



T.R. RAGAN

*SHE ONLY  
WANTED TO  
LOSE A FEW  
POUNDS ...*

DEAD  
WEIGHT

# **DEAD WEIGHT**

**T.R. Ragan**

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I love you all.

## **About the Author**

Theresa Ragan is a member of RWA and the Sacramento Chapter of RWA and has garnered six Golden Heart nominations in Romance Writers of America's ® prestigious Golden Heart ® Competition for her work. She lives with her husband, Joe, and the youngest of her four children in Sacramento, California.

# Chapter 1

## Free at Last

*California, 1989*

Headed north on Interstate 5, Carol Fullerton, sixteen going on thirty, waffled between feeling a sense of boundless liberation and apprehension. The windows of the 1969 Ford Torino were rolled down.

The wind whipped through her hair: freedom.

The slight hiss of the engine: anxiety.

Although her license, complete with picture of a young girl with blonde stringy hair and goofy expression, had arrived in the mail two days ago, she'd been planning for this day for what seemed like forever.

*Click. Pssst. Sssss.*

There it was again.

The tank was more than half full. She wasn't running out of gas. Her best friend, Ellen, had sold her the car for two hundred dollars. Ellen was a year older. In a very short time the two of them had made a lot of memories driving around Sacramento in the car they often referred to as their chariot. The car had allowed them a certain amount of freedom and always got them where they wanted to go.

But at the moment, the engine didn't sound too good.

She needed to find a gas station and have a mechanic look under the hood, but all she could see in front of her was a never-ending stretch of highway.

She pushed harder on the gas pedal, hoping to find help before it was too late. The engine whirred and then slipped as if something wasn't connecting. She was sure she was in trouble when she saw a puff of white smoke seep out from under the hood.

Pulling to the side of the highway, she shut off the ignition, exited the vehicle, and opened the hood.

The engine hissed and sputtered.

A couple of cars whizzed past. She found an old sweatshirt from the backseat and used it to wipe the dipstick so she could check the oil. It was full. Reaching through the passenger window, she grabbed a piece of Wrigley's Spearmint chewing gum and a map. She decided to give the engine a chance to rest before she tried turning on the ignition again.

She plopped down on the gravel near the front right tire and popped the stick of gum into her mouth. She looked around; nothing but wide open fields and pine trees in the distance.

According to the map there was a national park close by. If worse came to worst, she would head that way and look for a park ranger, or at the very least, a public telephone.

## Chapter 2

### Today's the Day

*Sierra Mountains, 2010*

"Step on the scale."

"No."

"You want to leave here, don't you?"

That got her attention. The woman on the bed turned her head toward him. She was not a happy camper.

"Today might be your lucky day. Your arms are half the size they were when you first came to me. Look at this," he said, holding up a summer dress with spaghetti straps. "I even bought you a dress for the occasion."

"You're never going to let me go." Her head fell back against the already flattened pillow.

He looked at the dining room table and noticed she'd eaten the salad and green beans and left the chocolate chip cookies. It was amazing what a person could do with the right motivation. He crossed the room in a few strides and went to stand on the other side of the bed so he could get a better look at her.

She wore an oversized pajama shirt that hung past her knees. Her cheekbones were more pronounced. Three chins had become one.

"Yes," he said. "You're definitely going home. You look like a whole new person."

She ignored him.

"Come on. Get up. I want to see how you look in this dress."

He helped her slide her legs to the edge of the bed. Her feet slid slowly to the floor, the long chain clinking as she moved.

She had taken three weeks longer than most to lose a measly ten pounds, but during the sixth week something must have finally triggered her to start doing the hard work because the weight had melted off from that point on.

He picked up her logbook from the bedside table and looked it over. "Good. Good. Looks like you've been following the routine perfectly. Get dressed," he said as he headed for the kitchen.

He removed the dishes from the small wood table, but left the plate of cookies. She was a messy one, he thought. Most of the women who had stayed here did the dishes and kept everything nice and tidy, but Diane Kramer was a bona fide slob. She used to be a pig and a slob. One out of two wasn't bad. When he returned to the bed, which also served as a couch when she wasn't in it, he was delighted to see that the dress fit her perfectly.

Today was definitely the day.

"You look great," he told her. He raised his hand to her face so that he could brush tangled hair from her eyes.

She flinched as if his touch was revolting in some way. The idea boggled his mind.

He'd been good to her. For months he'd provided her with nutritious meals, made certain she was clothed and bathed, supplied her with books to read and gave her a journal so she could keep track of her progress. Not once had he raised a hand to her, let alone his voice.

He nudged her arm to get her on the scale. She was five feet, five inches tall. When the tip of the needle settled on the nine, he was ecstatic. "Congratulations, Diane, you did it! You weigh 119 pounds." Once he removed the chains from around her ankles, she would be closer to 109 pounds. Fabulous.

She stood before the mirror looking glum, her shoulders slumped forward, her spine curved. There was only so much he could do. Attitude was everything.

Nothing she could say or do, though, would ruin the joy he felt upon seeing such amazing results. There wasn't a human being in the world who he couldn't help. He was sure of it.

He moved her away from the scale, placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her toward the one wall in the room that she could not reach during her stay. The wall was covered with a dark silky sheet.

It was time for the big reveal.

But first, he grabbed the comb from the bedside table and brushed the tangles from her long dirty-blond hair.

She remained silent, her eyes dull and lifeless.

Once that chore was done, he went to stand in front of the sheet, inhaling deeply as he turned and stared at her. Thirty seconds passed before he realized he was holding his breath. He smiled and then snapped his fingers when he realized he'd almost forgotten the most important part.

Within minutes he returned to the same spot in front of the sheet, glad to see she hadn't moved. He held the Polaroid camera high enough so he could see her from head to toe through the viewfinder.

"Stand up straight," he said.

She hardly moved. He took the picture anyhow. Within minutes the negative developed and he was able to compare her "before" picture with the picture he'd just taken.

"Look at this," he said. "You've lost 146 pounds without the chains."

He pulled the sheet away, revealing a floor-to-ceiling mirror. He turned toward the mirror and waited for her reaction.

"That's not me," she said under her breath, her sunken eyes unblinking as she gazed at her reflection.

"It's you."

Her eyes narrowed and she lifted an arm as if to make sure the reflection in the mirror would also lift an arm.

At first, her reaction irritated him. She should be overjoyed. The transformation was life changing. She'd never be the same person again. And yet she looked sad. She was in shock, he decided. The transformation was too much for her. "Do you want a glass of water?"

"I don't want to be here any longer. Please let me go."

"That's exactly what I'm going to do."

He stuffed his hand deep into his pants pocket and pulled out a set of keys. He

unlocked the door to his bedroom where he stayed when he had the place to himself and promptly returned with a miniature antique key. “Sit down on the bed so I can get these chains off of you.”

She did as he asked, her eyes wary.

It only took him a few seconds to unlock the padded shackle from around her ankle. The cuff and chain fell to the wood floor with a clank.

She didn’t move—just sat there like a lump on a log. “You’re free to go,” he said.

“I can go?”

“That’s what I said.”

She stood and walked slowly to the door, surprised to find it unlocked when she turned the knob.

From where he stood, he could see that the sun had managed to break through the clouds, the sun’s rays hitting the forest floor despite the regiment of trees. The porch was covered with prickly pine needles, but that didn’t stop her from stepping barefoot onto the porch.

“Don’t you want to put on your shoes first?”

She looked back at him, her face lined with distrust. She didn’t say a word in response. Instead, she turned back toward the wooded area, flew down the porch stairs, and ran.

Confused, he watched her run through the dense forest blanketed with leaves and twigs. Did she know where she was going? She weaved her way uphill, using her hands and feet to climb and claw her way through a stand of pine trees. On her feet again, the young woman looked as agile and graceful as a deer, as if she’d been running marathons her entire life instead of sitting in front of the television with a bag of corn chips and cheese dip.

He glanced from his backpack near the door to the kitchen floor that needed to be mopped. He knew he should probably go after the woman first and save the cleaning for later, but he just couldn’t do it. He was anal that way.



## Chapter 3

### Dying to Know

*Sacramento, August, 2010*

Lizzy Gardner, private investigator, ex-pencil chewer, and thirty-one year old woman who would more than likely always be known as the “one who got away,” looked over her notes. Two days after Carol Fullerton received her California driver license in the mail, she paid two hundred dollars for her friend’s car and took off, never to be seen again.

That was over twenty years ago.

The girl’s mother, Ruth Fullerton, had recently been diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. She was running out of time and the poor woman was more desperate than ever to find out what happened to her daughter.

With few leads and little evidence, Lizzy figured this could very well be her first and last cold case.

She tapped the rubber end of her pencil against her chin and glanced outside. It was so hot she could see the heat coming off the asphalt in waves. The streets of downtown Sacramento were empty. Whenever it hit triple digits, the crowds ran to local waterways to cool off. Many schools would not be in session for a few more weeks, which told her the American River was probably teeming with rafts and rowdy kids today.

The moment she looked back at her notes, the door opened.

Lizzy looked up. Ever since being credited with putting away Spiderman, a notorious serial killer, business had picked up.

The woman who walked through the door was tall and slender. She looked like a movie star—a young Sharon Stone. She wore a body-hugging sheath dress with a black and white graphic design.

Suddenly Lizzy felt underdressed in her T-shirt and jeans. “What can I do for you?”

“My name is Andrea Kramer,” the woman said. “I want to hire you to find my sister.”

Lizzy gestured toward the chair facing her desk and then dropped her pencil into the old mayo jar her niece had paper-mâchéd.

Andrea stepped closer, leaving the door to click shut behind her. The woman’s cheeks, Lizzy noticed, looked a little too hollow, her arms a little too bony. Glancing at the pastry wrapped in waxed paper next to her iced vanilla latte, Lizzy had to stop herself from offering the woman her lunch. “When was the last time you saw your sister?”

After taking the offered seat, Andrea looked at the ground before opting to keep her giant leather purse on her lap. Smart woman. Lizzy didn’t take offense. She had her priorities and cleaning the carpets wasn’t one of them.

“It’s been more than six months since I saw my sister,” Andrea said.

“Have you gone to the police?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“After much harassment on my part, and waiting a ridiculous number of days, they finally wrote a report. It took them three months to talk to Diane’s co-workers, shuffle through the drawers in her apartment, talk to one elderly neighbor, and conclude that my sister is a runaway.”

“What have you been doing in the meantime?”

The woman snorted, a dainty little noise. “A better question would be what *haven’t* I done?” Andrea reached into her purse, pulled out a plastic three-ring binder, and set it on Lizzy’s desk. “I have been gathering information: phone numbers of family and friends, recent photographs of Diane, anything and everything that might help *you* find her.”

Lizzy took the binder. It was divided by colored sheets, complete with color-coded tabs. Neat and orderly. Lizzy couldn’t help but wonder if the woman needed a filing job.

The first section consisted of a five-by-seven color picture of Diane Kramer, age twenty-eight, five foot five, 255 pounds. Without the round face and chipmunk cheeks, she and Andrea could be twins.

The next page described Diane’s personality: happy, funny, and caring. Diane adored kids and worked many hours with special needs children at The Helping Hand, a K-12 school in Sacramento.

Diane was also smart: BS in Biological Science, summa cum laude, graduating in the top one percent at CSU, Chico.

There were sections in Andrea’s binder titled Description, Hobbies, Education, Police, Friends, Family, and Miscellaneous.

The green section labeled Police was the thinnest. That didn’t surprise Lizzy. Often times police enforcement agencies only looked for missing persons in specific cases. They had limited resources and sadly, only a very few cases got the media attention they needed.

As Lizzy flipped through the pages, Andrea talked.

“As you can see, my sister is obese. She’s had a weight problem her entire life.”

The word ‘obese’ had not entered Lizzy’s mind. Although she could only see her face, Diane looked healthy and happy. “Did the extra weight bother your sister?”

Andrea nodded. “Gaining weight...losing weight...it’s all Diane talked about. She tried every diet on the planet: Weight Watchers, Nutri-system, Medifast, Jenny Craig, Atkins, Dr. Sears’ Zone, South Beach, and then all of the crazier diets, too, like ear stapling, the Cotton Ball Diet and the Chewing Diet, to name a few.”

“The Chewing Diet?”

“You chew each bite of food at least forty times or for thirty seconds, I forget. Then you tilt your head back and swallow any liquid you’ve generated from all that chewing. Everything else has to be spit out.”

Gross. “Did any of these diets work?”

“No, which is why the police determined my sister gave up and ran away. But that’s ridiculous. Diane would never leave without telling me where she was going. Never. She loved her job at the school where she works. The kids at The Helping Hand adore