

The Ample Lake Burster: Chapter 016

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The frenzied beating of Cody's heart shook the small leopard worse than driving on the bumpy road down to the camp had. Pain pulsed from the base of his tail, which he'd bruised during his multiple falls trying to pull Oscar's blimpy ass through the window. He'd scraped his elbows, and something wet and gooey had soaked into his pants. But the pain and discomfort barely registered with Cody. He was frozen in place, watching as his friend grew rounder and rounder. *Dangerously* rounder. The fox's swollen girth had cracked the window frame, leaving part of the sill bent away and wobbling.

Cody didn't need to poke Oscar to know he was reaching critical internal pressure. The furious creaking of taut hide blared like an alarm. The fox had a woozy look on his puffy face, the same he had after drinking. His eyes seemed to sway from side to side, unable to focus on any one thing for more than a fleeting moment. His muzzle twisted one way, then another, then fell open to let out a groan.

Nothing Cody did would save his friend. He'd pulled with all his might for as long as he could, and he hadn't budged Oscar an inch. Pushing him back inside with the psycho in black was pointless.

Though the shaking leopard loathed to admit it, he was scared out of his mind. The psycho had blown apart Berg without a second thought, turning the polar bear into a fizzing soda bomb. Fuck, Berg was gone! *Gone* gone! And the psycho had implied he'd popped others. Now he was gonna pop Oscar.

Cody saw Oscar's whole body quake and knew only seconds remained. He closed his eyes and turned away. Watching Berg explode had been too much; he couldn't witness it happen to Oscar, as well.

The inevitable explosion's shockwave rolled Cody across the patio. He howled in terror as hide scraps barraged him. When he looked up at the window again, Oscar was gone. In his place was the psycho in black, backlit by the glow of Oscar's fallen lantern. The longer he stared at the white paint on the psycho's mask, the more it blurred into resembling a real skull.

The psycho pointed a gloved finger at Cody, and that alone nearly made the leopard faint. "You're next," the deep voice rumbled. Then they backed away from the window, out of sight but not out of mind.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" Cody scrambled to his feet. He found the lantern he'd grabbed and flicked it back on to give himself light. That's when he realized the gooey stuff he'd slipped in was marshmallow. It splattered the patio and the wall, as if someone had haphazardly flicked white paint around. A bunch of it even gurgled in the hot tub. He spotted dozens of scraps of white hide between the

globes of goo. Far, far too much to have come from Oscar. And then there was Abel's snapped collar laying amongst the debris.

Cody sprinted away from the lodge at full speed with no particular destination in mind. He just needed to be away from the psycho and the scraps. The scraps of his frat brothers who'd been popped one by one like balloons. Webb, Abel, Berg, Oscar—who was even left? Had the psycho lied when he mentioned his burst count earlier in order to give him and Oscar false hope and trick them into wasting time searching for their friends? He could very well be the last one left, surrounded by silent piles of scraps.

The downpour soaked Cody to the bone within seconds. He splashed through fresh puddles, spraying mud in his wake. Away. He had to get away—away from the lodge and the psycho and the scraps. He looked behind him, not where he was heading, searching for a bobbing light that might belong to his pursuer. So when he slammed into something soft and puffy that hurled him to the ground, he let out a high-pitched scream of terror.

“Don't pop me! Don't pop me!” Cody hissed. He blindly swung his lantern, rewarded with a pair of hollow *thunks* as he made impact.

“Hey, dude, what the hell? Stop that!”

Cody opened his eyes. Blake's feathery, bloated belly loomed over him.

“Thank God you're alive!” Cody bounced up, shivering in the rain. “We gotta fucking get out of here, now, before the psycho gets us!”

“Huh?” Blake asked, looking at the frantic cat as if he'd gone mad.

“The psycho in black! They popped Berg and Oscar and Abel! They fucking *popped* them, dude! Oh God, they probably popped Webb, too. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” Words blew out of Cody's mouth like air from a hose. “There were scraps everywhere, and they said I was next! They're going to fucking pop me!”

“Dude, calm down. Are you on something?” Blake tilted his head.

“No I'm not fucking on something!”

“This better not be a joke.”

Cody grabbed Blake by the shoulders and shook him, bouncing against the crow's round balloon belly. “Why would I make this shit up?!”

“Okay, okay. What happened?”

Cody took deep breaths, not that they did him any good. “We were waiting for you to get the power back on, and something started making noises upstairs. Berg swore it was Abel sneaking through the window or some ridiculous shit like that, so he went up to confront him, I guess. But then he got shoved out the bedroom door swollen big and round and kicked down the stairs by some psycho dressed all in black like a fucking emo fisherman. Fucker must have stuffed Berg with mints because he exploded all over the place in foam.

“Then Oscar and I made a run for the window. I got through, but Oscar was too big and he...he got stuck.” Cody saw his friend’s eyes darting back and forth, begging for help. All the tugging that didn’t make a difference in the world. “Psycho pumped him up and popped him. And before I could bolt, I saw Abel’s scraps around the hot tub. He’s gone, dude. They’re all fucking gone!”

“Fuck,” Blake said. “Fuck,” he repeated a little quieter, taking the story in. “Someone cut the cables to the backup generator. I thought maybe it was just a little vandalism or something, but fuck.”

“We gotta get out of here! Just jump in the truck and book it.” Cody still had the keys in his pocket. They were more valuable than any weapon to him.

“We can’t ditch Kevin and Dante.”

“They might be scraps already! If they aren’t, and they’re smart, they’ll follow us when they see us drive off.” Cody kept looking over his shoulder, expecting the psycho to appear out of the darkness at any second.

“Or they’ll wonder what the hell we’re doing and get ambushed by the psycho when they come to investigate.” Blake stood his ground and shook his head. “I’m not abandoning them. You can run away on your own if you want, but I’m finding Kevin and Dante so they know what’s happening.”

Cody badly wanted to fuck off and get to the truck, but the only thing that scared him more than the psycho was being alone with the psycho. “Fine, we’ll look for them. But if we run into that psycho first, then we’re gone! No more searching, just running for our fucking lives!”

“Got it.” Blake rolled his eyes. “Kevin and Dante might still be at the mess hall searching for Abel. Let’s hurry before they give up and leave.”

Cody fell in behind the bloated bird, using his frat brother as cover while hunting shadows in the dark. No other lanterns lit up the night. The trip to the mess hall couldn’t have taken longer than a couple minutes, but Cody was exhausted by the time they sought shelter from the rain within. His earlier desperate flight had taken a lot out of him, and he hadn’t had a moment to recover from the emotional impact of seeing Berg and Oscar pop in quick succession.

The mess hall was silent. Cody expected to see two pairs of scraps as they raised their lanterns, but nothing littered the floor. The fact didn’t give him much hope, though.

“Okay, we looked. Now let’s get the fuck out of here!” Cody whined. Every minute wasted brought them closer to the psycho’s grasp.

“We’ve been here for two damn seconds. I’m not giving up on them,” Blake insisted. With how firm his voice was, Cody knew convincing the crew to see reason and flee was a lost cause. He might actually have to make a run for it on his own, as terrifying as the thought was.

“Give up on who?”

Light shone from the kitchen, and Kevin and Dante came into the main room.

“Holy shit, they’re alive,” Cody said, astonished. Finding Blake in one piece had felt like a miracle, but it turned out the psycho hadn’t gotten to the others after all.

“And why wouldn’t we be?” Dante asked, a nervous look coming across the bull’s face.

“Because a fucking psycho is popping everyone!”

“Stop shouting and tell me what’s going on.” Kevin was as stiff as a statue, but Cody spotted the elk’s clenched fist faintly shaking by his side.

Cody really didn’t want to have to explain everything all over again. The leopard growled. “If someone in a crowded room shouts ‘fire,’ would you stop and ask them to explain?”

“If I didn’t smell smoke, then yes,” Kevin snorted.

“Come on, dude, just tell them what you told me,” Blake said.

Cody puffed his cheeks out and exhaled in frustration. “Some psycho wearing all black attacked us at the lodge. They popped Berg and Oscar and threatened to pop me next. I also found Abel’s scraps scattered around the hot tub, so obviously he got burst as well!”

Dante covered his mouth with a hoof and looked away. Kevin wavered a bit before he talked again. “This better not be a—”

“It’s not a fucking joke!” Cody felt ready to rip his fur out.

“Kevin, it *did* look like a fight happened in the kitchen,” Dante said.

“Fuck me.” Kevin’s voice cracked. “Where’s the attacker now?”

“How the fuck should I know?! I ran the fuck away from them until I ran right into Blake, and then we ran here.” Cody hoped Blake wouldn’t snitch on him wanting to leave Kevin and Dante to their own fates. He could explain why the decision would’ve been justified later, when they didn’t have a frat boy popping psycho on their tails.

“Well, what did he look like?”

“Scary as shit! Black rain jacket, black pants, black gloves, black mask with a skull drawn on it!” The psycho’s features all blended together in Cody’s mind. It was the puffy looks of terror on the faces of his bursting frat brothers he remembered, not the person he never wanted to see again.

“What if Webb didn’t pop on accident?” Dante muttered. “We were so quick to blame him for it.”

“It’s not the time for that, dude,” Kevin snapped.

“Yeah, it’s time to get the fuck away before he pops the rest of us!” Cody couldn’t believe they were still standing around chatting it up like there wasn’t

a psycho wandering around the camp. He swore the characters in slasher films were more proactive in fleeing danger than his frat brothers.

Kevin scoffed. “And let that psycho vanish into the woods and get away scot-free with reducing our friends to scraps? Not a fucking chance! We outnumber them four to one. We’re gonna make them pay for what they did.”

“You’re insane!” Cody hissed, wishing he could strangle some sense into Kevin. “They’ve already popped four people, and you want to try and fight them? Absolutely insane!”

“Berg and Abel weren’t exactly pushovers,” Dante said, avoiding eye contact with Kevin. “Maybe we should call the cops instead.”

Kevin shook his head. “Abel was drunk and in a shitty headspace, while Berg was a damn blimp. They weren’t anywhere near their peak when this shithead got to them. And who else have they attacked tonight? Webb, who was stoned and couldn’t fight his way out of a paper bag, and Oscar, who was a balloon and could only win a fight if he fell on his opponent. The psycho won’t stand a chance against the four of us together.”

“This isn’t a damn bar fight, dude!” Cody’s tail flicked wildly behind him, flinging drops of water left and right. “This psycho is *popping* us. They’re not beating us over the head or mugging us, they’re reducing us to fucking scraps! You don’t fist-fight someone like that! I’m not gonna be burst to bits because you think you have to prove you’re the best!”

Kevin bristled. He snarled at Cody and stormed up to the small cat. Thanks to his antlers, he practically towered over him. “Do you seriously think I’m trying to avenge Berg and Abel just to fucking show off?”

Cody shrunk a little in the shadow of the furious elk but held his ground. “I just think that staying or leaving isn’t your decision to make alone! Our lives are on the line, so we should vote for it, damn it! All in favor of running the fuck away, raise your hands!” He flung his straight up, the tips of his fingers about on par with the tips of Kevin’s antlers.

Blake raised his hand, followed hesitantly by Dante. Kevin looked at the three raised hands and snorted. “Whatever. But if the fucker gets away, at least I *tried* to stop him.”

They hurried into the rain in a tightly packed herd for safety, lanterns held out. Eyes kept watch in every direction. Camp Ample Lake remained dark. Only the wind and rain broke the silence of night.

Cody readied himself to bolt without hesitation if the psycho came down on them. He wasn’t about to be popped in a vain attempt at revenge. He wouldn’t end up like Oscar—puffed up, frantic, and overwhelmed by the pressure. The authorities could deal with the psycho.

The sight of the trucks brought Cody a hope he hadn't felt since Berg had bounced down the stairs to his doom. They were going to make it.

But the closer Cody got, the more things felt off. Something didn't seem right about the tires of his truck, and he soon understood why. "Fucking hell, the tires are slashed!" The truck rims rested low on deflated rubber. A lengthy gouge ran across each tire, a blatant act of sabotage.

"Mine are slashed, too," Kevin said, smacking the hood of his truck.

The windows on both trucks had been smashed, covering the seats in safety glass. Cody saw cracks on the dashboard display and worried other unseen damage had been done to his truck.

"The trucks will probably still start," Cody said. His heartbeat was picking up speed again. "We just need to reach the main road, and then our phones will work."

"You're gonna try to drive up that rough incline on rims alone?" Kevin asked as he came around the side of the truck. "And you fucking called *me* insane. Uh-uh, we're not going anywhere in these."

Cody felt lightheaded. He braced himself on the cold, slick hood of the truck to prevent himself from collapsing. More than ever, Camp Ample Lake felt like a tiny island in the middle of the ocean, miles away from help. And this island had a psychopath stalking around the darkness, eager to blimp them all until their hide ruptured and they burst into a shower of scraps.