

Crumbs at Midnight

A Christmas Eve Horror Story

What happened, happened on Christmas Eve, just as the clock struck midnight. It took place one year ago—a year ago this very night. I know, because I was there. I saw it all. And believe me, it was terrible, it was scary, it was strange. It was messy.

And it's going to happen again.

Tonight.

There were six of us then. The angel, the reindeer, and the cute little star were sugar cookies. They were all sweet, but the angel was the sweetest, with a little wire halo and twice as much icing as the rest of us. There was a chocolate chip snowman—a little crusty around the edges, but still a pretty smart cookie—and there was a shortbread Teddy Bear, flaky on the outside, but tough in all the right places.

And then there was me. The Gingerbread Man.

We'd started out that morning as recipes in a book. After eight to ten minutes in a preheated oven, another half-hour on the cooling rack, and a few minutes by the frosting bowl, we all ended up piled together on a big plate in the living room, where it was gloomy and dark. The fire in the fireplace had dwindled to a faint glimmer, and the only other light came from the little sparkly bulbs on the Christmas tree. A towering six-footer, the tree was covered in pretty things, shimmering glass balls, and tiny little toys.

It was almost midnight.

The house was locked up, the dog had been put away for the evening, and the people had all gone off to bed. It was very, very quiet.

Having determined that it was safe, we all sat up and looked around.

We were alone, just six warm freshly-frosted cookies resting on the

great plate, which—we quickly noticed—we’d been sharing with a large orange carrot. A carrot? Must have been some kind of mistake. Next to the plate there was a big glass full of milk, and on the table beside the glass was a folded piece of paper, with words scribbled in thick, red crayon.

“Dear Santa Claus,” it read. “The carrot is for Rudolph, but these are for you. Merry Christmas.”

If only we’d realized what those mysterious words meant, if only we’d run away and hid ourselves the moment we saw them, things might have turned out differently. But we didn’t know. We didn’t know anything. The snowman was dancing a jig on the tabletop. The reindeer was giving rides to the little star and the Teddy Bear. The angel, reluctant to leave the big plate, was content to stay there, calling out to the others, warning them to be careful. Me, I was eager to learn more about where we were—and why—so I stepped away to check things out.

The table we were on was long and low. Across the room was an old sofa. A grandfather clock stood against the far wall, and the fireplace was decorated with evergreen branches and had three bright red stockings hanging from the mantelpiece. A fourth stocking was lying on the floor, not far away. It must have fallen. There were other things in the room--furniture, packages, chewy dog toys--but I never had a chance to study them, because suddenly, from high above us, a raspy little voice called out.

“*The fireplace,*” said the voice, old and broken. “Watch the fireplace! At the stroke of *midnight*, it’ll happen. It’ll come down the *chimney*. It’ll come through the fireplace...and there’ll be nothing left but crumbs. *Crumbs* all over the *carpet*.”

Alarmed, we gathered on the big plate, huddling close as we stared up at the Christmas tree, where the voice had come from. Dangling from a branch, about five feet up, there was an old ornament, an ancient, half crumbling Christmas bangle gazing forlornly down at the six of us. He was handmade, crafted into the shape of a Christmas cookie—a Gingerbread Man, to be exact.

I liked him at once.

“What do you mean, old ornament?” I called up. “*What* will be coming through the fireplace?” Nervously, the other cookies glanced over at the smoldering coals on the hot bricks.

“Oh, it’s hard to say *what* it is,” croaked the old ornament slowly. “But it happens every year at the stroke of midnight. It’s always big; it’s always

red; it’s always hungry—and it’ll be coming straight for *you!*”

“What kind of *thing* could it be?” stammered the reindeer.

“What kind of creature is so big and so red and so hungry?” asked the shortbread Teddy Bear, covering its eyes.

“What kind of monster would eat *cookies?*” wondered the star.

“And what are we going to *do?*” demanded the snowman. “It’s almost midnight!” The cookies all shouted out in fright and looked at the clock. It was, indeed, just one minute until midnight. The old ornament, from up in the tree, merely shook his head, repeating the terrible words: “Crumbs... nothing but crumbs...”

“We’ll fight it, then!” snapped the chocolate chip snowman.

“We’ll teach it a lesson!” growled the shortbread Teddy Bear.

“We’ll chase it right back up that chimney,” proclaimed the sugar cookie reindeer.

“No,” interjected the angel, a bit peevishly, “we should just stay on the big plate, right where they put us. What do we know? We’re only *cookies*. If we stay on the plate, we’re certain to be safe!”

“Oh, oh, oh!” cried the star. “What shall we do?”

But before anyone could answer, the clock gave a mighty blast of sound, and the first of twelve long, loud chimes sounded through the room. The second chime had barely faded in our ears when a brilliant, reddish glow began growing, brighter and brighter, inside the fireplace. We heard a rustling, scuffling sound and the ringing of tiny little bells. Yes, something was coming, and coming fast, right down the chimney.

The clock struck three.

“Run!” I shouted. In a flash, I raced across the table. Stopping at the very edge, I peered over, staring in dismay at the carpet, more than two-and-a-half feet below. As the little star ran about in circles, the reindeer and the snowman crowded in close behind at the edge—but there was nowhere for any of us to go.

The clock struck four.

The angel shouted, “Everyone back on the plate! We were put on this plate for a reason!” She flopped down on the plate and lay still, as the clock struck six. The Teddy Bear, frantically glancing over its shoulder at the fireplace, ran toward the rest of us, right up to where we stood cowering at the edge of the table. But the bear wasn’t looking and crashed into us with a mighty thump, sending the reindeer, the snowman, and me right over the side.

We fell to the carpet with a crunch. Fortunately, the carpet was soft