

## Short Mystery

Cold and stiff. Cold and stiff. That is how I found him. So cold and stiff.

In the hall, Christopher stood on his tiptoes to grab the ornament knocker. He pulled it back and let it fall with a clunk and waited. The door remained closed and silent. Out of the corner of his eye he could see his shadow dancing across the walls. He looked back towards the heavy oak door and reached up his hand again. He closed his fingers on the cold metal knocker and let it slam against the wood once more. After a minute there was still no answer.

“Grandpa?” Christopher called out. His voice echoed down the empty hall. “Hello?” He put his eye to the keyhole. Nothing could be seen but the fire burning steadily on the other side. He furrowed his brows.

With a quick shifty glance down the hall, Christopher grasped the doorknob. His small hand was barely able to hold on to the knob as he heaved to turn it. Finally, with both hands, Christopher opened the door and entered the forbidden room.

Christopher let out a gasp. The room was covered from floor to ceiling with books and what was more the ceiling stretched up and up. It seemed to go on forever but finally ended with a brilliant crystal chandelier. In awe, he stepped into the room.

Suddenly his foot bumped something on the floor that he hadn't seen. He tripped and went sprawling across the carpet. Stunned he pushed himself up with his hands and glanced back towards the door. His face locked into a stone look of horror. Ice pulsed through his veins and he choked as a scream caught in his throat.

A body lay collapsed on the floor by the door. Christopher's grandfather had a look of terror to match his grandson's frozen in place. It could never be replaced, that look, it was there forever more, burned into the young boy's mind.

One of his grandfather's hands was stretched out, grasping at something unknown. The other had frozen clawing at his own throat. Glass lay scattered around the corpse and red wine stained the carpet around the body.

At last the long awaited scream escaped. It pierced the silence like a knife sending shivers through the room.

An hour later red and blue lights still flashed outside and the only look of horror was that inside Christopher's mind. He sat wrapped in a warm blue blanket with his grandma's frail arms around him. Despite her fragile appearance, she was a pillar of strength and kept her despair to herself. She ran her hand soothingly through his blond tresses. Her tearless face was the opposite of Christopher's. His grandfather had been a strict and reclusive man but now that he was gone Christopher could only remember the good times.

He remembered sledding down Jasper Hill. Images of long past pillow fights were flashed past and memories of bedtime stories were still fresh. But always, always, the sight of that frozen face kept coming back. The face haunted his dreams well into the night. It's blank eyes boring into him from a distance.

At 2 am Christopher shivered even though he was in bed huddled under two quilts. Both inside and outside the blankets was pitch black. The only thing he could see was his grandpa's face floating in space. He tossed once more before pulling down his

blankets. His eyes peeked out from under his covers and surveyed the room. From the hall a soft light glowed steadily.

Christopher cleared his eyes of terrified tears and wondered who was up. Cautiously he pulled down his covers further, his curiosity overcoming the darkness around his bed. His warm feet made contact with the cold floor and took small steps forward. The light was bright on the other side of his door and seemed to come from far down the hall and around the corner. His pace quickened unintentionally and he practically ran down the hall.

Images of finding his grandmother cold and lifeless blared in his head. What if she had left the candle burning and set her bed on fire? Or maybe she had gotten up in the night to go to the bathroom and fallen? Christopher's little feet pounded down the hall. He ran around the corner and almost pasted the room from which the light was illuminating. He screeched to a stop, too surprised to be afraid.

Inside the room his grandma screamed in bloodcurdling hysteria. The once tidy books were strewn across the floor in every direction. Papers had been torn from the desk and thrown into the fire, and in the center was his grandma in her nightgown with a book in each hand. Her once kind face was twisted into the face of a stranger filled with loathing for young Christopher.

The stranger wailed again and lifted her hands above her head. With more force than her feeble arms suggested, she hurled the books towards him. Christopher tried to run from the doorway but his knees shook violently and he stumbled. His hands caught him as he fell against the wall. The books fell through the open door and collided with the opposite wall in a shower of pages.

He took off down the hall. He could hear his grandma from behind him "Not the place for little children! Back to bed you scamper like a rat!"

Not looking back, he fled into the cool darkness, twisting and turning through the hallways whenever the opportunity provided itself. Finally exhausted and lost in his own home, Christopher collapsed behind a lonely chair. He tried to slow his gasping breath and stop the steady rivers of tears. His head pounded in confusion. He felt as if he had just been tossed into a waterfall and pounded repeatedly against the rocks, blow after blow. He was lost, his grandma was no longer the kind old lady from before, and his grandpa was murdered.

He sat there for hours, lost both physically and mentally. If the Church bell rang the hours, he didn't hear it. At last, though, he awakened as if from a dream to the steady, soothing purrs of the kitchen cat. It lay on his lap, an unchanging object to grasp his mind around. After a moment of contemplation he squared his shoulders, took the cat in his arms, and stood. He was going to find out what was in that room and he was going to do strong like his grandfather. Again the image of that frozen face drifted in front of his eyes, but determinedly he pushed it away and took a confident step back down the hall.

He at last found his way. The door to the forbidden room stood open before him. The room was empty and the fire smoldered. He stepped over ruined books with pages torn out and half burned papers. Stopping in the middle of the room he looked around unsure of where to begin. At a loss he walked forward to the closest bookshelf and delicately picked one of the surviving books. Still a little befuddled he flipped through.

From between two pages, a single paper fell to the ground. It fluttered idly to the floor. Christopher bent down and snatched it up. He unfolded it. A few lines were

scribbled in his grandfather's handwriting. He didn't understand most of it but he did understand the word "Will" and the sentence "leave all my worldly possessions and wealth to my grandson Christopher Hazel."

From behind his he heard a soft chuckle. "Hello deary. Found something interesting?" Asked his grandma's sweet voice.

He spun around. She stood in the doorway watching him. She held out her hand. "Just hand it over sweetheart. It's not something little boys should play with. Then I'll make a nice batch of cookies. How does that sound?"

Christopher's stomach rumbled and he smiled at his grandmother's kind face. He was about to hand her the paper but two faces floated into view. One was his grandpa's immobile look of terror and the other was the loathing he had seen behind the eyes of his grandma. He drew back his hand.

"No." he stated.

"Christopher, honey, give me the paper." His grandma said through clenched teeth.

"No." he repeated.

"Give it to me Brat! Now!" screamed the angry lady in his grandma. Christopher drew back against the bookshelf. Tears ran down his pudgy cheeks and sobs tore through his chest. The strange woman advanced towards him.

"No!" he screamed. He charged forward. His grandma stood still surprised at the turn of events. He bowled her over and kept going out the door and down the hall. He heard he call after him.

"I'll get you too Christopher! Just like your grandpa!"

He kept going, out the front door and down the street, into the cold, dark world. He had to find someone, that's all he knew.