

ONLY FROM HEAVEN

By Deborah A. Elster

CHAPTER 1

“Aunt Reggie! Oh, Aunt Reggie!”

It’s Jen. I barely have time to wipe dry one of my soapy hands to get a better hold of the cell phone when, again, I hear her anguished voice.

“Oh, God, Aunt Reggie, Mom’s gone.”

“Jennie, gone where? Your Mom’s gone where?”

My first thought is that my sister, Lizzie, or as she prefers to be called, Elizabeth Rose, got in her car and finally left her home in Florida. I’d heard her threaten to do so many times, as she wallowed through a depression over not having the right man in her life.

“So, where did she take off to?” I ask, trying to temper the sarcasm.

“No, I mean she’s *gone*...Gone, Aunt Reggie. Mom is dead.”

Dead! Something just slapped me across the face and punched me in the solar plexus. *Dead!* My heart seems to be going into arrhythmia; I can’t speak. *DEAD!*

“Aunt Reg, did you hear me? Mom is dead!”

I did hear “dead.”

“Jen, what do you mean?”

“Oh God. I just got a call from Pam. She said that she hadn’t heard from Mom in a few days. No answers to her calls. So she went over to Mom’s condo. She found her dead on the couch.”

DEAD! That word, again. My mind is a blur. I fear I’m having an anoxic event, because I can’t breathe right. I’m standing, holding onto the sink for the longest time, until my niece’s knifelike holler jabs me back to reality.

“Aunt Reg, I need you! Please say something! I wish you could make this go away!”

Not knowing where I’d find the strength, I take a deep breath, and hear myself calmly respond to my niece, “Okay, Jen, I’m here. I’m here for you, honey.” Her heartfelt sobs further

jolt me into understanding that my sister is dead. “Jen, please, honey, try and stay together for me so we can communicate. Take a deep breath...a deep breath, Jen.”

After what seems like forever, she says, in a choking whisper, “I’m all right, Aunt Reg.” She takes a deep breath, pauses, and then...“No I’m not!”

THUMP, THUMP, THUMP barrels through my chest. Then a “whoosh” comes through the ear piece of the phone and seems to knock my senses back in order.

“Jen, tell me what happened.”

My niece tells me of the call she received from Lizzie’s best friend, Pamela Morgan, just a half hour ago. I’d met Pamela only once, about two years ago, during a quick visit to Flagler Beach. Lizzie had insisted that I visit her in her new ocean-view condo, which she bought with her divorce settlement. Pamela hadn’t been told anything about me other than I was Lizzie’s sister, which was a shock to me. But Pamela seemed like a sensible, sound, rooted person. Lizzie, a marriage counselor, later told me that she trusted Pamela, an attorney, as she was unemotional in her decision-making. I found her best friend to be a good counterbalance for her. It gave me some peace to know there was someone upon this planet who could fully understand my sister, someone that Lizzie would listen to.

For Lizzie never listened to my advice...or, at least, that’s the way it always seemed to me. She rarely asked for my opinion, or shared her most wearisome problems, without my probing her with a hundred and one questions. Being three years older, I always felt a need to be there for her, to guide her, to help her in any way I could, including giving her advice.

Whenever I shared thoughts with her, her usual response was a “huh huh.” Our conversations usually ended with Lizzie saying, “You don’t understand me. How can you? You aren’t me. And you aren’t my mother either, Reggie, so stop acting like you are.” I can honestly say that my heart was always in the right place for Lizzie. But she never would accept my love. All I wanted was her love, to accept me for who I am. I wanted her to tell me that our sisterhood was solid, secure, and founded on love. But she never did. I always felt left out of Lizzie’s life.

Jen continues, “Pam said that she and Mom had Sunday brunch together. Mom was upset that her latest online guy turned out to be another indigestible dinner date. Pam said that Mom was distressed and told her she needed time alone to think. She planned to take a few days off from work to just think and chill. So Pam left her alone. She thought she would check-in today to see how Mom was doing. She started calling early this morning but Mom’s land-line and cell phones had full mailboxes. She knew how compulsive Mom was about always checking her messages. So, she drove over to the condo and found Mom’s door locked. The only response to her hard knocks was the barking of Mom’s dog, Precious. She used the key Mom had given her to let herself in. That’s when she saw Mom lying on the couch, and thought she was asleep. Precious was whining and lying on Mom’s stomach. She noticed how pale Mom looked. She called to her. No response. Then she nudged her arm and realized that Mom wasn’t sleeping.”

I punctuate my niece’s breathy, run-on sentence with a deep breath of my own; she catches me and slows down. Jennie tells me that Pamela called 911 before calling Jen. Jen called her father, who told Jen to call me.

“Jen, where’s your mother now?” I’m too timid to ask where my sister’s *body* is.

Jen explains that Pam offered to accompany Lizzie wherever the paramedics transported her. Pam said she’d call later with more information.

Jen, who lives in Tampa, was packing quickly in order to make the two and a half hour drive. She tells me that her dad, Frank or Franklin, as my sister had insisted we call him, is on his

way out of Miami. Jen said she'd call Pam as soon as she got on the road, as well as her father to see how far he had made it up the road.

"Aunt Reg, when can you get here? I need you by my side *now!*" I hear grief in my niece's demand. As usual, my insides just melt. I'm always there for her.

"Jen, pull yourself together before you travel anywhere. Drive safe, please. I don't think I can take any more horrid news today. I'll come as soon as I can get a flight out of El Paso. I'll stay in touch. You stay in touch. And, Jen, you know I love you."

A whimpered, "I love you, too, Aunt Reg."