



Fallen Guardians / Small Town Packs crossover – 2022 Holiday Edition

I tighten the scarf around my neck, but it does nothing to block the frosty air cutting through my many layers of clothing. If only I could mist like the Guardians. Maybe I should've taken Cole up on his offer to pick me up rather than meeting them. A lesson for next year if we meet here again.

Slowing my stride, I take the time to appreciate the holiday decorations lighting up the town for the Christmas festival tonight. Giant trees with beautiful glittery baubles, twinkling lights high in the sky, weaving back and forth across the main street, while up head, a group of carolers sing beneath a decorated gazebo in the town square.

This is the first time I've been to Woodland Falls in winter, and magical doesn't even come close to describing it. Hallmark movies have it all right...Christmas in small towns like these are stunning.

Across the street, in front of a closed shopfront, the Guardians huddle together looking so out of place I try not to laugh. Until I see River's shirt and lose it, laughing so hard I have to cover my mouth. What the hell is he wearing? His shirt has a giant Christmas tree on the front with...flashing baubles. Oh my god, they look like battery powered lights. Just when I think I've seen everything. After I regain my composure, I cross the street to join them.

Raven: Cold enough for you?

Me: (tightens scarf until it almost chokes me) Sure is, but I kind of love it.

Even though I'm a summer gal at heart, a wintery Christmas is so freaking romantic. I greet the other Guardians and briefly catch up on what's been happening since I last saw them.

Which, for Cole, was only a few days ago.

Me: Where are your soulmates?

Aric: Would you hang around and endure this guy's shirt if you didn't have to?

River: (frowns at his shirt) What's wrong with my shirt? These batteries will go all night.

EJ: (snickers) I'm not even going there, Sunshine. You walked right into that.

(turns to me) They went with Hails to donate the cupcakes she made for the fundraiser.

Cole: Did someone say "cupcakes"?

We all laugh. And in an instant, it's like we've never been apart.

Raven: (scans the bustling street) Remind me again why we're meeting here.

Aric: Because the readers decided on the location.

EJ: (drapes an arm over Aric's shoulders) Don't be a grinch, Ric. I'm sure we can still find a decent bar in this small town, which happens to be in the middle of frickin' nowhere. (grimaces) I hope.

Aric: As long we don't see fucking candy canes.

EJ: (smirks) I don't hear Hails complaining about spotting candy canes.

Raine: Great, now I'm going to vomit.

Me: ...

Raven: (shakes head) Trust me, you don't want to know.

Right. I'm not sure if there's candy canes, but I have a great bar in mind. We fall into a comfortable banter as I lead the Guardians up the street to the temporary bar and grill set up in town square near the gazebo. People mingle around the front, drinks in hand dressed in various Christmas attire. Everything from elf hats with jingling bells to reindeer onesies. Given the crowd inside, maybe I should've asked Noah to reserve us a table.

EJ: (skids to a halt then turns around to glare at me) I thought I was your favorite.

Me: ...

Cole: (leans around EJ to see what he's looking at) Uh-oh.

Aric: (mutters) You've done it now. (walks into the bar with Raine and Slater in tow)

Me: Can someone please explain what's wrong?

EJ: (huffs, steps aside and motions to a sign) Cole's Bar and Grill. Cole's. Not EJ's. Cole's. What's so wrong with EJ's Bar and Grill? Why does Cole get an establishment named after him when he wouldn't know a good quality vodka if it slapped him in the wing. Let alone make a half decent cocktail.

Cole: (backs away) Oh, Fate.

EJ: (glares at Cole) Last Guardian to join the crew and you think you're suddenly the favorite? (looks at me) Do the readers think that? Has Reaper replaced me?

Me: ...

Shit. I didn't think this through. Who chose to meet in Woodland Falls and throw me under the bus?

Raven: (pats my shoulder) Let him down gently, he's not used to rejection.

Raven snickers as he abandons me to head inside the bar and join the others. Traitor. Okay, I can do this. It's a simple misunderstanding.

Me: (clears throat) Actually, the bar is named Cole's Bar and Grill because the owner's surname is Cole.

EJ: ...

Me: ...

Cole: ... (Why is he still standing here?)

EJ: (sneers at Cole before turning to me) You expect me to believe that? You write books. How do I know you didn't just make tha—

Just in the nick of time, Noah strides from the bar and holds out his hand for EJ to shake.

Noah: Noah Cole. Welcome to Woodland Falls.

EJ: (looks between me and Noah)

I swear I've never seen EJ so stunned...and speechless. I should do this more often. He recovers quickly though and shakes Noah's hand, while Cole throws his head back and laughs.

Cole: That was priceless, brother.

EJ: Shut it, Reaper.

I'm still laughing as Noah leads us into the bar to the table he reserved for our visit. This guy thinks of everything.

EJ: (leans in and bumps my shoulder) I'm still the favorite.

Me: Sure. (laughs) If you say so.

I don't have the heart to tell him that Cole will probably steal that spot once his book comes out next year. He brought all the swoon.

We join the others at a long table with bench seats, and I squish between Raven and Slater (not that I'm complaining!) who already have drinks in hand. Although the temporary bar and grill is set up for the festival, Noah and his brothers have done an amazing job of maintaining the look and feel. A dark timber bar extends down the side of the covered area with kegs of what looks like craft beer or cider stacked at one end. Liam is on a grill at the other end barbecuing meats. The dozen or so tables are packed with customers enjoying the festivities and at the far end, Ivy and Mia put the final touches on the hanging lights by the Christmas tree.

Once we're all seated, Noah takes additional drink orders and heads back behind the bar.

EJ: (smirks across the table at me) I get it. You have a thing for bartenders.

Raine: For the love of Fate. Do we have to sit here all-night listening to this moron?

EJ: Slater, your soulmate is being mean again.

Raine: (death stare at EJ)

Slater: I'm going to enjoy watching her kick your ass.

Uh-oh. Now isn't a great time for Raine to throw a dagger. To hopefully distract them, I unfold my list of questions.

Me: Actually, the readers have some questions. Do the Guardians have any kissing traditions?

Aric: (groans) Next question.

Raven: Please don't talk about the candy canes.

EJ: (holds up hands) Hey, I didn't raise it.

Me: Oh, now I *have* to know.

Raven: (takes a long sip of bourbon) This idiot thinks it's hilarious to kiss Hailee every time he sees a candy cane.

Slater: Kiss? I'm surprised her clothes stay on.

EJ: You're just jealous, baldie.

Raine: (reaches for dagger)

Slater: (stills Raine's hand) Not here, my Queen. But once we're back home, I'll hold him down for you.

I open my mouth to remind Raine that we're in public surrounded by mortals, but thankfully, Noah interrupts with our drinks before taking a seat at the end of the table where he chats with EJ and River.

Raven: (leans in and whispers) Is that guy a...wolf?

Me: (nods)

Raven: You didn't tell me he turns into a wolf.

Aric: (leans around Raven) Tayla has a thing for guys who shift into wolves.

Raven: Fictional ones. I thought they were fictional.

Me: (smirks) Raven, are you...jealous?

I cover my mouth to hide my grin when I remember Tayla's love of paranormal romance novels. But seriously, Raven is a freaking angel. And I know for a fact, he has nothing to worry about. Before Raven can answer, Liam joins us by adding plates of fried goodness in the center of the table then spins a chair to sit on it backward beside his brother.

Me: Where's Ash tonight?

Noah: He's on uncle duty.

Liam: (grumbles) Probably filling my little girl up on cotton candy before handing her back.

Noah: (laughs and pats Liam's shoulder) That's half the fun of being an uncle.

Noah is absolutely beaming with pride. I bet his niece has him wrapped around her little finger and Noah wouldn't want it any other way.

Noah: (glances over his shoulder at the bar) How does this work? Do the readers have questions for us, too?

Me: (checks list) They sure do. Do the different packs get together for the

holidays?

Liam: Not formally, but we've all become closer in recent years. We drop in on each other more often now that the hunter situation has settled down. In fact, Layla and Wyatt are heading here tonight for the Holiday festival.

Noah: Baker has been here for a few days helping us set up the bar. But I think he has an ulterior motive.

Liam: In the form of a fiery redhead.

Me: Ooh, good for him. Has anyone heard from the Archer pack?

Noah: Brax called this morning. They're having heavy snow in Cedar Valley, so they'll spend the holidays at the ranch. But he told me that Kali—

A clang from behind the bar makes Noah turn around. By now, the drink line weaves between the tables.

Noah: (stands and pushes chair in) I gotta serve, call out if you need refills, tonight's on me.

Liam: I'll help. (looks back at us) Make sure you enter the gingerbread house competition.

Noah and Liam both dart behind the bar to serve the ever-growing line of customers.

Aric: Gingerbread house? As in a house made entirely of ginger flavored bread?
How hard can that be?

Raven: (lifts one shoulder) I'm game.

Raine: (stands and adjusts the dagger on her hip) This, I have to see.

Oh, me, too. There's no way I'm missing Aric and Raven decorate a gingerbread house. The four of us leave River, EJ, Cole and Slater, and follow the signs to the stall where they assemble by the designated table.

Aric: (holds up a slab of pre-made gingerbread) This is weird-ass looking bread.

Raven: (takes a bite and screws up his face)

Me: It's like a cookie that mortals make houses out of.

Raine: (gapes) To live in?

Me: (laughs and points to the completed ones on display) No, to eat during the holidays.

Aric: And we thought River was weird. (tips his chin to Raven) What's the wager?

Because everything has to be a competition. Raven taps his chin as he thinks, reminding me so much of Blaine.

Raven: The loser has to wear one of River's shirts on Christmas Day.

Aric: (shudders) You're going down, man.

Raven: (snatches a bowl of candy from the table) My soulmate was once human. I think I have the upper hand.

I laugh as Aric and Raven snatch more candies and icing off the table to pile up their ingredients, while Raine diligently works on her own masterpiece. It's good to see them enjoying themselves because I know the next few months are going to be tough.

Probably drawn to the chaos, the other Guardians and their soulmates soon join in, grabbing ingredients to make their own houses while Hailee offers helpful tips and assembly instructions.

EJ: (lunges for River) You stole my balls!

Aric: I knew you were missing something.

River: They're my balls now!

Raven: This is so much more entertaining with food involved.

River throws one of the candied balls in his mouth then sticks out his tongue like a spoilt toddler, while Slater tries to hold back EJ. But eventually, it's too damn funny. That's when the real chaos descends. Slater loses his grip and EJ launches over the table to chase River, who's bolting down the street holding the cup full of candy in the air. I just shake my head. Another holiday check in, another dumpster fire. I thought by hosting it in Woodland Falls, things would be calmer. Wrong.

Soon, everyone abandons their half-finished gingerbread houses, laughing as they wander back to the bar to wait for EJ and River, and I take that as my cue to call it a night.

Me: Thanks again for having me, and for meeting in Woodland Falls this year.

Raven: The pleasure is always ours. If only EJ could fucking behave for three minutes so the readers could ask their questions.

Me: (peers at EJ still chasing River up the street) Hopefully they don't mind the crazy.

I farewell the remaining Guardians and their soulmates, but when I turn to walk back to my car, a multi-level gingerbread house catches my attention. It's off to the side, on a different table to where the Guardians stood earlier. The attention to detail is amazing. A castle-like structure with a gothic vibe, dark icing, multiple turrets, candied torches, and iced flames positioned on the walls. So unique, but for some reason it reminds me of—

A slight prickle at my nape makes me lift my gaze to the rooftop of a shopfront across the street where Blaine sits, dangling his legs over the edge. When I smile, he winks before misting away. And just like that, Christmas is complete.

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