d be wait-listed in community studies too,” Mel said.

Like business admin, programs like community studies,

social services and child and youth studies, fill up quick. Part of me knew that's where I wanted to go, but another part of me wasn't ready to let go of everything.

"What stopped you?" she asked. "I know you." She gently stuck a finger in my chest. "I read what you wrote tonight. You're soft, gentle, a good listener with an honest heart. You're someone the world needs. Why did you wait so long?"

"I'm . . . scared, I guess." I sat up.

"Scared of what?" Mel sat up too.

"Adulthood, things changing." I gulped. "Losing all of this. Losing you."

I looked over as Mel's shoulders dropped.

"Mel, I never expected to get this scholarship. And I'm unsure if I wanna go to university yet," I confessed.

"That fear about losing each other is mutual." She gripped my hand. "You know I plan to hit the road with these girls after summer, regardless of if we win this Battle of the Bands contest. We'll figure it out. The last place you should be is a place where you're not committed. We got the space if you wanna come along."

The idea excited me. Was it selfish that I wanted to spend time with them just a little longer? One more year? We were still young, and we had the rest of our lives to figure all of this out.

"What do you suggest I do?" I asked.

"I think more than anything, you should be true to this." She pointed to my heart.

"What are y'all getting sentimental about over there?" Kara called to us from the swings.

“It sounds like you’re trying to convince Adrian to come with us!” Azra yelled as Mel blushed.

“There shouldn’t even need to be convincing. It’s going to be bomb as hell!” Kara yelled back.

We both laughed. It would be bomb to spend time with them all on the road. There were a lot of things to get involved with, especially with that group. I knew no matter what happened, we’d be okay as long as we were all together.

“Don’t spend your time waiting on a list, when you can come find a new place you haven’t been.” Mel rested a hand on my cheek.

I think that’s when I knew my heart belonged with them. I liked the idea of sitting in my own driver’s seat. I thought about what we could do in Montreal, Toronto and even Ottawa. We wouldn’t have to worry about school, or anyone else’s expectations.

“Okay,” I replied with a stupid drunk grin.

Mel’s face lit up, and she wrapped her arms around me. “We knew you would come around.” She kept kissing my cheek as the photo fell onto the grass.

“Wait, have you guys been guessing when I might say yes?” I asked, realizing my face was now covered in lipstick.

“I honestly thought you’d say yes three weeks ago,” Jade said from the jungle gym.

“I guessed somewhere this week!” Azra called over.

“We knew you would,” Kara laughed.

The hard part would be telling my parents what my heart was set on. We didn’t have to think about that on

prom night. Instead we lay in a grass field, looking up at the few stars we could see, knowing we would be driving under more of them soon enough. Who wouldn't want to jump in a van and go on a great journey with the people they love most?