

## The Sweet Spot – Preview

By: Indi

Weekend closes were always bad.

Brett pushed through the doors from the kitchen and took a hard right. The deer saw a polar bear heading in his direction. They were short but heavy, wearing a crimson and gray shirt that didn't quite cover their belly. The initials of the local college—Columbia State University—were on the front of their shirt. Brett straightened up and kept an eye on the bear as they crossed paths, even though he was fairly certain they were simply heading to the bathroom. It paid to be cautious around bigger customers.

Painfully generic western paraphernalia covered the walls: wagon wheels, horseshoes, stock photos from out-of-state rodeos. Brett was surprised—and tremendously thankful—work didn't force them to dress to match the half-assed theme. Cowboy hats and antlers were an exasperating combination.

There was a bit over an hour left till they closed and half the tables were still full. Almost all were college students lingering, finished with food and sipping on drinks as they talked about finals they were dreading, parties they'd been too, and what they'd done during the long Thanksgiving break that'd just ended. He glanced at a couple of his other tables as he went, but none seemed ready for a check yet.

Nearing his destination, Brett raised his fake customer service smile and stopped in front of the booth. "Welcome to Country Cafe, can I start you off with any drinks?"

A snow leopard, a hyena, and a fox were at the booth. Each gave a drink order quickly and politely enough, and Brett began to assume it was going to be an easy table.

"And are you ready to order, or do you need more time?" Brett asked, still smiling wide, as if he wasn't about to check the time on his phone the moment he left.

The snow leopard's gaze settled on Brett's middle, eventually drifting upward. He grinned, fangs visible. Brett already knew what was going to happen, and suppressed a preemptive groan. "I'm liking the look of the deer special. You're on the menu, right juicy?"

The hyena cackled while the fox smirked.

Brett's smile faded. He wasn't in the mood to deal with preds—not that night, not any night. But eating people wasn't illegal, so the deer couldn't exactly tell them to fuck off.

Brett had grown up in a small town on the other side of the state, where the sight of a belly bulging with prey was so rare it was nearly gossip-worthy. Eating others was the sort of thing you saw in movies and video games, that TV insisted was common but felt like a "once in a lifetime" indulgence at best. Before college, only one of his friends had actually eaten someone; they'd described it as overrated and not worth the upset stomach.

When applying for colleges, Brett had been fully aware of Columbia State's reputation as a party college—which universally meant it attracted preds. But their English program was the best in the state, and the University of Columbia hadn't accepted him. Not that a college in the city would've been any less voracious.

Freshman year had been a culture shock to him. His first roommate had gotten eaten after only a week. His second, in less than a month. Roommate number three survived the

year, but also introduced him first to beer, and then to eating people. Gaining the Freshman One Hundred wasn't the highlight of his college career, but at least he'd learned how to evade potential preds. A quarter of the Freshman Class that year wasn't as lucky.

The novelty of treating people like food had worn off quickly. Brett was too prone to feeling guilty about it afterward, always remembering how sad he felt whenever anyone he knew got eaten. And people were obnoxiously fattening. His former roommate was currently taking an unplanned year off from school after gorging his way to immobility. He'd spent his first two years ballooning to a massive five hundred pounds before swallowing five people in one night while drunk. He had no regrets, but Brett wasn't eager to follow his lead.

Now a Junior, Brett simply went about his business, trying not to dwell on the gluttons around him. Work made that difficult.

"The Country Cafe does not encourage the consumption of staff or fellow patrons on the premises, unfortunately." Brett droned off the statement he was officially supposed to repeat when asked such questions. He wasn't fond of the fact he had to act as if the policy was a *bad* thing. *I'm so sorry you can't scarf me down and belch out my nametag, I'd be a great addition to your hips!* "Failure to comply can result in a one hundred dollar surcharge, in addition to fees related to any damage said consumption results in." It wasn't so much a deterrent as an unsubtle price tag. *Wink wink, nudge nudge, cough up a hundred and the deer's yours.* At least most college kids seemed to scoff at the idea of paying for something they could get for free elsewhere. "I assure you our farm-fresh burgers are just as delicious."

"Doubt that." The snow leopard said, before looking at the menu again. He flipped back and forth between a couple of pages, then tossed it on the table. "Guess I'll just get the venison burger instead. Who knows, maybe it'll sate my cravings enough." His friends burst into laughter again.

Brett left the table with three orders of venison burgers, not bothering to put his smile back on.

Brett passed along the orders, confirmed another table wanted their check, grabbed the most recent table's drinks, and then endured the trio acting as if the food had just arrived as well. It was all mechanical, even his familiar frustration with such customers. He couldn't bother to be passionately angry; it'd simply happened too often, to the point he was nearly jaded about it. Not jaded enough to let his guard down, though.

Once things calmed down, Brett poured himself a large soda in the back and leaned against a counter, gulping it down.

"You're certainly looking cheerful."

Brett stopped drinking and glanced up at the slim red snake talking to him. "Got a pred table, Raleigh. I think they just learned about venison jokes. I swear the last couple weeks I've had to put up with one table a shift pulling that crap." He returned to his soda.

"Well, you *have* hit the Sweet Spot," Raleigh said.

"The what?"

"The Sweet Spot," Raleigh repeated himself. "Wait, how do you not know what the Sweet Spot is?"

"Enlighten me," Brett said between gulps.

"It's the weight range where someone's statistically most likely to get eaten." Raleigh still seemed baffled by his friend's ignorance, as if he were having to tell him about gravity or breathing.

"And how have I suddenly fallen into that mythical Sweet Spot?" Brett asked.

Raleigh snorted. "Dude, you've been getting fatter all semester. Look how tight your vest is!" The snake leaned forward and prodded Brett's middle with a finger. Brett swatted at him and pressed further up against the counter, causing his vest to ride up a little. His work clothes *had* been feeling more snug lately. He'd even blown a button out while bending over the week before, but had managed to sew it back on.

"I'm like two forty-two max," Brett said.

"Two fifty's the start of the Sweet Spot, by the way."

"Good thing I'm not that fat then; I'm just chubby," Brett insisted.

"No, you're plump. Pleasantly plump. Dare I say: juicy!" Raleigh went for another prod, but Brett evaded it.

Brett scowled, putting down his empty soda cup. "Ugh, you're sounding like the preds now."

"Explains why I've eaten like three dudes this year." Raleigh thumped his chest and let out a modest belch. If Brett hadn't seen the snake's brief bouts of chubbiness he wouldn't have believed him. Raleigh had been blessed with a hasty metabolism that made gaining weight almost impossible for him. Even the pounds left by a live meal would be shed swimming laps at the pool. "But seriously, the reason you're getting ogled like a snack more is because of the extra weight. My old roommate Lyle was two-fifty when he was eaten. A cousin was about the same. When you get that big you're best off either shedding the weight fast or just going hog wild and blimping out of the range." Raleigh's gaze shifted to Brett's middle for a moment. "Another hundred pounds wouldn't look that bad on you, honestly~"

"You're just making shit up now."

"I swear I'm not! You've ballooned right to the edge of being the kind of indulgent feast a gluttonous pred dreams of. Even I think you're looking kind of filling now."

"Really, dude?" Brett sucked in his gut and stood up straighter. It was an instinctive response, one he used in the presence of preds to make himself look more imposing. Doing it in front of Raleigh made him blush in embarrassment.

Raleigh raised his arms in a defensive posture. "Whoa, big guy, I didn't mean I want to eat you. I'm just saying I can understand why others want to eat you. Fat tastes better and you've got plenty of it." The snake used the tip of his tail to poke Brett's belly. The deer twitched, his face twisting in annoyance as he smacked the mischievous tail away.

"Weight's not the only factor in someone getting eaten!" Brett winced at how loud he'd been. He hoped the noise of the kitchen had drowned him out. "I haven't survived as long as I have by being dumb. Gaining a little weight isn't going to change that."

"I'm not doubting your ability to dodge preds. But if you keep gaining weight you'll be dodging a whole lot more, and I don't want to get stuck covering your shifts because you ended up causing a jock to outgrow their letterman jacket." Raleigh smiled. The snake carefully adjusted his glasses with the tip of his tail and turned around, heading back out into

the restaurant. "Try not to end up as dessert tonight, Juicy!"

Brett nearly threw his cup at Raleigh. "My weight's fine," he grumbled. He'd been fat before and hadn't had any trouble with preds then. Raleigh was overreacting. Or teasing him. On occasion, their conversations had drifted into outright flirting. At least he thought it was flirting.

The deer went to take a drink of his soda and stopped. He guessed there was no harm in losing a bit of weight, just in case. But that could wait until the semester was over.

Brett chugged the rest of the soda and left the back.

The last part of the shift proved tolerable. The pred table continued to mock Brett and didn't leave a tip, but none made a move on him. He'd dealt with worse in the past and accepted some nights would be frustrating.

It was pitch black outside by the time Brett left work. The air was cold and he shivered. He hid his hooves in the front pocket of his crimson school hoodie and started moving, eager for the warmth of home.

The campus at night could be a terrifying place for some. Columbia State University was a sprawling campus that took up close to a quarter of the small town of Troy. Bus routes were sparse and rideshares wouldn't touch the place, forcing students to trek up hills and around sports fields with little to light the way. Dorms were scattered all over, eyes watching from windows above. And between the campus and the student apartments was frat row, a minefield of voracious gluttony.

As dreadful as the whole walk sounded, Brett had found it to be fairly uneventful in reality. After the first couple months of the forty-minute walk home, he'd stopped fearing it. No one was going to rush out of their dorm at midnight to eat someone they didn't know, hungry upperclassmen prowling the campus in the early hours was a myth, and the majority of the consumption on frat row was happening within the frat houses themselves.

So when Brett realized someone was following him, he had trouble accepting it. Whoever it was, they weren't bothering to hide, steps echoing on concrete. Brett picked up his pace and altered his route, heading towards better-lit paths in the hopes of dissuading his tail.

They kept pace with the deer, never far behind.

Brett hadn't lost them after ten minutes and decided being blunt was in order. He stopped and turned around, a bored look on his face. Fear encouraged preds and anger was often assumed to be a bluff. Apathy had the best chance of making a pred pause and reconsider if their meal would be as easy as they'd thought.

A snow leopard stood thirty feet away. The same one from the pred table at the Cafe. He stopped for a moment when Brett turned around, then smiled and continued towards the deer.

"I don't have the time to deal with you tonight," Brett said, speaking as calmly as possible. Deescalation was key. Few preds wanted a fight; they wanted an easy snack that'd make them feel like the top of the food chain instead of lucky. Brett had prevented their piss-

poor attempt at an ambush, denying them any advantage. His antlers were also fully grown, an extra hassle for any would-be pred.

The snow leopard kept walking. "I wasn't joking when I said the deer special looked delicious. I haven't had a real meal in weeks and that plump ass of yours is too good to pass up."

Brett snuck a glance at his butt. He hadn't thought about how round it'd been getting. And the snow leopard had been ogling it the whole time. "Look, I've got the weight advantage on ya and I'm pretty good at swinging these antlers around, so why don't you find someone easier to hunt tomorrow or something?"

"Well I'm pretty good at snapping antlers off the heads of tasty deer," the snow leopard replied with a smirk. "And you being fat sure as Hell isn't gonna stop me from cramming you down my throat." Their voice oozed with confidence. Brett knew he wouldn't be able to talk sense into the hungry feline. Sometimes he just didn't understand preds.

Running away wasn't an option. The snow leopard's thick hoodie prevented Brett from figuring out if they were athletic, but they certainly weren't fat. If Brett fled he'd get caught within seconds, accomplishing nothing but exhausting himself while giving his foe a free hit. He had to fight.

Brett widened his stance and hunched a little, tilting his head to angle his antlers at the pred. He hated fighting. He wasn't any good at it. He could throw a punch about as well as any drunk and hadn't been in anything worse than a frenzied scuffle. His best hope was that the snow leopard wasn't any better.

The snow leopard charged, closing the short gap between the pair fast. Brett tried to dodge but was tackled anyway, the pred's shoulder striking his chest. The pred kept going, forcing Brett to stumble backward before falling off the sidewalk and onto the grass.

The fall knocked the wind out of both of them.

Brett was still coughing when a clumsy punch skimmed his snout and stung his nose. He swung blindly, the back of his hoof slamming into the snow leopard's side. He yelped and his foe howled. Brett rolled onto his side to push himself up. The snow leopard grabbed a hold of his antlers from behind and pulled.

"Fuck!" Brett cursed through clenched teeth as his head was pulled back. His antlers creaked, the pressure building at their base. Despite the snow leopard's boast, their methods were poor. All they were doing was hurting the deer, not snapping his antlers.

A series of wild punches fended off the snow leopard and gave Brett enough time to roll onto his knees. He threw his arms up to block a punch. The follow-up strike went wide so he snatched the snow leopard by the wrist and twisted. Brett's victory was swiftly negated as a punch from the pred's free paw struck him right in the nose. It wasn't enough to make Brett lose his grip but it stung like Hell.

Brett pulled hard, causing the snow leopard to tumble forwards and against him. Before the pred could push away, Brett opened his mouth wide and lunged, swallowing their muzzle.

The snow leopard's eyes widened, anger turning to fear. He'd been so obsessed with taking down Brett, he hadn't considered the possibility the deer might be a pred as well.

Brett hadn't planned on eating anyone that night, that week, or even that month. The

snow leopard had pissed him off greatly, though. First at the Cafe, and then on the walk home. He didn't like being treated like food by a smug cat with terrible humor and a superiority complex. Without hesitation, he swallowed the rest of the snow leopard's head in a single gulp.

The snow leopard struggled, of course. He twisted and pulled, pushing at the grass with his paws to escape the warm maw of the deer. Brett placed a hoof on the back of the snow leopard's head and foiled his efforts with a forceful nudge.

Brett felt his cheeks swell and his neck bulge. It'd been over a year since he'd last eaten anyone, but his skills hadn't dulled. He secured his prey's arms and pinned them to their sides, narrowing their shoulders and weakening their struggles at the same time. His jaws stretched over the snow leopard's shoulders and the taste of cotton filled his mouth.

Few things ruined a prey's taste quite like clothes. Brett didn't have the luxury of stripping his meal, nor the claws required to tear the offending covering off. He ignored the blandness. His meal was born of spite, not actual hunger. Sealing the obnoxious snow leopard away was all that mattered to him.

Quick swallows brought the snow leopard in up to his chest. Both pred and prey were sitting on their knees, an awkward position that favored neither. Brett couldn't tilt his meal up to take advantage of gravity, while the snow leopard couldn't kick or use his legs much at all.

The predation was sloppy all around, unplanned and desperate. It was far from the idealized feat of strength and cunning everyone liked to make it out to be. Brett didn't care; he just wanted the snow leopard gone.

The collar of Brett's hoodie stretched as he swallowed the snow leopard. He didn't wear clothes made entirely of expensive, stretchy expandex—the kind popular with active preds—but the collars of everything he owned were made of it. It was a necessity for anyone with antlers like himself. It also coincidentally saved his shirt and hoodie from getting ripped apart as he ate.

The bulge of the snow leopard traveled deeper, ending at Brett's stomach. His belly swelled out from under his hoodie, giving him a lumpy beer gut. Every swallow caused it to balloon outward.

"Let me out!" the snow leopard roared from within. "I'm not food you piece of shit!"

The curses were muffled by Brett's existing pudge. He promptly ignored them.

Brett's jaws stretched over the snow leopard's flat stomach and ass, leaving only his legs left to swallow. In general, preds considered the waist to be the point of no return for prey. They could barely fight back then and it was even tough for others to pull them free. There were no guarantees when consuming others, though. A lucky swing or poorly timed cough could change everything. So Brett didn't relax.

The deer slid his hooves under his prey's legs and lifted, slowly raising them off the ground. The snow leopard kicked in a frenzy, only managing to hit the grass and kick up clumps of dirt. A few more swallows and Brett was able to lift his prey higher, finally angling them so they'd slide easier down his gullet. His belly swelled down his lap and against the ground, offering stability so he didn't fall back as he finished his meal.

Aggressive gulps pulled the last of the snow leopard into Brett's maw. He yanked off his



twenty bucks and cracked trophies that'd just take up space in your closet." He sighed. "Why am I lecturing dinner?"

The deer wobbled his belly to make sure the snow leopard wasn't just pretending to be passed out, then waddled back onto the sidewalk. Lugging around a full gut was going to make the trip home even longer. God, he just wanted to sleep. He'd need to set up two alarms to make sure he didn't food coma right through his first class in the morning.

"I should've pulled out your wallet so at least I'd know who ruined my perfectly bland night," Brett grumbled to himself, belly bouncing with every step. "Man, you're gonna make me fatter, too. Raleigh's gonna be insufferable."

The deer sluggishly headed down the sidewalk, complaining about his meal the entire way. Behind him, the snow leopard's discarded shoes littered the grass, waiting to be mistaken for evidence of a joyful hunt.