

# *the Dead Weight*

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**Sample chapter**  
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*For the girls.*



## Chapter 1

I can hear footsteps slapping the linoleum a few feet outside my open doorway. The morning shift is here.

I roll myself out of bed before Ms. Michelle can tell me to wake up. It's a small and probably futile act of rebellion, but I hate the look on her face when she tells me what to do. I won't give her the satisfaction today. By the time she gets to my door I'll be in my bathroom brushing my teeth. She might even give me a compliance point for it.

I already hear January screaming from the door closest to the staff's workstation. I'm pretty sure they put her there on purpose so they don't need to walk so far when they have to deal with her tantrums, which is just lazy, if you ask me.

"Shut the fuck up, Jan!" Tracy yells groggily from her room across the hall. It's times like these I wish they let us have doors.

"Two demerits for swearing, Tracy. Please try to have a little more compassion for January today," Ms. Michelle chirps. I imagine her pausing to make note of Tracy's two demerits on her clipboard and roll my eyes. Her footsteps continue.

When Ms. Michelle gets to my doorway, she peers in and smiles with a twinkle of pride in her eye. She actually thinks she's responsible for my "*marked decrease of defiant episodes.*"

"Wow! Up already and getting an early start on personal hygiene without prompting! If you keep this up all day you'll earn a compliance point," Ms. Michelle chirps. Ms. Michelle is always chirping. I force a smile and toothpaste drips down my chin. Her smile falters. Her eyes shift to the left uncomfortably and she keeps walking. *Goddammit.* I make a mental note not to show so many of my teeth next time.

Down the hall, January is still screaming her head off about being too tired to go to school. She's just making it worse for herself, but she's only been here for three months, so you can't really blame her. She doesn't know if you just play along they leave you alone. Or maybe she's too stupid to figure it out. I haven't read her chart yet, so I'm not sure.

Ginger adds to the chaos, demanding loudly to use the phone to call home. It's not even her phone day today, and I don't know why she bothers. Her mom barely tolerates those calls anyway.

I spit in the sink, wipe my face, then peer across the hall toward Keisha's room to see if she's awake. She is. I can tell she's been waiting for me. She stands in her doorway, casually examining the ends of her braids, and doesn't say a word. She just locks her gaze on me, lifts her eyebrows, then glances over to the staff's workstation. That's all the communication I need. I look down the hall and see Mr. Josh making notes in an electronic chart. I look back at Keisha and make just enough eye contact so she knows that *I* know. Today is the day.

I dress quickly and make sure to put on my white running sneakers with the red laces. Those laces are a prize that took me six months to earn. I can be trusted in my room alone with shoelaces. It's a status symbol.

As I walk into the hall, Keisha casually leaves her room a couple of beats behind me and we head toward the meds line. Octavia, Diamond, and Tracy wait in the line in front of us. They stand there looking like those dolls that stack up and fit inside each other. Hollow, identical copies of each other in various sizes. Their charts are just as boring as they are. Tracy looks me and Keisha up and down and the other two follow suit, but neither of us acknowledges their dumb attempt at intimidation.

Ginger joins behind us, crestfallen, having finally accepted that her phone call isn't happening. Tall and lanky with Coke-bottle glasses, she confidently sports a frizzy hairdo complete with puffy bangs like an '80s mom headed to a Jazzercise class. Tracy eyes her and whispers something to Diamond. Ginger's hair is exceptionally messy today and I silently hope that Tracy doesn't taunt her about it. I don't think I can handle two tantrums at once.

Across the hall, January lets out a gurgling scream, a little louder than before, and we all turn to stare into her room. She's flopping on the floor, red-faced in her too-small pajamas. Sweat and tears glue chunks of auburn hair to her round cheeks. Ms. Michelle speaks calmly, trying to reason with her, as if that has ever worked in the history of January's tantrums. Nurse Patrick is close by though, armed with a syringe full of diazepam. I guess January isn't going to be of much help today. That's okay. We don't need her.

Mr. Josh keeps an eye on the tray of undelivered meds while he writes in January's chart. Documentation is important here. God forbid these people aren't aware of every single moment of our existence.

January starts screaming even harder as Nurse Patrick enters her room with the syringe and I lean in closer to get a better look. No turning back now. Nurse Patrick whispers something in

January's ear, then sticks her with the needle. The meds go in, the lights go out. Jan's body deflates and the cacophony shrinks to a whimper. Finally. Jesus.

Once Jan ensures we'll all be late to breakfast, Nurse Patrick comes back to the meds line to distribute the goods. When it's my turn, I take my paper cup. Just one pill now, one beige oval. They're not sedating me anymore, and thank god they gave up on the one that gave me headaches and made me sleep twenty hours a day. It took me weeks to bounce back from that little experiment. My chart says my diagnosis is difficult to medicate, and I'm pretty sure they just quit trying. I'm told the beige pill is to help me focus in school. Whatever. I take it, swallow, and open my mouth for Nurse Patrick to check. He gives me a warm smile and his blue eyes crinkle.

"Thanks, kid! Have fun at school!" he singsongs.

Nurse Patrick is corny as hell, but he's not a bad guy. At six foot two, his size and solid build should make him intimidating, but his dopey smile instantly gives him away. He's a marshmallow. He holds out his elbow and I raise my own to give his elbow a tap. A sanitary high-five. He really does try.

Keisha is next and I watch her palm her meds and slip them into her hoodie's front pocket. She's really gotten good at that. Nurse Patrick seems none the wiser, gives her an elbow tap, and calls Cat forward with a smile.

Keisha and I leave the meds line together and join the rest of the girls. We lean against the wall in the north hall, waiting to be escorted downstairs to breakfast. We're all quiet, tired from another long night of hearing Diamond screaming in her sleep. As we wait, I can smell Mr. Josh approaching and my gut twists. His cologne smells like arrogance and asshole, and it takes everything I have to calm the muscles in my face, release my fists, and conjure a look of indifference as he walks up behind me, just a little too close. His shirt sleeve brushes my bare arm. Goosebumps.

"Alright, ladies, we're heading downstairs," he says, strutting in front of us. "I want an orderly line. Absolutely no talking until we reach the cafeteria, and I hope I don't need to remind you, you are not allowed to talk to the boys. Sit only at your designated table. Any deviation from these rules will result in a demerit and a demotion in your level. Have I made myself clear?" he asks, smiling falsely.

"Yes, Mr. Josh," we say in chorus.

He leads us down the stairs, single file toward the cafeteria. When we come to the locked door standing between us and our breakfast, he tells us to turn around. We do. I hear him punch in a six-digit code, followed by a soft click.

Mr. Josh steps into the doorway and holds the door open, blocking half of the entrance. I hate this part.

“Let’s go, ladies!” He leans his back against the doorjamb and waits. Everyone cringes. One by one we move through the doorway, each of us trying to make ourselves impossibly small. Inevitably, we brush up against Mr. Josh. He smirks. My skin crawls. I keep walking.

Mr. Josh is more than a jerk on a power trip. I’ve kept my eye on him since I got here and it wasn’t hard to figure out his game. I’ve met dozens of men just like him. The creep hiding in plain sight. Places like this are full of them. Nobody questions a do-gooder who helps troubled kids. But we all know better.

When we enter the cafeteria, the boys all look up. Of course, they beat us here and took all the good cereal. One more reason to hate January and her useless tantrums. I grab a box of plain cheerios and sit across from Keisha. Now we can finally talk.

“So today, then?” I say casually, glancing toward Mr. Josh to make sure he’s not paying attention to us.

“Today. Right after lights out. Mr. Josh is working a double, so he’ll be exhausted. He’ll be working on evening charts, so he won’t even notice if we do it right at shift change at nine,” Keisha says, carefully controlling the excitement I know she’s feeling.

“You realize if this goes sideways, we lose everything, right? We’ll be in our rooms without privileges for weeks.”

“We’re not going to get caught,” she promises.

“Are you sure you have the right code?” I press.

“Jesus, Quinn, for the thousandth time, I have the right code. I watched Mr. Josh use it again yesterday and I’m not an idiot. Do you think I’m an idiot?” Keisha says, challenging me with an arched eyebrow and wry smile.

I roll my eyes, but crack a smile of my own to answer hers. “Of course I don’t think you’re an idiot. If you say we’re good, we’re good.” But truthfully, I’m not one hundred percent sure. Keisha’s one of the smartest people I’ve met, but I’ve been doing things like this long enough to know you can’t predict everything.



I sigh and let my eyes wander across the room to where the boys sit. I do a quick headcount, just to be sure I know who's in the room with us. An old nervous habit from my last group home. All twelve are here. Same as us girls. We only see the boys at mealtimes and during school, but even then we barely interact. Half of them are too high on their meds to even bother trying to talk to us. I already read their charts, but even if I didn't know their histories, symptoms, meds, and the reasons they're in this place, I wouldn't interact with these boys on purpose. Sometimes you can just look at someone and know.

I let my attention come back to Keisha. "So obviously, January isn't going to be any good to us tonight. Those meds will have her knocked out until breakfast tomorrow. I can probably get Ginger to go off the rails and give us a good distraction though."

"What did you have in mind?" Keisha asks, a smile playing on her lips.

"At dinner I'll tell Tracy I heard that Ginger's mom called this morning. Tracy won't be able to resist a good rumor and it'll get back to Ginger within the hour for sure. Ginger will lose her mind in twenty minutes or less trying to get phone privileges. Boom. Instant distraction. They won't even bother to trace the rumor back to me."

"And if that doesn't work?" Keisha asks skeptically. She always demands a plan B.

"It will. But if all else fails, I'll just tell Ginger I heard Ms. Michelle call her a brat behind her back. She'll spend all night crying about it." Again, it's simple. Ms. Michelle won't even give me demerits for lying because it's the truth and she knows it.

"Jeez, Quinn. That's kinda messed up," Keisha says, but I catch her smiling.

I shrug. "People are predictable."

Keisha knows just about everything about me by now, but she doesn't know I read everyone's charts, and she definitely doesn't know I've read some of hers.

Her chart is very long. Like a lot of us, her mom and stepdad were addicts. She was placed in foster care when she was eight years old. She spent the next eight years failing out of every foster placement and group home until she ended up here a year ago, barely escaping a juvenile detention sentence. It's not like her history is special. We're all walking around with some version of the same old story. Bad childhoods, parents who were terrible, dead, or both. Keisha's only different in that she turns eighteen in a month and will be moving into transitional living. She's not being considered for placement in a locked adult facility, as she loves to remind us.

But what makes people feel special is also their weakness. If I ever needed to mess with Keisha, I'd start there. I wouldn't do that to her though. I hate just about everyone, but not Keisha.

I'm sixteen, so I have two years to go before I get to leave. The best I can hope for is transitional living like Keisha. They give you your own apartment, a job, and tuition for community college or a trades program if you want it. That's the goal. That's why I'm usually on my very best behavior. I can't go to an adult facility. I just *can't*. And I'm definitely not going back home. There's no home to go back to. Meredith and Daniel Wallace adopted me when I was two. I don't really have any memories of life before them. Anyway, they surrendered me back to the state four years later. No hard feelings. Not everyone is cut out to be a parent, especially to a kid like me.

I entered foster care after that and bounced from home to home. After the last foster family dumped me, a judge ordered a residential treatment center. I've been at the Pegasus Center since then. It could be worse. They could have easily sent me to juvenile detention for the things I did. Instead, they sent me for treatment. The system has a weakness for girls who look like me. Blonde hair, white skin, sweet face, small build. I'm not saying it's fair, but it's true.

I've learned all kinds of things in therapy, too. My therapist tells me when I've hurt someone's feelings and when my facial expressions don't match the situation. She explains how other people think and feel and why. I pay attention as if my life depends on it, because it probably does. If I can read people, understand what makes them tick, and match their energy, I can usually go unnoticed. I think I'm blending in pretty well now.

After breakfast Mr. Josh escorts us to the elevator, down two floors to the classrooms. We're split into small groups according to age and ability level. Only a few of us are smart enough to qualify for regular high school classes. It could be worse. As long as you put in a little effort, you pass your classes and your teachers can go home to their families and feel better about themselves because they saved a crazy child today. It's best to keep them feeling optimistic about you. They'll let a lot of things slide if they feel like you're making progress.

I raise my hand to let my teacher know I'm done with my work early. Without a sound, she smiles and points to the tablet cart. I grab one, find an empty corner, and settle in. These things aren't supposed to connect to the Internet, of course. In fact, the only thing we're allowed to do on them is read books, play math games, and draw. It wasn't hard to unlock the good stuff

though. I can't get on the Internet, but I figured out how to get into the internal server if I have a staff member's password, and I do.

Mr. Josh charts on us so often that nobody notices the extra log-in records. His password is his own birthday, which I learned while watching him show pictures of the big day to Ms. Rose, trying to impress her. When she asked how old he turned, I did the math. It was too easy.

I open the electronic charts and start reading where I left off. As always, I check my own notes first.

*Quinn Wallace woke and initiated her hygiene routine on schedule without prompting. Her cooperation continues to improve per her behavior plan. She showed patience toward a struggling peer during the morning routine. However, she did not show empathy or attempt to console her peer. She avoided eye contact and maintained a flat affect throughout the duration of her peer's tantrum. Empathy and compassion remain underdeveloped for her age and developmental level.*

"Dammit," I mumble under my breath. I make a mental note to remember to try to talk to January during her next tantrum or at least act concerned.

I back out of my own record and scroll until I get to January's chart. It's about time I read her file. Her daily notes are just a timeline of her tantrums. Boring. I check her psychological test scores. That explains it. She's fourteen, but it says here she's functioning like a kid less than half her age. I guess she can't really help it.

I scroll back to the beginning to read her family history. Both her parents still have legal custody of her. That's different. Why would someone with two functioning parents get sent to a residential treatment center?

I skim past her developmental milestone records and behavioral testing. I just about choke on my own spit when I see the answer. "Jesus Christ, Jan," I sigh quietly.

Who knew she had it in her? It's right there in her chart though. About a month before she arrived here, she started a small fire in her family's garage. From the notes, it looks like they believed it to be an accident. Then, a few paragraphs down, there's a note about her using a lighter to set the family dog's tail on fire because he was getting more attention than her. Then I read what must have been the final straw. In a blind rage over her bedtime, January used a nearby candle to set her parents' bed on fire. I guess they lived to tell the tale, then sent her here. Wow.

I don't get spooked easily, but something about this rattles me. And I thought *I* had a colorful record. I log out of the tablet quickly, erase my history, and ask to visit the library. My teacher smiles and nods and I walk to the back of the room, my heart slowing as I go.

Our library has a pretty decent selection. We get a lot of donations from local businesses and charities. We also get cast-offs from local high schools and the public library. There's enough here to keep your mind occupied for years. The shelves in the back of the room are ancient, made of carved hardwood, rising all the way up to the high ceilings. It feels like another world, not like the sterile hospital-like environment on the sixth floor where we spend most of our time.

My first stop is the fiction section. I scan the shelves for anything written about teenagers. I've missed out on a lot living here, and the foster care system and group homes aren't exactly normal either. If I want to blend in with other people my age, I need to know what they know. I need to behave like they behave and speak like they speak. I choose two thick novels, then move on to biographies, specifically autobiographies. Reading people's stories about themselves gives me a lot of information about what people think about and how they feel. I usually end up learning something about history or politics while I'm at it. Win-win, I guess. I tuck a memoir into the growing stack in my arms.

My last stop is the nature and travel section. We see almost nothing but white walls in this place. What few glimpses we get of the outside world are usually from the inside of a transport van. I like to know about what's out there. I choose a picture book on birds of the Midwest, which I've checked out multiple times already, a book on state parks, and a United States road atlas.

Satisfied, I bring my stack to the teacher's desk. She notes my choices in my chart to be analyzed by my therapist later, then logs the books into the library system. When she's done, she smiles stiffly and shifts her eyes away from mine uncomfortably as she hands them back to me.

"Enjoy!" she says a little too sweetly.

Three o'clock finally hits and I line up by the door with everyone else and wait for our escort. They're always escorting us everywhere, like it matters. Even if one of us managed to make a break for the door and run outside, there's really nowhere to go. Peoria, Illinois, is small and it's basically in the middle of nowhere. The only place to go in this town is the train station, and train tickets cost money. I heard that a few years ago one girl made it to the station, did a few "favors," and got all the way to Chicago by the next morning. Whatever it takes, I guess.

The elevator stops on the third floor and Ms. J pushes her cleaning cart into the tiny space next to us. She's just clocked in for her shift. The sharp smell of cleaning solution fills the elevator, burning my nose. Ms. J gives us a small wave and a smile. She avoids making eye contact with me though.

As adults go, Ms. J isn't the worst. When she cleans our unit, she's supposed to search our rooms for contraband, but she never narcs on anybody for their candy stash and leaves Jan alone when she hides extra art supplies under her bed.

The elevator dings. Ms. J pushes her cart toward the fifth-floor bathrooms as we continue up to the sixth floor.

When we get back to our unit, I drop my books in my room and join the rest of the girls in the dayroom for free time. I usually skip this part. Given a choice, I'd always rather read in bed. Lately, though, I've been trying to force myself to be social once in a while. Ms. Michelle started writing notes in my chart about isolation and my therapist started contemplating adding another personality disorder to my diagnosis. This week I've socialized almost every day in hopes that today's meeting with Keisha wouldn't seem suspicious.

I scan the dayroom and find Keisha by the game table, saving a seat for me. Without a word, she deals a hand of Go Fish. Here we go.

"So, we're still good for nine then?" Keisha asks quietly, her eyes on her cards.

"Give or take," I say with a wave of my hand. "The timing depends on how well I can plan out the distraction. It'll be close to the shift change, right after Mr. Josh does his last round of bed checks before he leaves for the night. Do you have any fives?" I ask to keep up the optics.

"Go fish," Keisha says.

"What about the alarm on the south door?" I ask as I pick up another card.

Keisha gives me a little smirk and rolls her eyes. "I already told you. I have the staff code. Do you have any twos?" she says a little louder. "All we need to do is make sure no one sees us leave. Once you set Ginger off, all eyes will be on her. I've got the rest covered."

"Already on top of it," I whisper. "Got any sevens?"

"I can't wait to watch the master work."

Behind us, the word "riot" catches my attention. The news plays quietly on a boxy television hanging from the ceiling and I crane my neck to see it. On the screen, a middle-aged man in a crumpled suit addresses the camera confidently, though he looks like he's been up all night.

“Riots continue to break out throughout the city of Chicago and its surrounding suburbs, resulting in multiple police-involved shootings and at least forty-three deaths. The riots began earlier this month and appear to be growing in size and frequency throughout the area. The mayor of Chicago is advising citizens to avoid large crowds and adhere to a strict curfew in hopes of containing the disturbances. At this time, Police Chief James Roberts reports that the group responsible remains unknown at this time. Police have been unable to identify a pattern in –”

Mr. Josh unceremoniously flips the channel to a nature documentary, leaving me hanging on the anchor’s words. It’s not the first time I’ve heard the news talking about these riots, but it *is* the first time I’ve heard them talk about them spreading to the suburbs.

“I was watching that,” I grumble at no one.

Mr. Josh struts over to our table, leans low and whispers in my ear.

“I bet you were, psycho.” He chuffs, stands upright, and moves toward the center of the room where Ginger and Diamond flip through magazines.

My skin rips into flames and my heart beats faster. I’m on the edge of losing control, but years of therapy kick in. I close my eyes and take three deep breaths. Count my fingers. Remind myself how much I have to lose if I react. My heart slows and a trickle of sweat drips down my spine. I open my eyes, calm again.

“Nice work,” Keisha says, impressed.

“Do you have any tens?” I ask.