

NOTE: There are SPOILERS here for Into the Storm, as this story develops an event that occurs late in that book.

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Here's a little taste of Badger and Adrienne, first getting to know each other.

BTW: this little thing is totally PG, except for language. All sweetness and light.

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Adrienne Gets a Tour

A Signal Bend Short

by Susan Fanetti

Badger waited on the porch of the B&B, feeling nervous—more nervous than usual, even. Although he got laid whenever he wanted to, he still had trouble talking to girls, and the prettier they were, the harder it was. He hated it.

It was probably just lingering high school horseshit, when his face was a fucking mess and, no matter how hard he'd tried, he couldn't even hit a buck fifty at six feet tall. Girls laughed if he even made eye contact.

So, yeah, he got the yips around them all, even at the clubhouse, when he knew they were there to fuck him, and they didn't care much about anything other than the kutte. Even then, he waited for them to come to him—which they did. But civilian girls? No. And if they looked like the kind of girl who could have anybody they wanted, then he just didn't fucking bother to even look.

Adrienne was the kind of girl who could have *anybody*. Holy Christ, she was pretty. She looked so much like Shannon it was crazy, and Shannon was so unbelievably hot Badger had trouble being in the same room with her for too long.

He thought about Shannon way too much. Especially since she was Show's old lady, and Show could wad him into a crumpled ball and toss him in a dumpster. With one hand. But she was so beautiful, and smart, and nice, and she had those tits that didn't quit, and she wore those skirts with the slit up the back...

Way too much.

Which was probably why his heart was in his throat at the thought of following her daughter—her daughter?!—around today. The gorgeous, age-appropriate, *not* taken by his VP daughter of the woman he was kinda in love with. Basically in love with. Pretty much totally in love with.

He felt sick.

At that moment, the front door of the B&B opened, and Adrienne came out. Badger swallowed and steadied his spine. He was a fucking patched member of the Night Horde MC. He was not some squirrely little pussy, to be brought low by a pretty face. Plus, his skin was cleared up, and he'd been working out. Pushing one-sixty-five now. And ink. He had his Horde ink,

across his chest, and a couple of smaller pieces on his arms. And the motherfucking kutte, motherfucker. He was Horde.

No reason to act like a dork.

Except she smiled, and he totally felt like a dork. Fuck, she was pretty. Long, curly mass of bright red hair, her mom's eyes and face almost exactly, with the added bonus of freckles. Badger thought freckles were totally hot. He wondered if she had them on her shoulders, too—because freckled shoulders? Damn. But the lace of her top was too dense to be able to see.

She was dressed in that loose, short, lacy top and little denim shorts. With cowboy boots over firm, long legs. And a shit ton of jewelry, everywhere—wrists, fingers, neck, ears. She had a little suede bag, with fringe or something, across her chest, the strap between her tits, which drew his attention right there. They were little and pert. She was pretty little, just in general, not much more than five-three or five-four. She was like a fun-size version of Shannon.

It was probably weird that he kept thinking about how she was as hot as her mom. That was weird. Was that weird?

“Hi. You're Badger, right?”

...And a phone-sex voice, all soft and sweet.

Drawing strength from the leather on his back, he pushed away from the railing on which he'd been leaning and stood straight. In a proactive move to avoid his voice cracking, he cleared his throat and said, “Yep. That's me.”

“Badger—that's like a nickname, right?”

“A road name, yeah. Only name I care about.” That was true. He knew Len had given him the name because of the way his face had looked, but he didn't care.

He'd made the mistake of complaining about it once, while he was prospecting, and Len had hauled off and socked him, rings and all. Then he'd picked him up off the ground and growled, “Make it mean something else, then, scrub.”

Badger had taken that to heart. He was working on that.

The gorgeous little redhead held out her silver-laden hand, her bracelets tinkling gently. “Okay, well, I'm Adrienne. Shannon says you're my bodyguard. I'm not sure what you're guarding me from, but I don't mind hanging out.”

He took her hand and shook it. “Just making sure everything's cool after the shi—stuff that guy stirred up.” It felt weird to cuss in front of her. “Don't want you to find trouble.”

“I was thinking I'd drive around and see the town. Maybe get a coffee—is there a Starbucks?”

Badge laughed, and with it, he felt less freaked out. “No. No Starbucks here. There's a 7 Eleven and an A&W. There's a tea shop on Main Street. And Marie's has great coffee—but it's not, like, flavored or whatever. Just coffee.”

“That's fine. I'm just looking to kill a couple of hours.” She tossed her keys at him, and he caught them without thinking about it. “You want to drive?”

“I thought I'd just follow you.”

“Why? Wouldn't it be easier just to come with, and then you could show me around?”

That made sense, though it meant they'd have to talk. He'd rather ride—no talking then—but she was wearing those tiny little shorts. And besides, it would probably be obnoxious to even ask her to ride with him. At least she hadn't expected him to ride bitch with her through Signal Bend. He'd never have lived that shit down. It was going to be tough enough to be seen driving her tiny little chick car. Convertible Beetle. Yellow. Jeez.

So weird, though, that both Adrienne and Shannon drove Beetles. Like a fondness for little, bulbous girly cars was genetic.

“Okay, let’s go, then. I’ll show you the sights. Not sure what we’ll do for the other hour and fifty minutes, though.”

She laughed—a full, sincere laugh, like she really thought what he’d said had been funny—and followed him down the porch steps.

When she settled in the passenger seat of her car, she pulled a clip out of her bag and caught her mane of hair back from her face. Then she pulled a pair of sunglasses out. Sliding them onto her face, she turned and gave him a brilliant smile. “Onward, Jeeves.”

She didn’t seem fazed at all by the bizarre scene that had happened earlier, the reason he was with her now—Show turning that lawyer guy into ground chuck—and all the weirdness about meeting her real mother and...well, everything. Badger thought that if it had been him in her place, the last thing he’d want to do is tool around town with a stranger.

As he turned the engine over and put the car into gear, he decided to ask.

“You doin’ okay? I mean, after all that stuff with Show and that guy and everything? Not freaked out or anything?”

She shrugged. “It was weird, no lie. But I don’t know. I’m okay, I guess. I’d ask if stuff like that happens a lot around here, but I guess I kinda brought that all in. That’s what I feel bad about, if anything. That it was basically about me. Not the way I thought this would happen.” She looked out the side window as they drove down the long gravel lane to the road.

Badger had a mountain of questions he wanted to ask, but it wasn’t his place to know what was going on between Adrienne and Shannon or anybody else, so he kept his questions to himself and focused instead on showing her around.

“Okay, well, anyway. You want to drive around a little or just go get coffee? I’ll warn you, people are gonna stare.”

“That’s what Shannon said, too. Is it really that big a deal? Don’t people from away come here at all?”

“It’s not that as much as looking like you do and being with me. People are gonna wonder. It’s a small town. They talk.”

She stared at him for a minute; he could feel her even as he kept his eyes on the winding road. “Okay. Show me around first, then.”

He did. There wasn’t much town, but the country around it was pretty. Actually, the B&B was on the prettiest land around, and Badger decided right then that he wanted to see if he could get her on a horse and take her into the woods—not for anything hinky, but because she was Shannon’s daughter, and he wanted her to see the best the town had to offer. In his mind, that was the Keller woods.

They drove for about half an hour, checking out the scenery, and Badger was thinking about heading into town and braving Marie’s, when Adrienne sat forward and said, “Hey—could we pull over here?”

Surprised, he glanced around, trying to see what it was that had her interest. They were near Len’s place, and—oh—there were two mares and two foals in the pasture nearest the road.

“The horses? That what you want to see?”

“Yeah—babies! That okay?”

“You got it.” Instead of pulling to the side of the road, though, he pulled down Len’s drive.

“Wait—are we going in?”

“Sure. Len’s not around, don’t worry. And I can get you closer at the other end of the pasture. The ditch along the road is pretty deep.”

He knew the place well. He’d started working with Len when he was in middle school, mucking stalls and doing errands. As he grew, Len had given him more responsibility, and he’d expected a lot of hard work. Like tending the fences. There was a lot of pine fencing to tend to; Len wouldn’t even consider barbed wire, which tore up his horses. Badger had spent the whole summer when he was fourteen, and again when he was seventeen, up to his elbows in creosote, treating all that wood. Six and eight hour days, ninety, ninety-five degrees, ninety percent humidity. That had sucked bison balls.

But Len had presented him with beer and pizza every afternoon after a cool shower, and then he’d spent a couple of hours teaching him about breeding and raising horses. And he’d paid great. Badge had saved the money for his first Harley within two years of working for Len—before he was old enough to get a license to ride it.

Len’s place was a study in contrasts. The barn was remarkable—huge and beautiful, with roomy, comfortable stalls and all of the best equipment. It was temperature controlled and perfectly pristine. The smaller outbuildings were cared for with the same attention. So were the pastures and paddocks.

But Len’s house—well, it wasn’t even a house. When a big elm had collapsed on the old farmhouse after a nasty storm and taken out the roof and half of the second floor—back when Badge was just little—Len had simply razed the whole thing and put a used Airstream in its place, and that’s where he lived to this day.

Badge had been in there a few times. If he were Len, he’d rather live in the barn. He had no idea how Len had kept his house when he’d had one, but he kept his trailer like a garbage bin. It was pretty gross.

He parked Adrienne’s little Beetle in front of the barn, and they got out and walked over to the pasture that ran alongside the drive and out to the road. Len had four broodmares, two of which, Arizona, a bay, and Goldie, a palomino, had foaled this spring, both fillies—they were whom Adrienne had seen coming in. The other two mares, Dinah and Jasmine, had foaled the year before and were resting this year. Badger assumed they were loose in the biggest, wooded pasture behind the barn.

When Badger had started working the ranch, Len had kept a big black stallion at stud, too, but he’d been too difficult to maintain, so Len had sold him. Since the money was better for stud fees than for selling foals, especially considering the expense of caring for pregnant mares, Badger had asked Len at the time why he’d made that choice. His answer: “I like havin’ the babies around. This is just a sideline anyway. Might s’well do it like I like.”

Badger had thought that was a pretty cool answer.

Adrienne came around the back of the Beetle and stood near Badger. “Can we go in?”

“Not a great idea. The foals are still real young, and their moms might feel protective. But come up here to the fence, and I’ll see if I can get them over.” Without thinking about it, he grabbed her hand. When he realized that he had, he almost pulled away, but then she closed her fingers around his, and he just led her to the fence. Right away, she climbed up so that she could hang over the top, and her little ass was right up there where Badger could get a good look. Not cool. Or very cool. One or the other. Shaking that off, he stood next to her and put his fingers in his mouth to whistle.

She jumped when he did and then laughed. “If you ever go to New York, you’ve got the cab whistle down!”

That pleased him, and he felt a little blush coming on. To try to prevent it, he asked, “That where you’re from?”

“Yeah, sort of. I was brought up upstate, but I go to Columbia, so now I live in the city. Or did. Not sure, actually.”

Badger wasn’t sure what to make of that, but Goldie and Ari were leading their foals toward them. “Oh, shit! Hold on a sec.” He pulled gently on Adrienne’s arm. “Do me a favor and come down. I need to bring them a treat for coming when I called.” When she stepped down, he turned and trotted to the side door of the barn. Len never locked it—nobody ever locked anything around here—so he ran in to the little kitchenette and pulled some carrots out of the bin at the bottom of the fridge.

When he came back out, Ari had her head over the fence, and her filly had her head between the rails. Adrienne was carefully rubbing Ari’s nose, while the babe tried to gnaw on the fringe of her bag. She was doing well.

“You been around horses before?”

“They’re around the city a little—carriage rides around Central Park and stuff like that, but otherwise, no. My mom used to say that I had a gift for animals, though. I guess I just get them. Or they get me. Or something.”

Goldie, who was generally more suspicious of people, was holding her baby back a little, but then she saw the carrots, and she gave her girl a nudge forward with her nose.

Rubbing Ari’s baby between her little ears, Adrienne looked over at Goldie and hers. “They’re so pretty. They almost don’t look real.” Goldie’s filly was a perfect palomino, just like her mom.

“They’re palominos. It’s a genetic thing. Len breeds Goldie for it, but it doesn’t always work, and he hardly ever gets a result this pure. This little girl’s gonna bring some bank.”

“Is that what...Len...does? Breed horses?”

“Len is Horde, like me. He’s our Sergeant at Arms. And he works at the hardware store—sometimes. But yeah, he breeds quarter horses, too.”

“Pretty much all I’ve seen of people around here are bikers. Is that right—are you the whole town?”

He laughed. “God, no. We’re a small club. But I guess you could say we run things. Or at least take care of things.” He handed her a couple of carrots, and she fed them to Ari and her baby. “You ready to hit Main Street, see some people not wearing leather?”

Without seeming to worry about her clothes, she wiped her hands, covered in horse spit, on her ass. “Sure. I like these guys, though. I always thought it would be cool to have a horse. I’ve never even been on one, though.” She brushed her hand over the palomino filly’s nose.

Delighted, Badger laughed suddenly, and Goldie reared her head back and then huffed at him. “Well, if you want, later on I can take you riding. We’ve got a stable full of horses at the B&B, and gorgeous trails in the woods out back. Interested?”

She smiled so brightly at him that her freckles seemed to glow. Damn, she was cute. “That would be awesome!”

~oOo~

First, he took her to Marie’s. He’d felt anxious about the idea of it when she’d first mentioned coffee, standing on the B&B porch, but now he was kind of into it. He liked the thought of being seen with Adrienne someplace where the word would spread fast. He knew

Shannon's connection to her would already be all over the town, so he didn't mind getting some mileage of his own with the story.

They came in during an off time, so there actually weren't too many people there. The Sullivans, having pie, one of the new families in town, with their kids—he couldn't remember their names—and two women he didn't recognize at all. Probably Main Street shoppers.

They'd driven through the Main Street Shops area on the way to Marie's, and Adrienne had remarked on how 'cute' and 'old-timey' it was. Badger supposed that was true. He didn't really pay attention to what the storefronts looked like anymore. It was his job to collect protection payments, and he was the first line for complaints from the shopkeepers, so it felt like he was in those shops pretty often.

Between that, managing the livestock at the B&B, and whatever else the club needed him to do, he didn't have time for anything else in his life. He hardly even saw his folks.

He led her to an empty booth about halfway down the aisle and saw Marie coming right over, her eyes keen with interest. "Well, hey there, Justin. How you doin', honey?"

Adrienne's eyes sharpened at hearing "Justin," but he ignored her and smiled at Marie.

"I'm good, Marie. We just want coffee, if that's okay."

"Sure it is. Who's your friend?"

Though he was confident that the drama with the lawyer wasn't gossip, since there hadn't been anyone around who would blab, Badger knew full well that by now Marie knew everything anybody in Signal Bend knew about Adrienne—at a minimum, her name and her relation to Shannon. Probably where she was from, too. But he played along. "This is Adrienne. She's visiting Shannon at the B&B, and I said I'd show her around town."

"Well, that's sweet of you, honey." She turned to Adrienne. "And look at you! Ain't you just the prettiest thing. Such a pretty name, too."

"Thanks." Adrienne blushed. She looked really uncomfortable, and Badger felt guilty bringing her in here. Marie was examining her as if through a magnifying glass; she wasn't even trying to be subtle about it. But when Badger turned his coffee cup over, and then Adrienne's, Marie got the hint. She filled their cups.

"Now, you let me know if you need anything else." With that, she finally left them alone, though Badger repeatedly saw her watching them.

Adrienne poured four sugars into her cup and stirred. "Justin? Is that your real name?"

He shrugged. "I told you. The only name I care about is Badger. But my given name is Justin. The older people around here are slow to make the change, though, I guess.

"Why is a 'road name' so important? I don't really understand the biker thing. I mean, it's cool. I just don't get it."

Again, he shrugged. "I don't know. Not everybody gets one, actually. But it's a name your brothers give you, so it means something. Hard to explain."

"Didn't mean to pry."

"It's okay. Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." A small smile perked up the corners of her pretty mouth.

"What did you mean when you said you weren't sure you went to Columbia?"

He knew right away that he'd asked her a much more intrusive question than she'd asked him. Her head dropped, and she stared into her coffee cup, swirling the spoon in it absently. He was about to take it back when she looked back up.

"I kinda bailed on this semester. It's only a few weeks before finals, but I'm here. And I'm not sure I'm going back."

He'd only known her for, like, ninety minutes, so he knew it wasn't his place to ask why. But his blood was singing with curiosity, and finally, as she kept staring into her cup, he couldn't take it any longer.

"I know I'm being nosy, but can I ask why?"

She brought her head up then. Her bright eyes shuttered abruptly. "No. Just drama. My drama."

"Okay. Sorry." They finished their coffee in silence while Marie kept an avaricious eye on them.

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He got her back to the B&B and left her on the porch. She was going in to talk to Shannon. He was proud of himself for not asking anything about all that—why she was here, what she wanted.

As he was turning to head down to the barn, she stopped him. "I'm sorry I was snappy with you in the diner. Thanks for not pushing."

"No problem. Sorry I got nosy at all."

She grinned. "You're pretty okay, Badge."

"You, too. If you want to ride later, just come on down to the barn. Wear jeans, though. Shorts on a saddle'll just make your legs sore."

She nodded and went to the front door.

~oOo~

She did want a ride. She came down to the barn an hour or so later, dressed as before, except in jeans now instead of shorts, looking happy but dazed. And she wanted a ride. So he saddled up Gypsy for himself and sweet old Toby for her, and he took her through the woods.

As they rode, she asked question after question about the town, the Horde, Show, and Shannon. He answered all the questions she asked, until they started to seem personal. It was one thing to tell her about Shannon running the B&B and how great at it she was, with all those amazing weddings and shit, but it was another thing to talk about Show and Shannon as a couple—not that Badger knew much about that, anyway. Finally, as they were heading back in, he pulled Gypsy up and turned her around to face Adrienne and Toby.

"For somebody who doesn't want people in their business, you're full of a lot of questions about other people's."

She blushed bright red at that. "Sorry. I just—you know that Shannon's my...um...that..."

"She's your mom. Yeah. Not that hard to figure."

"Bio-mom. Yeah. I'm just meeting her for the first time. I'm curious."

"Then you should ask her all these questions."

"I don't know...it feels weird to ask her."

"Well, I'm not going to talk to you about her private stuff—which I don't even know anyway. Let's just ride, okay?"

"Okay. Sorry."

He turned Gypsy and kicked her into a little trot. Toby had a smooth gait, so he knew Adrienne would be okay, but he kept an eye out anyway.

When they got back to the barn, he swung off while Gypsy was just slowing up, and he hit the ground with a light bounce. Gypsy was gaited, a big, beautiful Tennessee Walker. Damn, he loved her. He dropped her reins over the hitching post and went to help Adrienne dismount.

She leaned down and put her hands on his shoulders, and he put his hands on her waist—her shirt was loose so, though he hadn't specifically intended it, he ended up putting his hands on her bare skin, which was warm, firm and silky-soft. When she came down, she was right up against him, smiling up at him, and, for the first time, his aesthetic appreciation of her beauty and his enjoyment of her company kicked into something more—something physical. His cock filled right out, in other words. He set her down fast and took a step back, trying desperately not to look like an idiot. Grabbing Toby's reins and then collecting Gypsy's, he led the horses into the barn, hoping she wouldn't follow.

At first, she didn't. He had Toby's saddle off and was working the bit out of his mouth, thinking about Adrienne's skin against his palms, when she peeked around the open barn door.

"Is it okay if I come in?"

He didn't look around. "Sure."

While he untacked Toby and then Gypsy, and got them into their stalls, she stood right inside the door, watching but not saying a word. He put the tack away, deciding that their ride had been light enough that he didn't need to clean anything but the bits, which he'd do later. When he turned to face the door, she was right in front of him. The low afternoon sun was coming through the open doors and setting her hair ablaze. Wow.

"Are you mad at me?"

He was surprised. "What? No. Why would I be?"

"For asking too many questions."

"Nope. I see why you're curious. I'm just not the right person to ask."

"Okay. Can I ask a question you *are* the right person to ask, then?"

"Sure. Shoot."

"I've never kissed a guy with a beard before. Can I?"

She was blushing. It took him a second for the meaning of her words to sink in, and then he was blushing, too. "I, uh..."

Apparently, she took that as a yes. Rising up onto her tiptoes, she put her hands on the back of his neck and pulled him down to her. And then her pretty, soft mouth was on his.

She laughed against his lips. "Tickles."

Badger was proud of his beard. He might have to work like a fiend to get muscle on his naturally lean frame, and he might have had bad skin when he was in high school, but he had good hair—long, thick, and straight—and he could grow a damn fine beard. It was thick, even, and dark auburn, exactly the same color as his hair, and he planned to let it grow long. "That bad?"

"Not even a little."

With a sudden surge of confidence—and no small amount of lust—Badger put his hands on her hips and kissed her back, pushing his tongue into her mouth. She leaned into him, her little tits on his chest, and whimpered a little. And holy shit. She was the first civilian girl he'd ever kissed, and she was *fine*.

As soon as he realized that, he backed off fast. Christ on a crutch, how'd he end up making out with Shannon's *daughter* in the barn, with Toby and Gypsy both staring at them over their stalls?

Nope, nope, nope. All kinds of bad.

When he pulled away, she had a second of seeming disoriented, and he almost succumbed to the temptation to lean back down and kiss her again. But then she blinked and reoriented. And she looked embarrassed.

“Sorry. That was lame of me.”

“No! I—liked it. But I should take you back up to the house, I think.”

The embarrassment mostly cleared from her face, and she smiled. “Okay.”

~oOo~

U around?

Badger’s phone pinged, and he saw the text. He didn’t recognize the number.

Who’s this?

The next ping was a photo—a selfie. Adrienne, grinning. So cute.

She was literally the first girl he’d ever been comfortable talking to. He hadn’t realized it until late that first night, after Show had taken them all out for a steak supper, but he was at his ease with her. It was an amazing, empowering feeling. And then she was gone. The confidence with women hadn’t stayed with him, though. That seemed to be specific to one girl, at least so far.

He’d given her his personal number before she’d left, but that had been a few weeks ago, and she hadn’t used it. Until now.

Now he was grinning, too. *Hey! What’s up?*

IDK. Just wanted to tell you that I just took my last final of the semester. I guess I do still go to Columbia.

Cool. Totally cool.

Not dumb to text you about that?

No. Gave u my number to use it. Text me whenever.

K. Hey Badge?

Yeah?

Like your beard a lot.

He wasn’t sure what to say to that. She lived in New York City, and anyway, Show had made it clear that she was off limits. Adrienne, it seemed to him, was squarely in the friend zone.

So he didn’t say anything. He just took a selfie of his own and, once he made sure he didn’t look like a dork, he sent it to her.

THE END