

## The Ample Lake Burster: Chapter 01

By: Indigo Rho

*“Cshhhhhhhhhk. Ah, fuck!”*

Bertram Strout held his beer over the side of the boat, leaving a trail of fizzing foam across his lap.

“Fuck,” the horse repeated. He sipped the beer that'd pooled around the top while moving the can from one hoof to the other. Then he leaned to the side and dipped his free hoof in the cold lake water to wash it off, flicking the hoof dry after.

Quiet returned to Lake Ample. Frog croaks echoed across the water, and gentle waves lapped against the metal sides of Bertram's boat. No speed boats raced by, blaring music and throwing waves at him. Bertram didn't have to weave around paddle boarders or kayakers or the aquatic folk who never bothered wearing high-visibility gear when they swam from one side of the lake to the other.

Night brought peace to the lake, and peace on the lake brought Bertram out on his small boat with a cooler of beer and a fishing rod. He had the whole lake to himself. If only the fish were biting.

Bertram chugged the rest of the beer and tossed the empty can into the lake. *“Bworrrrrrrrrrrrrp!”* The belch rattled the rotund horse's doughy middle. He'd gone through five beers already and was just getting started. He planned on returning to shore really sloshed, a little bloated, and carrying at least one fish for his freezer.

“Just gotta try somewhere else,” Bertram grumbled as he reeled in his line. He brought the motor rumbling to life and headed towards the far end of the lake.

Huge homes crammed into tiny lots dotted the lakeshore. More and more popped up every year as the wealthy came hunting for summer getaways. Some shortsighted locals lamented the affluent seasonal visitors like a plague, but Bertram knew a business opportunity when he saw it. He could look to either shore and spot property he'd earned commissions on.

There was the log home on a steep lot with little room for expansion, which he'd lied about a counteroffer on to rush a buyer into accepting it. He had a good laugh when it went back on the market a year later. Then there was the sprawling McMansion with gorgeous views and a half-assed central air system that wouldn't hold up during the average highs of summer, let alone a heat wave.

Docks with hidden rot. Lots with building restrictions buried under fine print. Creatively worded inspection reports. Bertram Strout promoted himself as a real estate agent who could sell any home, no matter what, and he had no

problem resorting to questionable means. No one in the illustrious Strout family backed down from a challenge, especially not when it involved money.

Fewer and fewer homes dominated the shore as he journeyed down the lake. Tall evergreens grew right up to the water, shielding the tiny, older houses behind them. Bertram scoffed. Each lot held the potential for vast profit; he just had to wait for their stubborn owners to see reason and sell so that more ambitious folk could take over.

Then, at the very end of the lake, the homes vanished completely. Rather than a luxurious mansion, a handful of wooden buildings sat scattered in a clearing. Camp Ample Lake.

For decades, the old summer camp had attracted kids from all over the state. The Camp Ample Burstings had put an end to that in the early 2000s. Four staff watching the property over the winter were inflated and popped. Hide scraps and torn clothing were all the cops found. The lawsuits and bad publicity that followed shut down Camp Ample Lake. The burstings remained unsolved.

The property slowly deteriorated as it went through a slew of owners with more ambition than sense. At various points, it was set to become a campground, a resort, a church retreat, and even a heliport. Every last one of them had fallen through before any construction could begin. In the end, Bertram himself had swooped in and renovated the existing buildings before selling the place for a tidy sum to a company specializing in scenic rental venues.

From what the horse had heard, it barely made a profit and might go back on the market within the next year or two. He hoped to make even more money on commission by helping sell the cursed place.

Bertram brought his boat to a stop and killed the engine. The moon bathed the darkened buildings of Camp Ample Lake in faint light. He cracked open another beer—thankfully spared any foam spray—and cast his line into the night. Six recasts and three beers later, the fish still stubbornly refused to bite.

“Where are those fuckers?” Bertram shifted impatiently on his cushioned bench. He’d had his fair share of bad nights on the lake, but the waters around the Camp had never failed him. Even when he didn’t reel in a fish, he got a nibble or two. But for some damn reason, the fish wanted nothing to do with him or his boat that night.

Bertram drained his beer and tossed the can behind his back. “One more,” he grunted, casting the line.

After a minute of disappointing stillness, there was a tug at his line.

Bertram perked up. “About damn time.” He started reeling in his catch, but the line tugged hard to the left. He clenched his teeth as he fought to maintain his grip. The line tugged right, left, and right again, darting back and forth in front of his boat.

“It’s a big one. A fucking record-breaker,” Bertram said. He knew it was the sort of catch that’d make the entire night worth it. He just had to wrestle it out of the lake first.

Bertram stood and widened his stance as he poured every ounce of strength into working the reel. His hooves shook, and sweat beaded on his brow. The fishing rod bent, quivering.

The line snapped.

“Shit!” Bertram’s eyes widened, but the hefty horse lacked the reflexes to prevent the inevitable. He fell backward into the boat, slamming his shoulders against the edge of the bench and his elbows into the metal bottom.

“Fucking fuck!” Bertram rocked from side to side as pain radiated from his back and elbows. He made sure his fishing rod hadn’t flown into the water during the fall and was briefly relieved to find it beside him.

The catch of the year—maybe even a lifetime—and he’d lost it because the damn line had snapped. He swore he’d never buy that brand of fishing line again and make sure everyone he knew got an earful of how unreliable they were. He’d been so close! So damn close!

“God damn it!” Bertram whinnied furiously and chucked a crumpled beer can into the dark. He hoped the fish choked on it.

Something flew out of the darkness and struck Bertram in the muzzle. The surprise attack made him jolt and rock the boat. He touched a hoof to his muzzle but didn’t feel blood or a bruise, just a hint of rapidly receding pain. A wet, crumpled beer can lay in the boat. It was the same brand he’d been drinking all night.

A second empty can hit Bertram from behind, clattering to the bottom of the boat. His heart beat faster, and he snarled. Someone had the gall to fuck with him. Him! He looked all around for the insolent pranksters, but he was alone on the water. No boats, no paddle boards, no floaties. But if the fuckers had gills, they wouldn’t need any of that.

Bertram stood so fast the boat swayed. “I’ve had enough of your shit!” he yelled at the top of his lungs. “Do you know who I am?! I’m Bertram *fucking* Strout. You throw one more can at me—just one *fucking* more—and I’ll have you arrested for assault!” He clenched his fists, preparing for another barrage that never came. He puffed out his cheeks and exhaled, calming himself down some.

“Thought so,” Bertram muttered as he sat. If the fish weren’t cooperating and shitheads were roaming the lake, then he had no reason to be on the water any longer. He had whiskey and a fireplace to return to.

The boat tipped backward. A cold, sopping-wet arm wrapped around Bertram’s neck from behind and dragged him back. The metal edge of the boat dug into the shocked horse’s neck, reducing his breathing to gasps. Croaking

whinnies pierced the silence of Lake Ample. The unseen attacker shoved a hose into Bertram's muzzle before zip-tying it shut.

Air hissed through the hose, causing Bertram's cheeks to billow out. Some air whistled through the corners of his clamped mouth, but the bulk of it blew down his throat and into his middle. His already sizable belly puffed up like a party balloon, steadily unzipping his fishing vest. The buttons of Bertram's plaid shirt underneath the vest had barely contained the horse's doughy girth. They creaked and quaked, popping off one by one.

Bertram thrashed about, threatening to capsize his boat as he fought against his attacker. But the grip of that cold arm refused to budge. Fear tainted every thought racing through his head. Someone was inflating him. Someone who wanted to torment him. Someone he couldn't escape. Someone who might want to pop him. The last thought added fuel to his blind panic.

Unable to tear away his attacker, Bertram instead targeted the hose. He pulled at it, again and again, but couldn't move it a single inch. His own jaws kept the hose locked into place, and the zip ties clung painfully tight around his muzzle.

The horse's belly ballooned against and over the sides of the fishing boat. Bertram felt the first subtle pangs of pressure needling him. His body wanted to swell freely to contain the seemingly endless torrent of air gushing into him, but his boat wasn't built to hold a blimp.

He flailed at his bloated middle with both arms in a desperate attempt to force the air—any air—out. All he did was tire himself further. Every kick, wobble, and swing drained a bit more of Bertram's meager energy reserves.

Bertram expanded in every direction, the air no longer content to remain solely in his middle. His hips, rump, back, and sides filled out, giving the squirming horse a rounder shape. Seams failed, reducing his clothing to shreds of fabric cluttering the boat's floor.

The choking arm abruptly retracted. Bertram tried to sit up but only wobbled. He'd inflated too much, grown far too round. He was becoming more balloon than horse, and balloons weren't known for their flexibility.

*No! No no no!* Bertram screamed in his head. His limbs grew puffy and stiff. They swelled with air, then sunk into his increasingly spherical body. Every second stole a little more of his mobility. Every second brought him closer to his unknown limits.

Bertram could count the number of times he'd truly inflated on one hand. He'd experimented with inflation at college. Most everyone did, whether they wanted to or not. The initiation for his fraternity had involved remaining fully inflated for twenty-four hours straight. After that, he'd only blimped up because of ill-advised bets. Inflating was undignified, an insult to inflict upon others, not

a hobby to indulge in. So the expanding horse had only the vaguest idea of just how large he could grow before he burst apart, and that uncertainty worsened his dread tenfold.

The features that defined Bertram as a person rounded, smoothed, and sunk away, turning him into a dark brown sphere perched atop a fishing boat. His puffy hooves just barely jutted from his bloated sides, wiggling helplessly in despair. His chin pressed against his round chest while his cheeks swelled like balloons.

Taut hide creaked ominously in the night. The air within Bertram's swollen body relentlessly pushed outward, fully intent on blowing him apart to get free. Tingling sensations sprouted across the vast circumference of his middle, alerting him to weak spots on the verge of failing. He dared not squirm, terrified that any strenuous movement might detonate him. All he could do was endure them and pray the air ran out.

It didn't.

The pressure pounding away at Bertram first dominated, then dulled his thoughts. The raging river of fear, anxiety, and anger rushing through his mind trickled to a stop, as if dammed. Coherent thoughts no longer plagued the horse. His hooves and head sunk into his spherical body like quicksand.

A perfect sphere balanced on the boat for a moment, its surface quivering ever so slightly. Then Bertram Strout lost the battle against pressure for good and exploded.

With a thunderclap, dozens of scraps of hide erupted from the void that'd been a horse. The scraps pelted the water and boat like heavy rain. The force of the explosion violently rocked the fishing boat, but it miraculously stayed afloat. The disturbance ended as swiftly as it'd begun, and Lake Ample was quiet again.

A dark shadow moved beneath the water, heading away from Bertram Strout's abandoned boat and towards Camp Ample Lake.