

The Ample Lake Burster: Chapter 03

By: Indigo Rho

Cody maintained his fakest, friendliest smile as he watched the cop waddle back to his truck through the side mirror. The short leopard rolled up his window and dug his claws into the steering wheel, not caring if he left marks. He planned on replacing the cover soon.

“Cool. Cool cool cool. Why didn’t any of you tell me the fucking speed limit had changed!” Cody hissed.

“I’m not your damn navigator,” said the fat arctic wolf filling out the back seat. Abel scratched the fur around his red studded collar. “Throw a hissy fit at Oscar.”

Cody turned his vengeful gaze on the rotund red fox packed into the passenger seat beside him. Oscar’s seatbelt dug so far into his large belly that it seemed ready to disappear. “I swear I didn’t see a sign. And these eyes don’t miss anything!” He gestured with two thick fingers between his eyes and the road.

“They don’t miss anything edible,” the chubby, gray and white cottontail rabbit sharing the back with Abel giggled.

Cody narrowed his eyes at Oscar and poked the fox’s gut with a finger. It sank into soft pudge up to the second knuckle. “Yeah, Webb’s right. You wouldn’t have missed the sign if it was a pizza, jumbo.”

Oscar’s muzzle twisted. Cody felt the fox try to suck in his gut, an impossible task. “I *really* don’t think there was a sign, though!”

Webb continued giggling. “Chill, Cody. It’s not that big of a deal.”

Cody snapped his attention back to Webb like a feline whip. “Not a big deal? You think getting a ticket’s not a big deal? It’s an *enormous* deal. An Oscar-sized deal!” He wanted to shake Webb until the rabbit’s ears flew off. “It’s over a hundred dollars. My dad’s gonna go ballistic when he sees it!” He could already envision the big, gruff leopard looking down on him with a frown so sharp it might as well have been carved from stone. Dad didn’t take kindly to his kids shaming the Carmichael name; any blemish to *any* record was a shame in his eyes.

Abel reached over and tousled Cody’s head fluff with a giant paw. “Aw, is little Cody gonna lose his precious allowance?”

Cody’s fur puffed up. He hissed at Abel and took a swipe, but the wolf dodged him with ease simply by leaning back in his seat. Abel let out a deep, belly-shaking laugh at the failed counterattack.

“Hey, now, put those claws away,” Oscar said, pulling Cody’s attention away from the snarky wolf. “It’s really, really obvious to me that you got caught

in a classic speed trap. I'd bet lunch on the lower speed limit sign only being on one side of the road to set up travelers. A street near where I grew up is notorious for that. The good news is, if you contest the ticket in court, I can almost guarantee you it'll get thrown out. And then you won't get grounded."

"I wouldn't be grounded," Cody grumbled. But he'd never be allowed to forget it. "You'd better be right." He took the truck out of park and got back on the road, staying five under the limit and hypervigilant for hidden signs.

"I am! Probably," Oscar quietly added. "Forget about the ticket for the time being and focus on the party! The night sky full of bright stars. The warmth and glow of a roaring bonfire. The tables creaking under the weight of beer and snacks. The hunky frat boys searching high and low for the bratty bottom of their dreams. The kind of guys who've cultivated cat-squishing hips thanks to the campus' notoriously fattening dining halls."

"If that's all it'll take to calm Cody down, I'll sit on him all night long," Abel offered with a toothy grin.

"And I can pump him up beforehand," Oscar said, diving right into the teasing.

Cody clutched the steering wheel tight. His ears sat flat, and his face radiated flustered warmth like a heater on full blast. The leopard wasn't necessarily ashamed of his preferences for guys bigger than him in every way, but having people blow them out of proportion complicated things.

Cody didn't like to inflate, not at all. Inflation led to teasing and mockery and embarrassing photos of him bouncing around like a beach ball. Inflation led to people wanting to inflate you again, whether you like it or not. And inflation led to accidents, which led to popping, which led to others remembering you only as the guy who burst doing something dumb.

Cody enjoyed being the guy doing the inflating and teasing. A stuck-up jock on the football team would typically have every advantage over the short, slim leopard, but their strengths vanished the second they blimped up. Then, they weren't a star athlete standing proudly at the peak of the social ladder, they were a helpless balloon whining about how loudly they creaked.

But a few weeks back, Cody had gotten a little too high at a party and let Oscar pump him up. Thank God he'd avoided becoming spherical, but he'd still sported an unwieldy balloon belly the size of an exercise ball, which had turned him into a target. Abel had bumped into him and used him as a damn inflatable chair for over an hour, ensuring his social media feeds overflowed with pictures and videos of his humiliating plight.

Years of avoiding gaining a reputation as a seat cushion or an air mattress invalidated in an hour, all thanks to his obnoxious friends. Now most of frat row

believed he wanted to be sat on all the time, and half of *them* were convinced he liked a bit of inflation in the mix as well.

Worse yet, his treacherous mind *had* enjoyed the treatment to some extent. And when he'd remained inflated while getting fucked by Abel later that night, he'd enjoyed it even more. At least an audience hadn't witnessed that particular awakening.

"I'm not ending up under anyone's ass anytime soon!" Cody growled. His frat brothers snickered at the declaration, and the slighted leopard silently vowed to get back at them all before they returned home. They'd all make perfect party balloons.

Cody begged his GPS to be mistaken as it guided him into the dreary Ample Lake Gas and Grocery, but it disappointed him with a cheerful "You have arrived at your destination."

"Congrats, Kevin, you picked the shittiest gas station in the state to stop at." Cody brought the truck to a stiff stop beside a pump.

"I doubt there's much choice out here," Oscar suggested.

"Then he should've stopped earlier before all we had left was the gas station of the damned." He'd throw a fit if the shoddy station's gas somehow ruined his tank.

"Vape break!" Webb yelled as he slid out of the truck. Abel joined the rabbit, his vape pen already out of his pocket.

"Must be nice to spend the whole day high without a care in the world." Cody jeered in the rabbit's direction, not that Webb could hear him. He got out and started up the pump.

"As if we've never wasted a weekend puffing up." Oscar gave the small leopard a friendly nudge with his elbow.

"Ugh, don't call it that," Cody groaned. He hated how often he'd needed to deflate after getting high with Oscar. The fox had a habit of testing his lung capacity on Cody while inebriated.

"But really, cat, what's eating you? You've been as prickly as a furry cactus since before we left, so it can't just be the ticket." Oscar loomed, casting a wide shadow on Cody.

Cody kept quiet. Oscar would find a way to tease him if he vented, so why bother?

"The silent treatment won't work on me, Cody. I'm not letting you bottle up that frustration until you swell and explode." Oscar took one step forward and pinned Cody against the truck with his soft belly.

Cody's tail poofed up. He pushed futilely at his friend's gut, but his paws merely sunk in. "Fine!" he hissed, prompting Oscar to pull back. "I'm pissed because I want this dumb vacation to be relaxing finally! No one said anything about me having to drive when Kevin volunteered me for this job." He'd only stopped shouting at Kevin for that after the elk had promised him a reprieve from cleaning up after, which he knew would be beyond horrible. The guests were going to trash the place, guaranteed.

"Well, you've got the biggest SUV in the frat."

"Not by choice!" Though Cody appreciated towering above everything else on the road. "That's just what my older brother Grant had, so I got stuck with it when he didn't need it anymore." Because he'd gotten himself popped in a way so astronomically stupid, Cody would never have to worry about being the most disappointing child of the family. And with all the shit Grant had put him through growing up, it couldn't have happened to a more deserving jerk. But he didn't want to dwell on popping at that moment, so he moved on.

"True. But with all the supplies we had to transport, it made sense to bring the most spacious truck. It was either that or choosing a smaller truck and cramming everything into the backseats. Would you have *really* wanted to make that trip buried under grocery bags?" Oscar asked with a grin.

Cody shuddered. One disadvantage of being on the smaller side—at least compared to the hulking, bottomless pits he called frat brothers—was the assumption he could be squeezed into any seat, even when clutter filled half of it. He had little nostalgia for car rides.

"Okay, that would've sucked. By you know what also sucks? Nearly getting flattened while loading all that junk we brought!"

Oscar rubbed the back of his head. "I said I was sorry."

"You laughed while saying it! That cooler could've crushed me, and you laughed!" Cody clenched his fists shut. He'd felt his life flash before his eyes when he'd looked up while tying his shoes and seen the cooler tumble off the counter. Only swift reflexes had saved him from harm.

"I only laughed because you did that thing where your fur puffs out. It's like watching a blowfish defend itself." Oscar snorted, then burst into laughter.

"It's not like that at all! My fur stands up a little. A *little*!" Cody insisted.

"And the cooler was empty, anyway."

"It was still a heavy cooler, which I only had to dodge because you bumped it with your enormous gut!" Cody glared at the vulpine mound he blamed for his close call.

"I don't know what you're talking about. My paw slipped, that's all." Oscar sucked in his gut and lifted his chest."

“As. If. I’d. Fall. For. That!” Cody jabbed the fox’s middle with a finger as he spoke every word. Oscar’s muzzle twisted from the barrage, and he exhaled, causing his belly to balloon back out to normal. “I swear your belly will be the end of me one day. And you, too, probably!”

“My innocent paunch would never betray me.” Oscar proudly patted his gut.

“Remember that the next time you run a red light trying to make it to a fast food joint before their breakfast menu closes.” Bringing up traffic violations was a mistake because the memory of his speeding ticket came rushing back. “Oh yeah, and after the huge hassle of loading shit and driving here, I’m the one who gets stuck with the ticket!”

“Which you’ll be able to contest so it doesn’t go on your record,” Oscar was quick to remind him.

“I bet I’ll have to come all the way up here again to contest it, though. That’s gonna be such a huge waste of time and gas. And getting it cleared won’t stop Dad from throwing a fit!” Maybe he’d bring a six-pack of beer as a peace offering. The only thing the elder Carmichael liked more than lecturing was liquor. Dad went through so many beers while watching football and baseball games that his gut always sloshed audibly afterward. He was more booze balloon than cat on game day.

Oscar stepped forward again, bringing his whole girth to bear upon the leopard. Cody meowed in surprise as his friend’s belly pinned him to his truck, practically enveloping him. He snarled, but his face flushed red. Why did getting squished have to feel so good?

“Buddy, you need to take a breather,” Oscar said, casually ignoring Cody’s weak attempts to push him away. “You’re on vacation. No school, no work, no grouchy dad. Well, there’ll be a little bit of work, but then you party. Doctor’s orders.” He finally backed up.

“Fine, whatever,” Cody snapped, trying to hide his blushing. He welcomed the click of the gas pump finishing up, and parked his truck next to Kevin’s before heading into the gas station. Webb and Abel followed them inside, laughing about something Cody didn’t care about.

Cody’s nose wrinkled at the smell. The place looked as terrible on the inside as he’d imagined, a shambling corpse of a store that likely peaked decades before he’d been born. Shelves alternated between messy and barren. He vowed to check the expiration dates on anything he bought, even if it came in a can.

Kevin, Dante, Berg, and Blake loitered close to the entrance. “We were just about to text you. What took you so long?” Kevin asked.

Abel spoke up before Cody could open his mouth to offer a vague excuse. “Kitty got a speeding ticket trying to catch up.”

“That’s not what happened!” Cody was as annoyed by the nickname as he was by Abel outing him. The wolf was only supposed to call him that in private when they occasionally hooked up.

Kevin’s mouth flattened, and he stood up straighter. The damn elk was about to go into authority mode, precisely what Cody didn’t want to deal with. “Lagging behind’s no excuse to drive recklessly, dude. What if you’d crashed? We can’t afford to let this party become a disaster.”

“I *wasn’t* being reckless,” Cody said, speaking slowly so he didn’t blow up at Kevin. “I thought I was going the speed limit, and the cops decided I wasn’t, so they stuck me with a ticket.”

A raspy cackle startled Cody. His unpleasant surroundings had distracted him from the ferret hunched over the front counter. The man’s polo stretched tight over his chest and shoulders. He wore a camouflage pattern cap tilted low enough to hide his eyes.

“They got ya on that stretch of road right past Crystal Creek, right?” the ferret asked with an amused tone in his voice.

“Uh, maybe?” Cody muttered in response. He would’ve rather gotten a lecture from his dad than spoken with the stranger.

The ferret laughed again. “The Sheriff loves staking out that spot. He mostly catches folk racing home to watch the game, but he snaps up out-of-towners as well. Y’all staying for a bit or just passing through?”

Cody didn’t like a single thing about the ferret’s toothy grin or how his half-hidden gaze lingered long and hard on every one of them.

“We’re partying at Camp Ample Lake.” Webb revealed what the entire group had quietly decided to hide, earning frustrated exhales and a few glares. The odd gas station attendant didn’t need to know their exact plans.

The ferret’s grin got wider and toothier, like he’d just uncovered a winning lottery ticket. “Is that so? I’d be careful out there, otherwise your bad luck’s only just beginning. The curse of Ample Lake is strong on that lonely shore.”

Cody knew he should’ve shut up and nodded along to the ferret’s nonsense, but the day’s hardships had left him in a foul mood, and he got snarky when that happened. “Nice try, but we’re not falling for ghost stories. Speed traps scare me more than sinister forces in the dark.”

The ferret chuckled, seemingly unfazed by Cody’s dismissive remark. “You’re free to ignore my warning. Just like you’re free to ignore your seatbelt if you drive home from a late night at the bar. Both choices tend to end the same way.”

“Uh, what kind of curse are we talking about here?” Oscar asked. Cody wanted to snap a paw around the fox’s snout and drag him outside. They didn’t need to give the weirdo an audience for his dumb stories.

“The sort of curse that seeps into a place drop by drop. Ample Lake has a long history of tragedy and inflation. And I’m not talking about the economic kind.” The ferret added a little laugh to every sentence as if he’d been itching to babble on for months.

“It all started with Abraham Ample, the man the lake is named after. He lived by the shore for a decade at least before any other settlers moved into the area. Some say his cabin used to stand on the same plot Camp Ample Lake eventually occupied.” The ferret paused for a moment as if anticipating shudders from his audience. “Well, the new folk were a distrustful lot, motivated by greed and convinced hidden riches dotted the land, just waiting to be snatched up. They bickered endlessly with each other, spreading lies and stoking feuds. They even sabotaged homesteads when the mood struck. Stubborn Abraham stayed out of their mess, until the unfortunate day they dragged him right into the middle of it. Literally.

“Someone had fouled the well of Luther Strout, the wealthiest, most vindictive man on the lake. No one with an honest conscience could genuinely believe Abraham Ample had anything to do with the crime, but Strout coveted Abraham’s land. The fiend bribed enough folk into becoming ‘witnesses’ to a host of preposterous crimes Abraham had allegedly committed, and then had a posse bring him the accused for punishment. They forced Abraham to guzzle water from the lake, bucket after bucket, mocking his struggles as he ballooned. And as the creaking became deafening and the explosive end drew near, Abraham Ample cursed those around him who’d defiled the lake with their greed.

“Those who’d done Abraham Ample dirty didn’t fear the gargled threats of a burst balloon. But only fools underestimate the power of a vengeful spirit. One by one, the most despicable of the lot met explosive ends under mysterious circumstances. Luther Strout didn’t have long to enjoy his ill-gotten land. His hide scraps were found beside a water pump, arranged to spell the word ‘Guilty.’” The ferret chuckled long and hard after the revelation.

Cody rolled his eyes at the drivel the gas station attendant heaped upon them. It was the same sensationalist crap Webb loved to go on about. Ghosts and demons and cryptids and curses. “Well none of us are guilty of bursting old man Abraham, so I don’t think we need to worry about haunted faucets or hoses or whatever.”

The ferret shook his head. “If only Abraham Ample’s spirit were that easy to appease. His final curse falls on deaf ears to this very day. Whenever folk don’t treat the lake with proper respect, he rises from the depths to make things right, leaving piles of scraps in his furious wake. So you’ll tread lightly if you know what’s good for you, lest you draw the ire of the Ample Lake Burster.”

“How many times do I have to tell you to stop spreading that shit around, Roscoe!”

Cody’s tail stiffened, and he nearly jumped at the sound of the new voice, which he faintly recognized with dread. Sure enough, a rotund elephant in a sheriff’s uniform stood at the entry to the gas station. His broken left tusk was tipped with a blunt silver cap. The odor of cigarette smoke rolled into the station with him. A spotted hyena wearing thick-framed glasses slunk in behind the Sheriff.

The ferret’s smug grin upended into a bitter scowl at the Sheriff’s arrival. “People got a right to know about the curse, Sheriff *Sutton*.” Roscoe spat the elephant’s name out. “Bad things happen when they don’t.”

“There’s no God damned curse!” Sheriff Sutton ended the declaration with a short trumpet from his trunk. “But you and a bunch of other idiots spread utter nonsense around like it’s gospel and rile people up for no reason. You scare away the sane visitors and attract ghost hunters like flies. Wanna know how often I get called out because some crackpot with a camera’s trespassing in search of ghosts? Too damn often!”

“If the curse is nonsense, then how do you explain the ghost sightings? Or the creaks in the night? The air compressors rattling to life on their own?” Roscoe crossed his arms.

“People swear they see all sorts of shit when they’re drunk. Or *high*.” Sheriff Sutton shot an accusing glare at Webb. Cody didn’t understand how the elephant could smell the weed while wrapped in his own thick aroma of cigarettes.

“Alright, then what about the burstings? The curse got Bertram Strout just two days ago!”

Sheriff Sutton’s face scrunched into three different scowls before he finally responded. “Shut your damn mouth, Roscoe!”

“It *is* public knowledge, Sheriff,” the hyena in Sutton’s shadow spoke up. “Kind of hard for the news to ignore someone with Strout’s reputation, even out here.”

“Did I ask for your input, *Deputy* Marsh?” Sheriff Sutton turned around, bringing his considerable ire down upon the hyena.

“I just thought—*mrrmph!*” The deputy’s excuse was forcefully silenced by Sutton’s trunk clogging his mouth.

Sheriff Sutton breathed in so deep his gut swelled half a foot rounder. Then he blew out through his trunk like he was trying to inflate a weather balloon.

Marsh jerked as his flat middle blimped out like an airbag. The buttons exploded off his uniform, and his belt snapped off, making way for his wobbling globe of a belly. His hide creaked in protest from the rapid inflation, and his short

tail stuck straight out. Sheriff Sutton yanked his trunk out, sending the hyena stumbling back.

“Don’t interrupt me, and don’t undermine my authority. Got it?” the Sheriff demanded.

“Of course, sir. Sorry, sir.” Deputy Marsh nodded frantically, and his glasses slid to the tip of his snout.

Finished humbling his own deputy, Sheriff Sutton turned on Roscoe again. “The unfortunate incident with Mr. Strout is an ongoing investigation, which I will *not* allow to be muddled by claims it’s the fault of malicious spirits or zombies or whatever other supernatural crap you believe in. If anyone’s to blame, it’s a regular, shitty person who’ll soon be behind bars for good.”

Sheriff Sutton didn’t wait for a retort from Roscoe. He pushed aside Berg on his way to the snack aisle and grabbed a few bags of chips. Then he stormed out of the gas station without paying.

Deputy Marsh adjusted his glasses and sighed. “Uh, sorry, folks. The Sheriff’s got a lot on his plate at the moment, what with the investigation.”

Yet he still finds time to write up fraudulent tickets, Cody grumbled to himself.

“But, uh, do report anything suspicious you see,” Marsh continued. His exposed, bloated belly wobbled up and down as he talked, immensely diminishing his authority. “And Roscoe, you really gotta stop getting the Sheriff worked up like that. You know how he feels about your, uh, hobbies.” Roscoe stayed silent, and the deputy didn’t push the matter any further. He nodded at the guys and left the gas station, briefly becoming wedged in the doorway before squeezing himself through.

Roscoe grunted in disgust once the door shut. “Both of them are damn fools, and I pray y’all are smarter than they are,” the ferret urged. “The Ample Lake Burster is very real, and nothing can stop him when he wakes. Cuffs don’t work on ghosts. Neither do guns. Maybe this time, the good Sheriff will see old Abraham Ample for himself—right before the pressure overwhelms him. Just like that bastard Strout.”

The deep laugh that rumbled out of Roscoe made Cody’s fur stand on end. He wanted to bolt out the door and drive straight home, not because of any ghosts but because of the locals. But the unnerved leopard knew the rest of the guys would overrule him, and he’d been laughed at enough for one day. He was beginning to think he’d need to take a vacation to recover from his vacation.