

# Christmas Cheer

## *A Genie Whisperer Short Story*

By Nicole Eatough

*(This story takes place during the events of The Three C's of Genie Whispering right before Christmas when the genies' magic isn't working.)*

Shelly's sigh was more of a growl as she leaned against a nearly barren display of gingerbread house making kits. What kind of heartless corporation made their employees work the night of Christmas Eve? Living during the height of commercialism, she expected—but didn't appreciate—to work the *morning* of Christmas Eve, but the *evening*? Really?

And maybe that could be justified in a big city, but Horton was tiny. She had seen three customers since lunch. The store was paying the employees more than it was making for these hours, but since they were the only department store in Horton, the higher-ups were just sure it would be worthwhile.

When the store manager tried to make a case against them working, corporate claimed that even if it wasn't worth it financially, it would be worth it for the credibility it gave them with the locals, because staying open late on Christmas Eve would show their loyalty to their customers. Which just went to show how poorly corporate understood small towns. If anything, the locals would think *less* of them for staying open during such a big holiday.

The bell over the front door jingled, pulling her out of her thoughts. She straightened, forcing a friendly smile on her face. It became a little more real at the thought that after these customers maybe she could convince her coworkers to close up shop early. What corporate didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

Then she caught sight of the trio of young men who'd just walked in, and her smile twitched, threatening to turn into a gape before she clenched her teeth together. No way were these real customers. No freaking way.

They looked like models—but models from three entirely different shoots. What, had they forgotten a prop for a photo shoot and had to run here? But shouldn't assistants or whatever take care of tasks like that?

The first young man had dark skin and black hair with . . . flowers threaded through it? She couldn't quite tell from this distance, though that was what she thought it was. It at least matched his outfit of a white t-shirt and dirt-covered brown overalls that were unhooked on one side. That definitely meant he came from a shoot, right? He couldn't have been gardening in this frigid weather. And there weren't any gardens right now anyway.

The middle guy had dusky skin and red hair so spikey he must have used a whole bottle of gel to get it to stay that way, though she didn't see any evidence of stiffness, like she would expect. Must have been some high-quality stuff, but you would expect that from models. He wore a punk look with baggy black pants with a silver chain dangling from one side, and a red tank top covered by a short-sleeved unbuttoned black shirt.

The last guy looked as though he'd spent his life hiding from the sun with pale, pale skin and white blond hair. He wore a preppy style with neatly pressed khaki pants and a buttoned long-sleeved white shirt with thin light blue stripes.

But where were their coats? Not a single one of them wore a jacket, and it was below freezing outside. Maybe they didn't want to mess up their styles for their photoshoot? The things people did for fashion.

They were almost to her now. She would be worried about them catching her staring if not for the fact that they were arguing so heavily that she was pretty sure they hadn't noticed she was there at all.

"There are trees outside," the overall-clad man said. "We should get one of those ones."

"Those aren't the right kind of trees, Flower Head," the red head snapped. "I thought you at least understood that much. You had the right kind of trees a few days ago. You just had *way* too many."

Overalls pouted, the sight making Shelly blush. How could a guy look so sexy while doing something like pouting? "There are only too many trees if they get in each other's way and start stealing sunlight and nutrients from each other. Trees can be very competitive."

Competitive? Trees? This guy was getting way too into his photoshoot in a really strange way.

"Let's just focus on getting a nice tree," Preppy said in a formal tone. That must be the prop they needed. Though she couldn't imagine why all three of them needed it. "That's why we're here."

"But there are ones outside!" Overalls spun toward the door, taking a couple steps toward it. "I can feel them calling to me. We'll just have to walk a little ways, and they'll be there waiting."

The red head grumbled something under his breath before talking louder. "How do you expect us to manage to get a tree from outside into the apartment? We have no way to cut it down and no way to move it. Even if it's not too heavy for us to carry, we'll draw way too much attention carrying a pine tree around." That was his concern with carrying a tree? That they would attract attention? She didn't think this group needed any help with that.

Overalls gasped in horror, clutching a hand over his heart. “You can’t cut down trees! You’ll kill them!” He scowled. “You don’t even have fire right now, and you’re still picking on plants. This is why they don’t like you.”

Now this conversation was really getting weird. But if they were headed to some apartment, maybe this was an after party for the photoshoot and they wanted a tree to be festive. That made more sense—but their words didn’t.

The red head threw his arms into the air. “How else would we get a tree to the apartment other than cutting it, Flower Head?”

Overalls placed his hands on his hips. Shelly imagined his name wasn’t actually Flower Head, so she’d still call him Overalls in her head for now. “I can *move* trees. I’ll just— Oh.” He deflated. “I can’t right now.”

Preppy sighed. “Yes, that *is* why we are here. Otherwise, the apartment would already be decorated.”

At that point, Preppy finally noticed Shelly. He gave her a polite nod. “Excuse me, Miss, do you have any Christmas trees left?”

At least this one seemed normal. She was about to correct herself that Red Head also seemed normal, other than ornery, but then he started pulling at his tank top, muttering, “I hate wearing shirts. Why are humans always covering themselves up?”

She gave Preppy a plastic smile, ignoring the other two. Were all models this eccentric? “We only have smaller trees left, but let me show you what’s left in stock.”

She fast-walked to the dwindling Christmas decoration section, hoping to hurry this trio along. Once they were done, she was definitely leaving, whether her coworkers agreed to it or not. She deserved to go home after dealing with these weirdos.

They stopped in front of a picked-over clearance section as she gestured to what was left.

Overalls gasped. “Baby trees! If we have to have pretend trees, we should get a baby one!” She was glad he was so pleased, since that was all they had left. Hadn’t she already said that?

Overalls wandered through the sparse selection, studying the leftover trees. There was a plain one, one with pinecones dangling from the branches, and one with frosted needles. He studied each one with an intent expression before pointing to the one with pinecones as he looked to his companions. “That one. It’s still just a dead tree, but it’s trying its best. Let’s take that one home. Lady Flora will like it.”

How did he go from calling the trees pretend to dead? They’d never been alive.

Red Head scowled. “How would you know? Maybe she’d like the one with fake snow. Maybe trees are like that where Girlie came from.” He paused. “Do we know where Girlie came from?”

Did Lady Flora and Girlie refer to the same woman? And how did she fit into all this? Was she a foreign model they wanted to show off a U.S. Christmas to?

“She is from Chicago,” Preppy answered. “While frosted pines may be common to the state, they will likely not have been common in her life in the city. Though I don’t know what her family Christmas traditions are, so perhaps she would approve of the frosted one.”

Overalls shook his head, gripping a branch of the tree he’d chosen. “It’s trying too hard. It’s not even real, and it’s still trying too hard. I would talk to it about it if I could, but . . .” He shrugged. “It’s dead.”

“It’s not dead, it was never alive.” Shelly didn’t know what possessed her to talk, other than that she wanted this conversation done. Couldn’t they just go with Overalls’ pick and leave? “And the flowers in your hair are probably dead too.”

She gestured to his scalp, finally realizing that was probably why Red Head kept calling his companion Flower Head.

Overalls let out an offended gasp, a hand going to his hair. “I would never wear fake flowers. That’s insulting to real ones. Fake flowers don’t help *anyone*, but real flowers—”

“That’s enough.” Preppy held up a hand to cut off his friend. “She doesn’t need your flower lecture.” Meaning that Overalls had a set lecture he gave about flowers?

“But she hurt their feelings! Now they’re not even talking to me.” Overalls grabbed one of the tiny flowers from his head as he turned toward her. “See? It’s still alive. It can still grow.”

Shelly gasped, her eyes widening as the petals *moved*.

Preppy rushed forward, clapping his hand over his friend’s and covering the flower. “We’ll take the tree with the pinecones, please. As well as the frosted wreath.”

She nodded numbly. She was tired and ornery. No one should have to work Christmas Eve. That made her see things, right? Of course. She shook her head. The pinecone tree was a display tree, but she was pretty sure it was the last one, so they would have to take that one. At least they were almost gone.

“We need decorations too,” Red Head argued, looking around. “We can’t just have a naked tree.”

Shelly jumped when Overalls smacked his hand against his leg, his eyes darkening with irritation. “Pine trees are never naked. They always keep their needles and are beautiful without decorations. And it’s not the other trees’ fault they lose their leaves! They have to do it to take

care of themselves.” He pointed an accusing finger at Preppy. “It’s the cold weather’s fault!” But why was he so defensive over it, and what did Preppy have to do with cold weather?

Red Head rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, whatever. But Christmas trees have Christmas decorations and Girlie will want them.”

Overalls huddled closer to his chosen tree. “You don’t know that. Lady Flora appreciates plants just how they are. She’s never asked them to change.”

Was . . . was he talking about people asking *plants* to change? He spoke like this Lady Flora person not wanting that was a positive characteristic, which kind of indicated he thought other people did go around asking plants to change. Maybe they were talking in code? Or pranking her?

But none of them looked her way unless they had to, and surely they would be sneaking peeks at her for a response if they were messing with her. They each seemed dead serious about this conversation.

“Christmas decorations on trees are traditional,” Preppy said, grabbing a plastic tube of red and gold ornaments. “And these colors are traditional as well. Not knowing Miss Ali’s preferences, I think the most sensible route is to choose as traditional choices as possible.”

So Ali was the girl they were all talking about? Why were the other two calling her Girlie and Lady Flora? Reminding herself that she didn’t care and didn’t want to hear any more of this nonsense, she piped in, “Absolutely! A lot of people love traditional Christmases. Should I ring this all up for you?” *Please say yes, please say yes.* She kept her smile in place as she pleaded with the universe to just work with her on this. Didn’t nice little retail workers deserve a special kind of blessing for what they put up with? Especially around Christmas?

Red Head pointed at a sparkly red garland before looking at Shelly. “Is that traditional?”

“The garland? Yes, garlands are traditional. They can be wrapped around trees or furniture. Why don’t you take that one?” It was the last one. If these three were going to ruin her night, they could at least clean out the leftover inventory. “And here’s a strand of multi-colored lights! You’ll need some lights for your tree!”

She reached down to grab a discounted set that had been returned. Supposedly, the small bulbs didn’t “shine bright enough” but the family didn’t want the large bulbs, because those were too clunky and took away from the magic of the Christmas tree. After several frustrating rounds of conversation explaining that those two options were the only ones available, the family stalked off saying they would just order everything online next year. Shelly hoped they kept that threat.

Preppy’s eyes lit up with relief, and her heart skipped a beat at making someone so handsome look so grateful—until she reminded herself that these guys were weird, and she wanted no part of them.

“Thank you.” Preppy took the box with more awe than she’d ever seen an adult look at an unlit strand of lights before. “We would have forgotten this, and that would have been a travesty.”

*That* was a bit dramatic. Unless this Ali friend of theirs had had a rough year. Maybe these three were trying to do a good deed, and she should cut them some slack. But why did they have to be so weird?

“Yeah,” Red Head agreed, throwing the garland over his shoulder. “Light couldn’t have helped us out with the lights right now. And even if he could, he’d never do something nice for Girlie.” He muttered something that sounded uncomplimentary under his breath.



“Indeed,” Preppy agreed, giving the small selection one last look. “I believe we now have—”

“No!” Overalls shouted.

Shelly jumped, putting a hand to her racing heart. What *now*?

Overalls pointed a finger at the garland draped around Red Head. “No! It looks like fire! Fire isn’t Christmas. It’s . . . that loud holiday with . . .” His outraged look faded as he stared pensively at the tree, like it might help him.

Red Head growled, protectively tightening his grip on the garland. “Fire absolutely goes with Christmas! Humans used to light their Christmas trees using candles, Flower Head!”

“No one puts fire on trees they like! Not even humans!”

What the heck was with all this human talk? Were these guys stage actors instead of models, and decided to stay in their characters to go shopping? She relaxed a tiny bit at that thought, wondering if the local college had a theater program. That would clear *all* this up. It still made these three weird though.

“Enough!” Preppy widened his eyes at the other two with a significant look. “We have what we need, and we still need to pick up dinner. It is time for us to be off, or we will miss Christmas Eve altogether, negating the point of us going out at all.”

Shelly bit her lip against asking Preppy why he couldn’t have said that earlier. Instead, like a good little worker, she pasted her smile on and helped them carry all their things to the register.

She didn’t care what corporate said or how they felt, she was never working Christmas Eve again.