

The Ample Lake Burster: Chapter 06

By: Indigo Rho

Webb had settled into a nice, mellow high, the kind that got the rabbit twitching his ears for fun. Angled out, straight up. Angled out, straight up. Tilted back, straight up. Tilted back, straight up. The distraction helped get him through the ride up.

Memories of lousy road trips stuck to him like mud. Piling into the old minivan that never quite cleansed the aroma of cigarette smoke left by the previous owner. All his siblings arguing over space and games and who tugged who's ears. His parents occasionally telling them to behave but mostly tuning them out while they discussed whatever drama had recently enveloped the extended family. Their destination would inevitably be a public campground or national park, places where a large family could vacation for cheap on short notice.

Webb nearly refused to come along when he heard the word "camp" in the name of the venue where the big frat party was to be held. Seeing actual pictures of the place had shifted his answer to a solid maybe. But spotting Ample Lake on the must-see list of a local ghost hunter blog was what had truly sealed the deal for him. He'd intended to delve more into the lake's past before coming but had lost track of time for reasons he'd argue weren't exclusively related to breaking in his new bong after a rather blimped-up Cody had bounced into the old one.

Camp Ample Lake had great vibes so far. Decent weather, cozy buildings, and views fit for a postcard. Potent energies swirled through the area like a light breeze; he was certain of it. The remnant joys of old campers mixed with the chill sorrows of those who'd met an explosive end there. It lacked the unnerving feel he saw ghost hunters experience at old prisons and hospitals, which was nice. If he had time later, he'd check out the cabins Roscoe said the staff had popped in decades ago. He might be lucky enough to finally witness a paranormal event himself.

Or he'd chill in the hot tub all evening once the rain came, getting high and messing around with Abel. It all depended on the rabbit's mercurial mood.

"C'mon, get in." Blake fussed with the knob on the lodge door.

"You sure the key's all the way in?" Berg asked. The polar bear loomed over Blake's shoulder, his gut pressed against the crow's back. Webb doubted he needed to be *that* close, but Berg loved to throw his weight around.

"Of course it's all the way in." Blake pushed the key, and a loud *click* sounded as it fully entered the lock. "Son of a..."

Berg let loose a bellowing laugh that jiggled his gut. “Had a real airhead moment there, did ya?”

“It’s a stiff lock,” Blake insisted. He pocketed the key and opened the front door.

The great room of the lodge was two stories tall and took up half the building. The room smelled strongly of a wood pile, with wooden planks covering the walls and exposed beams that resembled logs. A hulking, traditional stone fireplace stood on the far wall opposite the door. A large flat-screen TV hung above the mantle. The furniture was rustic, heavy on the wood with a preference for red plaid fabric. A staircase directly right of the entrance led to a small landing and doors to the two bedrooms on the second floor.

Giant windows covered one wall, offering a scenic view of Lake Ample. Webb could see Kevin and Dante on the dock, near what he assumed was a little boat.

Berg and Blake immediately honed in on the TV, swarming it like a pair of pudgy piranhas.

“Damn, bro, I was hoping it’d be bigger,” Berg said.

“It’s the same size as the TV back home, dude,” Blake said.

“But it’s smaller than the projector screen in the basement.”

“No shit. Rental cabins don’t have projectors.”

“But this place is supposed to be fancy and shit. We need a good TV to watch the game on.”

“We should probably make sure they even get the channel the game’s on first.”

“Bro, they gotta have it. Right?” Berg asked, his voice tinged with desperation. Webb dealt with people calling him addicted to weed all the time, but no one seemed to notice that Berg was practically a baseball addict. The polar bear could ramble off obscure stats while drunk off his gourd.

Blake picked up the remote. “We’ll see.”

The two frat boys stood in silence as they turned on the TV and skimmed the channel guide. When they did find the right channel, they whooped and hollered and belly-bumped each other.

“I *told* you they’d have it! I never lose a bet!” Berg smirked.

“You’ve lost plenty of bets, blimp butt. And I didn’t say they didn’t have the channel, just that we should check to make sure they did.” Blake tossed the remote onto the nearby couch.

“Which means you doubted they did, which means you bet against me, bro.”

“That’s not how that works.”

“Is to. If you’re this sore a loser now, how are you gonna act when the Baysox wreck the Barons tonight?”

“I’ll be shotgunning a beer to celebrate the Barons winning, duh.” Blake crossed his arms in confidence.

“As if,” Berg snorted. He said a few names and numbers that reached Webb’s ears as gibberish, and Blake countered with more gibberish.

Webb knew next to nothing about baseball, so he decided to wander while the other two rambled at each other. The rabbit ignored the stairs and headed down the short hallway that led to the back half of the lodge, which held the kitchen and dining room. The rustic theme of the place remained in full force. Wooden cabinets blended in against wooden walls. Even the countertops were some sort of polished wood that reminded Webb of fancy cutting boards. Only the appliances broke the mold, being made of plain stainless steel.

The back windows looked out on a broad covered porch with a sunken hot tub and plenty of lounge chairs. The weather was a little too warm for the hot tub, but Webb still intended to take a dip if the night cooled down some. It was something he rarely had the chance to enjoy.

A passing thought reminded Webb he was supposed to check the power in the lodge, which seemed pointless with the TV confirmed to work. It wasn’t like the electricity would bypass literally everything else. But he still flipped switches on and off and back on again. The windows were intact, nothing had crawled in and died, and the appliances looked fine at a cursory glance. Mission accomplished.

Before Webb could leave, he found himself drawn to something oddly out of place. An old-fashioned fireplace bellows sat on the dining room table. He’d initially missed it since it blended in with the table. He guessed it’d gotten overlooked the last time the lodge was cleaned.

Curiosity got the better of Webb, and he picked up the bellows. He pressed the two paddles of the bellows together, squeezing the leather pouch between them and blowing air out the nozzle. Then he released the pressure and listened to the air hiss back into the pouch.

Webb had watched videos of people pumping each other up with bellows before, though they were far less common than air compressors, helium tanks, and bike pumps. He was sure he saw more videos of people using their own lungs to inflate someone. The Rho Theta Rho frat house didn’t have any working fireplaces—not since an incident before his time involving a blimped-up wooly ram—so he’d never had access to an actual bellows.

The rabbit turned the bellows and gently sealed his lips around the tip of the nozzle. He pumped the bellows thrice in quick succession. His cheeks swiftly rounded out, and he felt a faint—but definite—increase in pressure in his middle

as he took in air. He smiled around the tip of the bellows, then started pumping earnestly. Steadily, Webb's chubby middle ballooned out.

Inflation filled the rabbit with boundless amusement. *And air*, he thought with a giggle. He simply thought being turned into a balloon was hilarious, just one of the greatest things in life, short of weed. With a pump or a tank or a lot of aggressive puffs on a bong, Webb could swell so big he could barely move.

Webb had grown up assuming he'd hate inflation. Having your hide stretched taut like a drum looked uncomfortable. You could pop if you grew too round and were reckless. People didn't praise balloons; they laughed at them.

But sometimes they laughed *with* them. Plenty of comedians were best known for doing entire comedy sets inflated. A literal sitcom character archetype was referred to merely as The Blimp because they spent most or all of their screen time inflated. Ballooning clowns had been a circus staple since the very beginning.

Webb didn't accept inflation could be fun until his first semester at college, and it happened at the same time he fell in love with weed. Freshly pledged to Rho Theta Rho, he'd slid into a circle of upperclassmen smoking pot at a party. He got through his first go at a bong with minimal coughing. Then, the senior who hit the bong after him decided to show off and changed Webb's life forever in the process. The guy inhaled long and deep on the bong before grabbing Webb by the collar and exhaling all the smoke directly into the stunned rabbit.

The pressure of Webb's middle puffing up had proven surprisingly nice. While he sat there, flustered and shocked, the next guy in line proceeded to puff up Webb as well, followed by everyone else in the circle, turning him into a thoroughly stoned balloon. And while there were plenty of laughs and slightly embarrassing pictures, there were also cheers and supportive slaps to his taut middle. He woke the next day exhausted but with few regrets.

Ever since, the rabbit had found inflation relaxing, the ideal way to fend off stress and entertain people. Living balloons put a smile on everyone's faces.

Webb watched his shirt stretch tight over his rounding middle. The shirt inched up with every pump of the bellows, revealing his gray and white belly. Inflating with a bellows wasn't all that different from using a bike pump. It felt more intimate, in a way, and he reminded himself to order one after the weekend.

Pump after pump puffed the rabbit up. His belly gradually blimped out, changing from a balloon to a beach ball. Webb felt his swollen middle wobble up and down as he worked the bellows, provoking muffled giggling fits. He twisted his hips to intensify the wobble, swaying to a non-existent tune.

The constant pumping made Webb's arms sore, forcing him to rest. He pulled out the bellows and gazed upon his wonderful balloon of a belly, which had swelled to at least two feet wide. An ideal size for casual blimping. Bigger

could be funner, but then he'd have to wrangle his giant gut through doorways or have someone roll him around, neither of which were feasible while he still had work to do.

Bloated and content, Webb drummed on his belly. "Who could hate this?" he mumbled aloud, soothed by the *thunks*. Small, needling teases of pressure followed every smack, sending pleasant tingles across his middle. The buzz from being mildly high only enhanced it.

After a few minutes of lazily playing with his swollen belly, Webb remembered his responsibilities. He waddled back to the main room with bellows in paw, his large gut bouncing up and down with every step.

Berg and Blake were *still* going on about baseball, arguing about the dimensions of outfields or wall heights or something. It might as well have been rocket science to Webb.

Webb wobbled past the pair in search of whatever rack or bin the bellows belonged in. The bloated bunny's presence brought the baseball discussion to a snickering halt.

"Bro, what the heck happened to you?" Berg asked.

"Not much. Just got ambushed by one of Ample Lake's ghosts," Webb replied matter of factly. The guys gave him a hard time about his belief in the paranormal, but he'd learned to roll with the punches and play it up. They made fewer jokes when he laughed along with them rather than scowled. "I'd be scraps right now if I hadn't wrested this fearsome bellows from their grasp and turned it against them." He made pumping motions with the bellows and smirked. The performance got the laughs Webb wanted.

Blake leaned over and tapped the rabbit's belly. "Maybe the ghost should try a more efficient inflation method next time. Anything with a hose would be better than that old thing."

"Don't give the ghosts advice! If they pop me, you might be next." Webb spotted a little tool rack by the fireplace. When he bent over to add the bellows, his round belly pushed the rack out of reach. He tried once more, with the same result. Berg and Blake snorted at him behind his back. Webb shrugged and gave up, placing the bellows on the fireplace mantle. "Oh yeah, the kitchen and dining room in the back are fine. Nothing broken."

"Shit, we do have to check stuff, don't we?" Berg said, shaken from his baseball daze.

"Maybe TV really does rot your brain," Blake snickered, not bothering to dodge the gut smack from Berg that followed.

"Since our favorite balloon bunny cleared the first floor, all we've got left is the bedrooms upstairs." The polar bear took the lead, rushing from the embarrassment of letting himself get more distracted than the guy who was high.

Webb wobbled along with the guys to the base of the staircase, happily taking up the rear since his recreational blimping had made him the most sluggish of the three for once.

“How stiff do you think the beds are gonna be?” Berg asked as they headed up.

“The beds here should be okay. This is supposed to be the fancy main lodge, after all. I bet the cabin beds are hard as a rock, though,” Blake said.

“Good thing we’ve got dibs on the good beds. Waking up with a hangover after sleeping on a hard floor blows,” Berg snorted.

“Doesn’t all that padding cushion you?” Blake slapped Berg’s round rump, causing the startled polar bear to let out a flustered yelp.

“Oh fuck off!”

The stairs led to a landing with two doors. Berg opened the first door, revealing a bedroom decorated with more of the same—wood, wood, and more wood. Webb began to think a whole forest had gone into furnishing the lodge. He feared he’d get a splinter if he brushed against any surface in the room.

Two queen beds covered in plaid blankets and pillows stood against a wall with a nightstand between them. There was a heavy dresser, a plain desk, and a small TV. Paintings of mountains hung behind the beds. A second, open door led to a shared bathroom.

A light brown stuffed animal sat atop the closest bed. It was practically spherical, with intentionally vague features that left its species up to interpretation. Most stuffed animals were designed that way to appeal to the widest possible audience. Webb’s mother had sewn fabric ears and cottontails onto all of theirs so they’d sort of resemble rabbits.

But most stuffed animals didn’t come with a giant tear around their middles and stuffing spilling out.

Berg picked up the ripped stuffed animal. “I guess the weirdo at the gas station was right. The Ample Lake Burster *does* exist, and he’s ruthlessly popping stuffed animals. We’ve got nothing to fear as long as we’re not full of stuffing.” He tossed the toy back onto the bed, leaving a short trail of spilled fluff.

“I thought hotels were supposed to leave a mint on your pillow, not a disfigured stuffed animal. Kind of clashes with the whole vacation retreat feel they’re going for,” Blake said.

The vibes around the stuffed animal were rotten from Webb’s point of view. He thought of how the ghost hunters he followed emphasized watching out for paranormal destruction of property. Sometimes, the destruction wasn’t random, it was symbolic, and the stuffed animal was the only damaged item they’d come across. And while he knew Berg had been joking, he *did* think the torn stuffed animal looked like it was bursting from certain angles.

Webb shuddered. “Dude, I don’t like this. It’s an omen.” The inflation and weed weren’t enough to counter the ominous energy of the stuffed animal.

“Ghosts aren’t real, bro. Don’t worry your damn cottontail off,” Berg said.

“It’s creepy, but it’s mundane creepy,” Blake insisted. “I’m sure it was just the last housekeeper venting some work rage or something. Cleaned the place a final time and then clawed the stuffed animal on the way out.”

“That or an animal went to town on it. Bro, there better not be rats in the walls or something,” Berg groaned.

Both theories sounded sensible enough to Webb, but he knew Berg and Blake were skeptics who’d go out of their way to excuse literal floating furniture or symbols burning themselves into the wall without a second thought. He rubbed the purple crystal around his neck between two fingers and told himself the stuffed animal was the only bad energy he’d come across so far.

Berg led them through the shared bathroom, checking faucets and light switches along the way. Nothing sputtered or flickered. The second bedroom was an exact replica of the first, though thankfully lacking any ruined stuffed animals.

Berg clapped his paws and put on a pale imitation of Kevin’s voice. “Swell job, guys! We proved the place isn’t infested or trashed. Time to fucking chill.”

“We still haven’t brought in the lanterns and stuff yet,” Blake piped in.

“I didn’t forget about them!” Berg blurted out in a huff.

“Sounds like you did to me.”

“Oh shut it. Why do we need lanterns anyway? We’ve got electricity and cable.”

“Only if a storm doesn’t knock out the power. Don’t forget it’s supposed to rain hard tonight.”

“If we lose power during the game, *someone’s* ending up a blimp,” Berg threatened. It wasn’t a bluff, either. The polar bear had a history of puffing people up whenever a team he liked lost. He’d roar, grab the nearest frat boy, and balloon them with lung power alone. Or belches if he’d been guzzling enough soda or beer. On more than one occasion, Webb had strategically positioned himself within reach of Berg as an excuse to blimp up.

Bad vibes bred more bad vibes, and Webb didn’t want Berg drawing the attention of anything malevolent because of one bad baseball game. “Maybe we should all mellow out and blimp out? Seriously, nothing’s more chill.” The rabbit thumped on his belly with his paws.

“Thanks for volunteering later, bro,” Berg said.

Oh well, he’d tried. At least he had a decent chance of fully inflating later. “I aim to please. Should we grab that stuff now?”

Berg nodded. “Yeah, but not before you deflate.”

“What’s so wrong about having a little fun while I work?” Webb smacked his belly and watched it wobble. Nothing beat the little pleasures in life.

“You won’t be able to do shit with that gut in the way, and I’m not letting you blimp your way out of work.” Berg walked around Webb and grabbed him from behind.

Webb blushed as two thick paws groped the round sides of his belly. “H- Hey, wait a minute,” he stammered.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make it quick,” Berg smirked.

Berg lifted Webb off his feet as if he weighed nothing more than a real balloon, then gave the rabbit a firm squeeze.

Webb’s muzzle twisted as the pressure around his middle intensified. His cheeks puffed out, and a thunderous belch escaped his lips, rattling the room. Webb’s belly shrunk by half, reduced to a mere beach ball in size. “I’m...I’m good,” Webb gasped.

“Nope, gotta get all that air out of there,” Berg said before squeezing the rabbit once more.

The resulting burp shook only Webb as Berg forced every last ounce of air from his middle. Webb stumbled when Berg released him, dizzy and unused to not being swollen. He missed the faint pressure already, and the hint of clumsiness a balloon belly brought. As rough as the treatment had been, he’d also enjoyed it. An air pump flipped to reverse was boring and uneventful. Getting squeezed by hand was fun and comical.

The vibes in the air were good again. With a little effort, Webb would ensure they stayed that way.