

AJ Hampton

Grave Weight

By AJ Hampton

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Like a grave weight, complete and total darkness pressed on Madilyn Duval's tightly closed lids. Motionless, the darkness seemed to break the acuity of time. Stiff, smooth leather cushioned her unconscious body as a troubled moan parted from chapped lips. She lay with one lifeless hand crooked towards the beige floor, the other curled between her breasts. Long, bare legs curled in towards her belly. Knees that barely touched stuck off the edge of the two-person couch.

Moaning in unease, she shifted her head from one side to the other. Pain. Caught on the cusp of sleep and wakefulness, Madilyn was conscious of the first agonizing throb that resonated through her skull. Groggily she pushed at the air, trying to thrust away the darkness surrounding her. For a moment, she felt as if she were trying to claw her way out of a coffin.

That pain, slow and pulsing, intensified at the first flutter of her heavy eyelids. Confusion coupled with the curling sensation of nausea rolled in the pit of her stomach. Slowly, Madilyn moved the hand on her chest upwards, trailing a balmy palm over her face until she could rub the sleep from her eyes.

Blinking slowly, the vague darkness broke away to leave blind confusion in its wake. *Where the hell was she?*

Above her she heard, before she saw, the soft whirl of a ceiling fan.

Swoosh. Swoosh. Swoosh.

Dusty brown and beige blades cut through the stagnant air in a monotonous rhythm that threatened to lull her back to sleep. With each pass, the dry air stirred and Madilyn's nose wrinkled at the scent.

Death. Blood. Decay.

The air stunk of something rancid. It smelled like the dead possums she and Jordan--her older brother—used to find curled in the garage at their father's house in the sweltering humidity of a Missouri summer. The darkness was overwhelmed with that scent. Nausea strengthened in her stomach as she and as she woke fully. The air was so full of the rotting stench she could practically taste it. . It was too much. Choking, she tried to ignore the wretched acidic taste in her mouth as her back peeled off the sofa with her coughing attempt not to puke.

Along the front wall of the room, an echoing click sounded. Startled, Madilyn shrieked and jumped into a sitting position as she struggled to make out her surroundings. Heat, like a blow dryer, blew into the room and she felt it like a slap in the face.

Pain tightened like a vice against her temples and she felt that ache pulse with each frantic beat of her heart. Reaching out a steadying hand, she grasped the arm of the couch and moved her feet to the carpet. Sticky with perspiration, her legs stuck to the tan leather sofa beneath her.

A bead of sweat from her hairline fell and Madilyn felt it trickle down the curve of her cheek. Stifling, the hot, pungent air suffocated her. The stench only got worse with each breath. The ceiling fan swooshing above her did nothing to alleviate the hot press of air. No, it made it worse. Each time it circled above her, the heat and the acidity of the air was forced along her barely clothed body.

Not sure what as was worse, the heat or the smell, she closed her eyes and tried to ignore them both. It was impossible. They seemed to go hand in hand. The hotter it got, the worse the smell became. Something was cooking, and her gut told her she didn't want to figure out what that something was.

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With slouched shoulders, Madilyn leaned back against the couch and pushed her face into the palms of her hands. She blinked away the haze and cast her pale eyes toward the floor. Her toes, painted in a soft cotton candy pink, wiggled into the tan shag of the carpet.

It was familiar: the feel of her toes against the carpet, the press of leather under her back and thighs.

Long moments passed as she tried to sort out the facts. The longer she thought about it, the more confused she got. Why in the hell was it taking her so long to figure out what was on the tip of her tongue? She breathed deeply and her stomach curled in disgust.

Madilyn moved her eyes around the room, cautious of the pain that drummed in her head. Eyes adjusting to the lack of light, she recognized the sofa she sat on and the dark ceiling fan above her. Along the walls, ornate portraits hung. Between the paintings were holiday decorations she vaguely remembered hanging. Paper skeleton's and fake cobwebs reminded her that yesterday was Halloween. That was, if she'd only been asleep a few hours.

Slowly everything clicked into place, like a puzzle, one detail at a time. Without having to look, she knew that dark cherry wood bookshelves that reached to the ceiling mirrored a large bay window with dark brown curtains. On both the left and the right of those bookshelves, on the second shelf from the top, were pumpkins that she'd carved.

In front of the bookcases was an oversized desk. A big, black leather chair that was ten times more comfortable than it looked, was tucked in nicely. On the desk was a silver lamp without a light shade, just a burnt out bulb that looked more gray than white.

Next to the useless lamp was a phone, black and littered with too many buttons. Next to that, if she could turn her head, was a cup holder. It was black to match the phone, but it was oddly empty of any pens or pencils. The cup's purpose was ornamental, like so many other things that one would find in the drawers.

This was his, William Deveroux's—her lover and her worst enemy—domain. Madilyn knew she was in his study. This was his *very* private sanctuary. If she was here, where was he?

Unsteady on her feet she got up and her fingers clutched the arm of the couch as she teetered precariously. When she stood, she felt the blood drain too quickly from her head. The effect made fuzzy blobs of nothingness float before her eyes. She had an insane urge to swat at those gnat-like fuzzies, but Madilyn knew they wouldn't be there.

"Will?" she called out and the hoarse sound of her voice made her realize how scratchy and dry her throat was.

The first inkling of fear crept deep inside of her. What the hell was going on? Was this some sick Halloween trick? Lock Madilyn in a furnace and see how long it takes before the stench is too much and she passes out?

"William?" Madilyn called out again and her eyebrows furrowed when she was met with an odd silence.

The fan whirled above her and the heater hummed from the wall, but there was nothing else. It was too quiet. There were no maids bustling around down stairs. There was no clinking of pans from the kitchen. There was nothing.

Stumbling towards the open door, her nose followed the pungent odor like a dog being pulled on a leash. Each step was measured carefully, and she felt her precarious

world teeter as it spun on its axis.

Something was wrong. Very wrong. But she couldn't put her finger on it.

Hadn't she gone to sleep in her own bed, in her own two-bedroom apartment? Hadn't she fallen asleep wrapped against Will's pale, sweaty chest after they'd gotten back from a ghoulish party? She could almost taste it, the memory of him. Closing her eyes she was able to feel his lips against the back of her neck as he snuggled behind her. She could still feel of his warmth of his breath moistening the spot just below her ear as he whispered how much he loved her.

They had been in her bed, warm air from the overhead vent easing the chill of the brisk upstate New York autumn night. One hundred percent positive Madilyn knew she had gone to sleep in her bed, in her house, with her lover spooned behind her. That throb, that delicious ache deep inside of her confirmed her memory. William had ravished her in a jealous frenzy after a drunken mishap at the party. Sore and sated, they'd fallen asleep together as the sun started to bath the room in sunlight. That should have been earlier that morning.

So why, now, was she waking up on the couch in his study, feeling like she'd drank too much? Why was her head ready to explode? No light peered in from the windows and she knew it was night once more. The day, though, that was the more important question.

Madilyn staggered down the hallway, fingers digging into the wooden railing. She tried not to look over the mahogany banister; tried to not to look at the foyer that was floored in hard shining granite. From the ceiling, large white ghosts hung, floating from clear fishing wire to make the ghouls appear like true apparitions. On the table next to

vase of deep red roses, was a crystal bowl of candy that held a single empty wrapper.

If she fell, Madilyn mused, it wouldn't be good. Inch-by-inch she crept, long manicured nails clutching against the railing as she fought through the fog of pain and dizziness.

Heat like an oven nipped at her heels and with each step she took, she felt the sweat bead along her skin. It dripped down her back and down the valley between her breasts in tickling little rivulets. Her thighs, calves, feet, all felt sticky with perspiration.

From her cherished summers with her father, she knew it had to be a hundred plus degrees. The air was so damn thick with heat.

Limp, wheat-colored strands of her now stringy hair clung to her forehead and cheeks. The nape of her neck was wet. The strands of her golden blonde hair were now almost brown from moisture. The silk that barely covered her clung like a second skin against her flesh, and Madilyn had to literally peel the fabric away from her to let her skin breathe.

She wore next to nothing, only a thin cream-colored silk camisole and a pair of matching boy cut panties that accented the feminine curve of where her thigh met her ass. Against the paleness of her skin, the silk gave the facade that she wore nothing at all. When she'd gone to sleep, she *had* been wearing nothing at all.

What seemed like minutes were only actually a few seconds as Madilyn reached the partially opened door of the master bedroom. Pressing against it, she heard the soft familiar creak of the hinges as it opened. There was a time, long ago, when she dreaded the rasp of that door, of what that sound meant to her morals.

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Any morals she'd had spent acquiring in her twenty-nine years of life had disappeared the minute she'd stepped into his bedroom nearly five years ago. Now, the groan of the door was familiar, like so many other things in her life that had to do with William Deveroux.

Madilyn walked in, her head clearing with each second that passed. Her baby blue eyes, bloodshot and rimmed with red from too much sleep - or maybe not enough - settled on the large king sized four-poster bed that took center stage in the fiery heat of the room.

It took her a moment, her brain muddled as she absorbed the scene before her. The image, the horrendous picture, was like looking at a scene from a horror flick. What she saw looked like everything and nothing all rolled into one.

It wasn't instantaneous. No, it took her long seconds to figure out what she was seeing. It was the smell, above the image, that hit her first. Like a fist in her stomach she doubled over from it.

The stench of death was strong, so overwhelming that Madilyn felt the nausea rise in her stomach and this time no amount of coughing would keep it back. Helpless to stop it, Madilyn fell to the ground and her knees burnt against the rug on impact as she coughed and sputtered. Retching, her small form contorted as vomit burned her throat and tears leaked down her sweat-slicked cheeks.

Stomach empty and the beige carpet soiled, her watery eyes helplessly peered at the bed once more. Madilyn didn't want to look, but she felt compelled. Unable to turn and leave, she stared at the trails of dark red blood splattering the carpet as if there had been an explosion of flesh and bone. The lines reminded her of a dotted trail leading to

the 'X' on a treasure map and morbidly she followed those crimson tracks. What she found, though, was far from treasure. What she found was Ella Deveroux, Williams's wife – her nude broken body hanging half way off the bed in a grisly display.

One limp arm hung at an unnatural angle, obviously broken, and it touched the floor. Bent fingers rested in a pool of blood that had gone stagnant and dark with age. The other arm lay lifeless on an unmoving chest. Ella's neck, the long graceful throat that Madilyn had been so envious of, was slit from ear to ear and gapped open to expose the gore beneath.

Shiny, beautiful white-blond hair was now stained red and caked with dried blood. There was so much blood. The sheets. The bed. The floor. The walls. Everywhere Madilyn looked, there was blood. Some was a rich crimson and some was dark maroon, so dark it was almost brown. It looked like mud, but she knew it wasn't.

Watery eyes moved back to the wound on Ella's neck that lay parted. It was so deep Madilyn could see what she guessed was the esophagus and the other innards no one was meant to see. The wound no longer oozed blood, but she could see the trail where it had spilled over the white satin sheets to pool on the floor.

The worst part, more disgusting than the fatal lesion or the stench of her rotting corpse, were her eyes. Striking, cerulean eyes were wide open and cast up at the ceiling. In those cloudy depths, Madilyn could see the scream that matched the shape of her snarled mouth.

Madilyn shrieked, loud and piercing as her fingers clutched at the carpet. Voice cracking and burning, she continued to scream as tears ran down her face in a never-ending stream.

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A shadow moved across the room, the darkness separating from the wall and Madilyn caught it in her peripheral vision. The sound in her lungs stopped as if her scream had been cut off with a flick of a switch. Fear like she'd never known grew in her stomach and she felt tremors of true terror run down her spine. No time to react, no time to speak or to think, the shape took form as it emerged from the corner of the room. It was too late to run.

Thwack.

Like a hard crashing wave that breaks your body in half, Madilyn felt the blunt force against her head. Fighting in the drowning haze, she struggled against the undertow of darkness. Falling, face first, she hit the carpet and rolled onto her side with a choking sob that resounded through the room. A trickle of blood ran from the wound at her temple and its warmth against her skin was the only thing that kept her from melting into oblivion.

The shadow loomed above her, a mass of black cloth that she struggled to comprehend. Blinking dizzily, her eyes went wide with shock when William, her lover, peeled back the hood that covered his face. Dark, green eyes shone like emeralds and sparkled just as bright. Horrified, Madilyn stared. Her lover looked the same as always, except for the set of scratch marks that dug into his once flawless flesh from the corner of his eye to his jaw. His chiseled features were splattered with blood. Some of it was his, but most of it, she knew, was Ella's.

Thin, pale lips curved into a loving smile as he bent and trailed a blood stained finger over Madilyn's cheek. Gently, he moved the strand of hair that covered her face, as

if he wanted to make sure she could see him clearly. Struggling, she fought against him, but he was too strong.

“No,” Madilyn gasped, carpet abrading her skin as she tried to scramble away.

Tight, he gathered her wrists in one hand, pinning them to the floor after he drew them over her head. Soft fingers soothed the growing bruise where he’d struck her. From her temple to her cheek, he stroked his hand lower and Madilyn suddenly felt like she was an offering to the devil. Shuddering, Madilyn felt him press his lips against her cheek.

“Don’t cry baby,” he purred, cupping her cheek in his palm as he nuzzled his nose against her face. “Everything is going to be okay.”

His voice was tender, almost soothing as he stretched her arms high above her head. The jangling of metal sounded through the room, and she felt a scream bubble to the surface when her dear lover pulled a pair of silver handcuffs from his pocket. A knee shot into her stomach as she fought, and she froze in pain as she struggled to find her breath.

Tight, the ratcheting of the metal echoed through the room as he cuffed her to the bedpost. Blood lined the floor around her, and through the thin silk of her shirt, Madilyn could feel the coolness of it. Hot tears ran from her eyes, over the hand that cupped her chin as she tried to shake her head back and forth.

William bent forward and the fabric that pooled at his wrists lapped against her arm like water. Hard, grasping, his fingers bit into her skin as he grazed his lips tenderly against hers. Salty, rancid, she could taste the remnants of blood along his mouth as he

kissed her lovingly, kissed her as if he would save her. Shuddering in revulsion she kicked her legs out. Desperately, she pulled against the metal holding her captive.

Growing brighter, William's eyes glowed with glee as he looked down at her like a kid in a candy store. Goose bumps rose on her skin as the terror mounted. Slightly abrasive, his hands wandered down her body. Tweaking her nipples through the thin, see-through shirt she wore, she caught the icy chill of his smile and trembled.

Hot, her cheek pressed against the bloody shag carpet as she turned her head away from that gaze. "Don't do this William, please."

Hard and fast he struck her again, the sound ringing out almost as loudly as the bells she heard in her head. The pain blossomed as his lips, so gentle and soft, pressed against the spot that he'd just struck. A slow gleam filled his eyes, as he pulled away and looked into her eyes.

"I've dreamed about this for so long." His words were seductive and low and Madilyn trembled as his mouth came down hard, almost as hard as his fist, against her lips.

Thrusting, his tongue invaded her mouth and it made it hard to breathe through the fear when he forced his kiss deeper. Black faded along her consciousness as she bucked against him, desperate to get away and unable to find oxygen through the heavy press of his body against hers. The cotton of his robe was soft, so unlike the rough denim that she felt chafing her thighs. He jerked away, hand fisted in her hair to keep her head in line with his. Panting in excitement, Madilyn felt every single breath pulsing against her bruised lips. The aroused length of his flesh throbbed against her center as he loomed above her like a nightmare she couldn't wake up from.

There was a moment when she felt nothing except the weight of his body, and it would have been a welcomed relief if she hadn't caught the flash of sliver that he pulled from his robe. Thrashing harder, she felt her skin tearing as she pulled against the handcuffs.

"I'm going to make you scream, baby. It's gonna hurt... so bad." The harsh words fell from his lips like it was a coo.

Slowly, he slid the knife in his hand down the side of her throat. Cold, the blade was such a sharp contrast to the stifling heat of the room that she'd almost forgotten about. Gulping hard, the scream she fought to keep trapped inside fell from her lips as white, hot pain moved in a searing line down her breastbone with the cutting edge of the knife.

The shimmering look of pleasure in his eyes was the last thing Madilyn would know before the pain she felt digging into her gut took over. His laughed echoed through the room as she fell into darkness. This time, she'd be unable to claw her way back into the light.