

# What Ever Happened

by Lucia Meade

## Chapter 1:

Antonia's POV

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*Toni wasn't sure exactly when it all fell apart. Reflecting, there wasn't a definitive moment, an explosion of action or a specific second when she knew it had officially all gone to shit. Sitting in the middle of that stupid forest behind the train tracks, though-she knew they were really in it now.*

“Food's ready” Mel's rough voice carried over the trees, and Toni walked back to their camp slowly. The wind had died down now. Earlier it had been so insane that Mel had hacked off the front part of her bangs with a pocket knife to keep them from flying in her face in a frustrated rage. Best entertainment Toni'd had in weeks.

Ari sat across from her. He was painting his nails with yellow polish and *dead* focused. Toni had no idea how he'd managed to smuggle the bottle in his bag when Quin was very explicit about essentials. Next to him, Mel was stoic as she shoveled food in her mouth.

“Did you find the good ax?” Toni asked hopefully.

“We did,” Mel's voice was icy. “*someone* left it behind a tree by the west side.”

“I told you, I didn't leave it there! I don't know how it got there!” Ari screeched indignantly, slamming his hands on his knees.

“Just,” Mel sighed. “don’t do it again. You gave Quin a heart attack. He thought we forgot it after the fight with that group of infected at the race vine station three weeks back. ”

“How is that even possible? You used it to get firewood four days ago. ”

“Yeah, and then *you* left it behind a tree in the middle of nowhere” Mel supplied unhelpfully.

“*I said, I didn’t-*” Ari started up again but Mel reached over and ruffled Ari’s hair as he was mid yell which only made him shriek louder.

“You’re gonna wake Quin up, idiot.”

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Quin’s POV

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Quin was rudely woken by an offended yelp, which concerned him enough to grab his knife until he realized it was just Ari. Mel was probably needling him about the ax incident again. It had actually been Quin who’d misplaced the ax, but he had decided Mel didn’t have to know that. He ducked his head as he dragged himself out of the tent. The zipper caught the top of his ponytail anyway. They really had to get a better housing situation.

“Morning. ”

Mel handed him a plate.

“You were out for a *while*” She whistled.

He ignored her. “Do we have a plan for the next few days?”

“I think we should move across the park. Get to the other side of the pond. We’ll have a steady water supply, and the infected can’t swim” Mel said, perching her elbows on her knees.

“That sounds okay.”

“Good. We can start packing our stuff in an hour” Mel said, and then relented at the look on Quin’s face. “Fine. 30 minutes. I know you’re worried.”

She wasn’t wrong. As the oldest by four years, Quin felt personally responsible for all five of them which was unfortunate because he was ill-equipped for this. The infected freaked him out in a way that didn’t seem to get to Mel. They weren’t even really zombies- more just alive folk who’d slowly lost their minds.

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Mel

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Mel toed a piece of broken metal with her boot as they trudged across the park.

She wasn’t sure what to think anymore. Sweating like a maniac, too. The others had offered her a tank top instead of her long-sleeved thermal but she declined.

If she wore a tank, they’d see the scar. She’d gone out for firewood four days ago and been ambushed. Slit one of their throats with her butterfly knife but the other one grabbed her arm and before she could crush it’s skull, she’d been bitten. Upper right arm. Mel had briefly considered just cutting her entire arm off before she remembered how fast the infection spread

through the bloodstream. She was too far gone already. It took a week at best until it got to your brain, but most balked after a few days. She'd been lightheaded since yesterday.

They just had to get to the lake. She figured after that she could sneak off somewhere and never come back. "Accidentally" fall in a pond and forget how to swim. She'd kept the others safe for two months and now she had to save them from herself. It was just fucked up enough to be a little poetic.

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Antonia "Toni"

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"Most likely to dance in a Target parking lot naked."

"What?" Mel snorted at the same time Ari said "Me." without missing a beat.

They'd been playing 'most likely' while walking.

"Most likely to start a fight in a school bathroom" Ari offered.

"No school anymore. Gotta be realistic."

Toni shook her head at him.

"Realistic? Most likely to get bitten."

“That’s a little dark” Quin said in a wavering tone. Toni could tell he was on edge.

“I dunno. Probably you.”

“Me!” Ari acted offended.

“Well, not Quin, not me and *definitely* not Mel. You’re the only one left. Process of elimination” Toni explained.

Mel was stone-faced.

“Check it out.” Ari pointed in the general direction of the lake. There was no way to get across the park without swimming or going all the way around, and they’d see a zombie coming from a mile away. *It would be nice to let her guard down for a bit*, Toni thought. Quin definitely needed it. And, strangely enough- Mel looked like she did, too. Her face looked gaunt and hollow, dark eyebrows pressed together like Toni’s did when she had a headache. Probably just tired. It had been a long day.

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Quin

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As they were about twelve feet away from the water’s edge, Mel faltered and then full-on staggered, catching herself on a tree almost drunkenly. She leaned behind it and threw up before dissolving into a violent fit of coughing, body pitching sideways as she curled inwards. Quin got

there first, holding her shoulders up and peering into her glassy eyes as he placed the back of his hand against her forehead.

“Mel? Melanie. MEL!”

“Yeah?” She spat out, wiping her mouth on her sleeve.

“What’s going on?”

“I think I’m going to pass out. Hands under my arms.”

Quin slipped both hands under her and she almost immediately became dead weight.

“Fuck!” He struggled to adjust to the weight difference. Mel was 5’10 and about 150-160 pounds of pure muscle. Quin was...not.

Eventually he opted to set her down and lean her against a pine tree. His mind was spinning out. Was she sick? Hurt? Tired? Maybe she’d just sprained something. Or cracked a rib. Oh god- what if she’d punctured a lung- that could happen, right? He thought *he* might throw up.

She was still vaguely conscious, though. Toni had squatted down next to her on the ground. Mel was ripping her own shirt off. Assuming she was losing it, Quin tried to stop her but then he saw the mark.

Oh.

*Oh.*

“Fuck, Mel.” Quin looked pained.

“Yeah.” Her voice was quiet.

“How long have you- why didn’t you tell us? We could’ve-”

“Could’ve done what, Quin?” She deadpanned, eyes unfocused.

“I don’t know.” He seemed deflated.

“What are we supposed to do now?” Ari’s voice wavered.

“It’s been four days. You need to get to the other side of the lake.” Quin opened his mouth to protest and she shut it down quickly. “Q. You know we don’t have other options. I love you all so fucking much.”

Mel had never been one for emotions.

“I always wanted siblings. Thanks. For these last couple months.” She rasped. Her skin had adopted an unhealthy gray-yellow pallor and the undersides of her eyes were bruised and dark. Quin kicked himself for not noticing sooner. He was supposed to keep these kids safe.

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Mel

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Everything hurts. I look over, and they’ve made it across the lake.

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Antonia “Toni”

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The second the last person steps on land, I can see her give up, pale hand falling to the ground and bloodshot eyes sliding shut. She had to wait until she knew we were okay. We all collapse in a drenched crying mess of an embrace. More a pile of body parts than anything else. Legs are tangled with arms, I’m buried in the crook of someone’s shoulder and someone’s face is in my shirt.

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Quin

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I’m trying to be the strong one, but that’s Mel’s job.

*Was Mel’s job.*

The other two end up having to calm me down. Toni wrestles me to the ground while Ari rubs my back and whispers in a calming tone. The cold grass stabs my skin like millions of tiny needles, and I don’t care. I can see her mangled body across the river. Soon she’ll get up and walk again. Except it won’t be her. We’ll figure it out, though. Doesn’t mean it’ll be pretty or easy.

