

# EIGHT DAYS

TERESA TOTEN

Cover illustration by  
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# IN MEMORY OF NANCY SINGER



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SOMETIMES IT'S THE JOURNEY  
THAT TEACHES YOU A LOT  
ABOUT YOUR DESTINATION.

-DRAKE



Day

***1***



# ONE

I waited for the hurt to start.

I was perched on the arm of the pullout couch in the living room, holding on to myself. The nubby fabric chewed on the backs of my thighs. The bed hadn't been made or turned back into a sofa. I just . . . sat. Carl, my grandfather, got the pullout when he got me ten years ago, when I was almost four. He was supposed to sleep on the sofa and I was supposed to sleep in his bedroom but the bedroom felt too small. Or something. I don't remember a whole lot from that time, sometimes. But even when he painted the bedroom one of my favourite shades of pink, like I asked him to, I couldn't sleep in there. It's a small space, pink sure, but still small. I don't like small spaces.

According to my Benjamin Moore paint colour fan, it's Paradise Peach 011. If you stand in the doorway, you can almost taste the colour. Paradise Peach is warm and fuzzy but not in a gross way.

Carl didn't have to wait for his hurt to start. He was crying in the kitchen. CHEX 101 Country Oldies was blaring so loud it made the floor vibrate. His phone rang and rang but he didn't pick up. Maybe he couldn't hear it above Tammy Wynette pleading for us to "Stand By Your Man." Carl had cranked up the radio so much that our neighbours above and below us in the White Towers must've been hopping mad. I heard the ringing and the singing and the crying. He was chugging coffees too. Four so far. I count.

I don't know what to do.

He can't talk now.

He said so.

What should I do?

I always make Carl his breakfast — two eggs sunny-side up and three slices of Jimmy Dean sausage at 7:35 am. I also make him two pieces of hundred per cent whole wheat toast to make up for the Jimmy Dean sausage. He didn't want breakfast.

I'm not a crier, so whenever I get . . . when things get like this . . . I do stuff, useful stuff. It's important to be useful, like really important. I could clean the bathroom, make up this week's Costco shopping list . . .



I got back into bed and dug my feet deep into the crumpled bluebird sheets. The sheets are old and super soft. I don't want new ones. I love the patterns of the birds sitting and chirping on April branches. The pillowcases are long gone, replaced by blue and white stripes on one pillow and a washed-out butter yellow on the other. Maybe we should get new pillowcases. Yeah. A whole new set that would match the birds better.

I should be sobbing right alongside him in the kitchen. But there's not a drop in me.

I heard Carl get up. The chair screamed at the tile floor he put in all by himself two years ago. I love the floor. It's that dusty brick colour that makes you think of sunsets. He did that for me too. Carl was going for another coffee, black, no sugar, no stirring. He got used to it that way at AA meetings. His fifth cup. It's hard to cry and drink coffee at the same time. But he was managing. The phone kept ringing.

I don't understand.

It was Patsy Cline's turn on the radio. She's got that hurting catch in her voice as she belts out "Your Cheatin' Heart." I started whisper-singing along with her. "*When tears come down like falling rain . . .*" Mine didn't.

I should do something.

Carl got the call this morning. He didn't open the hardware store, no sign saying *Gone Fishing*, or *Be Back in Five*, or calling in Eduardo or nothing.

I didn't go to school. Who cares, there's only a few days left. Exams are done. All we'd be doing is make-work projects, signing yearbooks, blowing up the chemistry lab with an old timey volcano competition, and the parking lot picnic for the Valley Park Middle School grade eight class. I wanted to go to that.

The call came in at 5:23 am. Carl woke me up and told me and then couldn't say much else. He gets like that. He's not a talker at the best of times. "Later," he said, "I promise, later. Please, Samantha, later." He went to the kitchen and I went back to the pullout bed. That was hours ago.

It was official.

His daughter, my mother, was dead. She died at 11:20 pm last night. There will be an autopsy, an inquiry, depending.

My mother is dead.

I don't know what to do. How to be. What to say.

I don't understand.

Everything is upside down.

None of it makes any sense.

I thought my Mama died ten years ago.