

*A 68-year-old-widowed homemaker from Philadelphia and a 67-year-old single retired teacher from Hershey interact on a flight to Albuquerque. Their sightseeing adventures, horror, grief, and love experiences form an enduring friendship.*

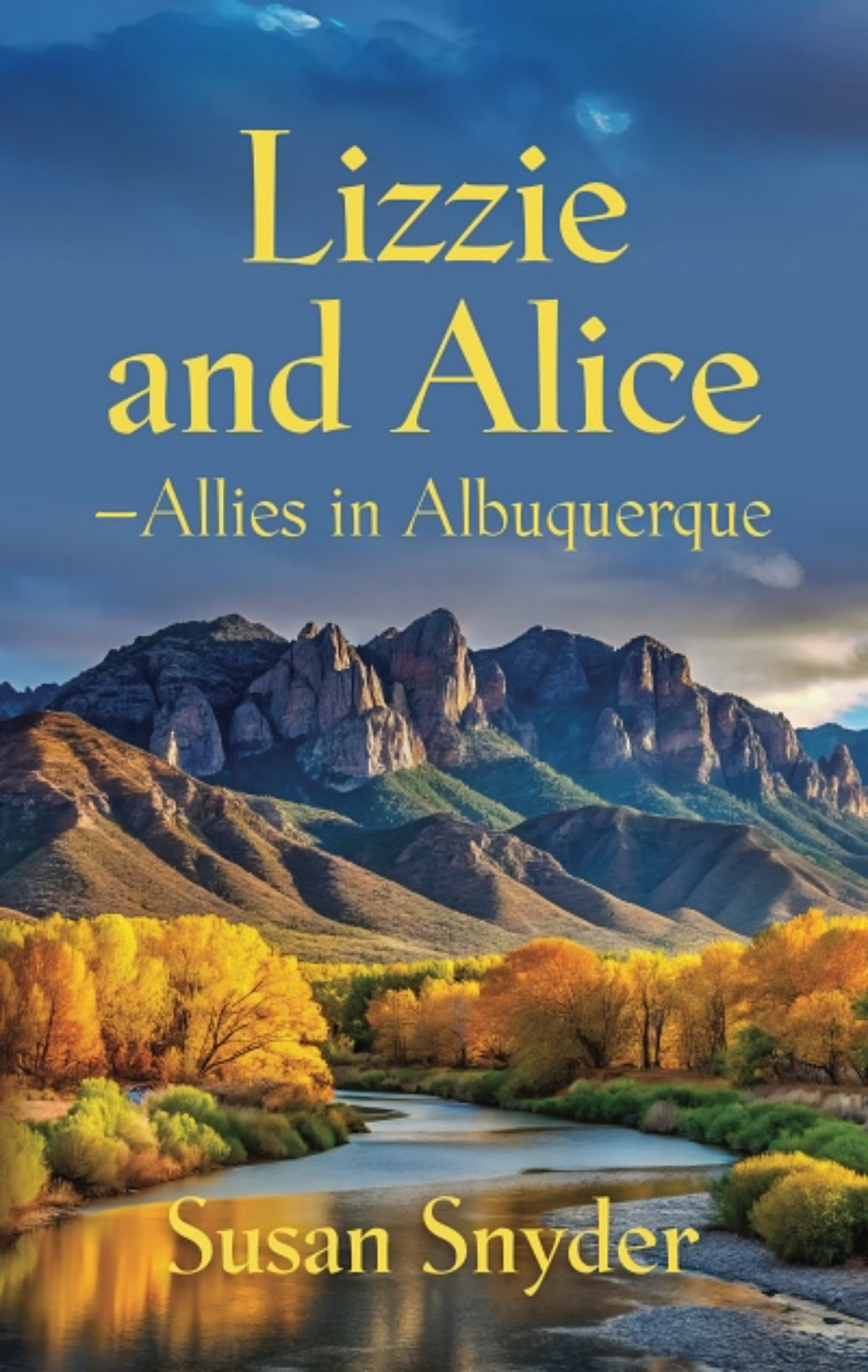
## **Lizzie and Alice - Allies in Albuquerque**

By Susan Snyder

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Lizzie  
and Alice  
—Allies in Albuquerque

Susan Snyder

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## Chapter One

The Delta employee at the Philadelphia Airport, wearing a crisp white blouse, blue vest, and skirt, held the microphone to her lips. “Delta flight 278 to Albuquerque will begin boarding in 20 minutes. Please have your boarding pass out to scan at the gate.”

A stocky woman rushed over and plopped into the seat next to Alice. Deep in thought, Alice reacted by moving her arm away from the armrest, clutching her purse, and yanking her carpet bag closer to her feet to make room. The woman, slightly out of breath, pulled a shiny black purse out of her carry-on and stood up.

“Would you please watch my bag while I run to the restroom? These oversized carry-ons don’t fit behind the door, especially if you’re my size.”

“I really shouldn’t. Airport officials say never consent to watching a stranger’s luggage,” Alice replied.

The woman reached out to shake Alice’s hand. “Hello. I’m Lizzie Jablonski,” she said with a smile. “And who might you be?”

“I’m Alice.” She kept her hand at her side, cautious of this woman encroaching on her space.

“So, now we’re friends. I’m in a hurry, as you can see. Thanks for helping me out.” Lizzie hustled toward the

restroom sign, and all Alice could recall about the woman was her clunky gold sandals and bright red toenails. She glanced at the suitcase and wondered if security was zeroing in on her, ready to cart her away to be interrogated. She knew her fear was unreasonable, but what if the woman didn't return?

As passengers lined up to board the Sunday 8 AM flight, the woman dashed back, grabbed her bag, headed for the early boarding line, and yelled, "Thank you." Alice, whose ticket had her boarding in the last zone, remained seated and continued to mull over the experiences she had so far endured.

The decision to go to Albuquerque came about through visits by her minister, Pastor Nelson. He'd been dropping in for informal chats since her husband passed away two years ago. Alice hadn't taken to him right away, being a private person regarding emotional and spiritual relationships. Still, her husband Kane had found him very supportive while going through his cancer diagnosis, treatment, and hospice. While recently sitting in her kitchen drinking tea with Pastor Nelson, she inadvertently expressed her fears of being alone without plans for the future.

She remembered saying, "I should be thankful for all the blessings God has given me: healthy children and grandchildren, a few good friends, although most of them are older than me, and my church, of course. It's just that the days alone in Philadelphia are long and uninspiring. I was hoping for several years of travel with Kane, and now that's gone."

Pastor Nelson suggested she become active in community organizations to make new friends, so she started by joining the knitting group at church. It was like entering a secret society where everyone knew the rules except her. The older widows didn't just knit; they crocheted, quilted, embroidered, and baked, striving for excellence. Their objective was to fulfill charity and fundraising goals and repeatedly tell stories of their youth.

Finding this boring, she attended a tour presentation on a 12-day trip to Europe, something she had longed to do, but Kane had refused to leave the country. The film presented the beautiful scenery of Italy, Greece, and France, but only couples were in attendance, except for one bearded man who kept glancing her way with a sly smile. When the lights came back on, she dashed for the exit while everyone else headed for the refreshments.

A leaflet on the corkboard at her supermarket regarding a singles group meeting downtown sponsored by the WMCA and the YWCA caught her eye. *Were singles only looking for people of the opposite sex?* Alice wasn't ready for that step. When the meeting day arrived, she convinced herself it would be a waste of time, finished washing her dinner dishes, looked in the hall mirror, and thought, *What's wrong with you? Get in the car and go.* So, she backed the car out and headed downtown for the 7:00 meeting.

That night's speaker was a man in his 80s, wearing a gray three-piece suit and a Mickey Mouse tie, who had just returned from a trip to Africa. His presentation was engaging

but drawn out, plus Africa sounded scary, with too many dark jungles and wild animals. A woman Alice believed to be close to her age spoke about her travel checklist for a recent trip to Albuquerque, New Mexico. At that moment, Alice made up her mind. *I'm going all by myself to Albuquerque.*

This morning, it had taken Alice's pastor only 30 minutes to drive from her townhouse on Locust Street to the Philadelphia airport, arriving at 6 AM, the designated two hours ahead of her flight time. Pastor Nelson retrieved her bag from the trunk of his car, gave her a parting hug, and wished her safe travel. She walked into the Delta terminal, her heart racing and her palms sweaty. Even with her boarding pass, which she'd carefully printed at home, clenched in her hand, her suitcase weighed to ensure it was under 50 pounds, and her driver's ID in her pocket, she remained panicky.

The terminal was in complete chaos, with lines forming everywhere and people shoving, seeming to know where they were going. Alice was buffeted between travelers until a male attendant in a yellow fluorescent vest took pity and directed her to the end of the line for economy passengers.

Weaving back and forth through stanchions, she kept pushing her suitcase forward, passing the same people as they slowly moved closer to the counter. Some smiled, most looked annoyed, and others stared at their cell phones. She tried to act like a seasoned traveler, waiting patiently in line for a planned vacation, but she knew she wouldn't relax until seated on the plane.

Several agents were working behind counters, taking turns accepting customers, so she kept glancing back and forth when she reached the head of the line. She missed the open agent, and the young man next in line propelled her in that direction.

The carpet bag twisted between her legs as she dragged her suitcase behind her. The agent, a thin woman with a scowl, never looked up at her but asked for her boarding pass and ID. Within minutes, without much confirmation from her, the agent took her checked bag and returned the boarding pass, the gate number scribbled at the top. Before Alice could breathe, someone else was taking her place.

The airport screening process scared Alice the most. She'd read the instructions several times while packing, ensuring she followed the rules. Four 3 ml. plastic bottles containing shampoo, conditioner, hair spray, and hand sanitizer were in a quart plastic bag. Before leaving home, she'd removed the pepper spray Kane had gotten her, which she kept in her pocketbook, and tucked it into her checked luggage. She'd worn slip-off shoes, no belt, and had nothing in her pockets.

After standing in line for over 20 minutes, she showed her boarding pass and ID to the agent, who waved her toward the conveyor belt and X-ray machine. Trying to grab a bin, she was pushed aside several times before succeeding. She'd held onto the conveyor belt to steady herself while removing her shoes and almost toppled over when it began moving. As Alice watched her items pass through the X-ray compartment, an



agent shouted at her to keep the line moving and pointed at the body scanner.

While in her stocking feet, she stepped into the machine, and a hefty black woman told her to lift her arms and assume the foot position painted on the floor. Her arms felt heavy, holding them up, and as the machine spun around, she felt a few seconds of vertigo. Alice's heart sped up, not seeing her personal items while people gathered around her, grabbing things as they left the area. Thankfully, her carpet bag lay across the bin that held her shoes and purse, keeping everything together. She collected her belongings and then looked for a bench where she could get organized. Now, she was at the departure gate, awaiting the last onslaught before squeezing herself into a seat with her seatbelt tightly secured.

The woman, Lizzie, appeared everything Alice wished she was -confident, relaxed, and traveling independently. It had taken Alice two years to gain the courage to travel alone. Neither she nor Kane, her husband, had developed much of a friend network since she'd stayed home to raise their two daughters, and Kane's job required a lot of overtime. In the past two years, she'd made a few friends volunteering at the local hospital teaching CPR for the Red Cross, but no one close enough to go with her on a vacation. After the girls had grown up, traveling had always been with Kane. In their 46 years of marriage, he'd set up all the travel plans, and she'd do the packing. Now, at 68, she was alone and anxious but knew there had to be life outside of Philadelphia.

Unknown to Alice, Lizzie had come to the airport by limo service, leaving at 4 AM for the two-hour drive to Philadelphia. She could have flown out of Harrisburg, which was only 20 minutes away, but she was saving over \$200, plus she wanted a direct flight to Albuquerque. A dear friend ran the limo service, so the cost was nominal. During the ride, she napped, read the morning paper, and made notes on her upcoming vacation. Flying was an adventure she enjoyed, taking all in stride since she had no restraints on time. Her tabby cat, Buster, didn't seem to mind her being away since her neighbor loved caring for him.

After going through security, Lizzie stopped at a cafe for an egg, cheese, and ham on a croissant and a large coffee. She also bought a bottle of water since everyone knows you need to stay hydrated when flying. Many women her age had difficulty holding their urine, but Lizzie's bladder was huge from only voiding once or twice during her busy teaching day. One good empty before boarding the plane was all she needed. Lizzie had accomplished that, thanks to Alice, and looked forward to her week in Albuquerque visiting with her niece, Ava.

## Chapter Two

Finally, when it was Alice's turn to board, she gathered her purse and carpetbag and got in line. As always, people storing their luggage caused congestion in the aisle. A baby was screaming, people were scrambling for overhead bins, some stayed too long in the aisle so others couldn't pass, and a large gentleman needed a seatbelt extender.

The hippie-looking girl in the line behind her kept unintentionally running her suitcase into the back of her legs, repeatedly saying, "So sorry." While standing in one spot for several minutes, someone's aftershave was so overpowering that Alice could taste it. Meals were being unwrapped, reminding her of a documentary about overcrowded trains in India where people carried everything from food to livestock, planning to travel for days. The pungent scent of tuna wafted in the air, and she was glad her seat assignment was further back. Alice envied the women traveling with companions and sensed they were looking at her with sympathetic eyes. *I'm a fool to be doing this.*

When Alice arrived at her row, the woman called Lizzie was seated at the window, which made her grateful the travel agent had suggested an aisle seat for easier exit. A middle-aged man standing behind Alice lifted her carpet bag into the overhead bin, and she tucked her purse at her feet when she sat.

“Well, we meet again,” Lizzie said. “Fate has brought us together.”

“It seems that way,” said Alice, glad the seat would be a barrier between her and this pushy woman. While settling in, she checked Lizzie out and saw the oversized navy jacket with a bright orange scarf looped around her neck. Alice thought it looked tacky, especially with the circle-hooped earrings almost touching her shoulders. Her medium-length ginger-colored hair with bangs grazing her eyebrows, paired with tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses, all accented her large brown eyes and high cheekbones.

Alice compared this to her soft curls from a perm she got every four months, along with the color her stylist called caramel. She never let her hair get longer than chin length and liked V-neck sweaters that showed off a little cleavage. Alice’s pearl necklace matched her button earrings, a gift from her late husband. The plum-colored sweater she’d chosen for this trip went well with her gray slacks, and the Lasik surgery she’d had done years ago allowed her to go without glasses. Alice felt that her overall look was much more sophisticated.

Lizzie thought she’d made a new friend and would have someone to talk to during the four-hour flight. She enjoyed people-watching and speculated why Alice might be traveling to Albuquerque, creating a story sequence about her. *Maybe she’s going home after visiting a long-lost friend or something sad like a death in the family.*

When Alice assumed the middle seat would be left empty, a tall, blonde-haired young man strolled down the aisle. He dressed like many young men nowadays, wearing a sports coat over a collared shirt and tousled hair like he had just gotten out of bed. His forearms pressed against his jacket sleeves, and his face showed an unpleasant cockiness.

“Looks like I’m joining you lovely ladies.”

Alice sensed he thought she’d move over to the middle, but with the long flight, she had no intention of spending it between the two. She stood in the aisle so he could take his seat. Finally, she could fasten her seat belt and relax.

After adjusting his seat belt, the man announced, “A thorn between two roses.” Alice inwardly groaned, and Lizzie let out a flirtatious giggle. “Good morning, ladies, I’m Mike. Going to Albuquerque for business or pleasure?”

“Oh, definitely for pleasure. I’m Lizzie,” she said, gazing into Mike’s piercing blue eyes, glad she’d have someone to talk to. “My niece lives there. She’s an artist and has a large studio at the base of the Sandia Mountains. That’s where she gets all of her inspiration.”

“Is that so? Is she famous?”

“Well, she’s sold a lot of her paintings and sculptures. She also buys and sells works of other well-known Native American artists. Some of them go for huge prices. We’re going to tour Albuquerque together. Are you going there on business?”

“Oh yeah, business,” Mike said with a chuckle. “Looking to expand my horizons.”

“What kind of business are you in?” Lizzie inquired. Alice, staring at the seat in front of her, couldn’t believe how forward Lizzie was. *Perfect strangers giving out information like they’ve known each other for years.*

“You might say import and export. Your niece’s work sounds interesting.” *If I play my cards right, this trip could pay off.*

Mike is actually 32-year-old Carl Bensinger, who served two years in jail at age 22 for robbing a liquor store. Now, his claim to fame is home invasions and internet scams with his sidekick, Jake Danatto. Today, he’s returning to New Mexico from Philadelphia to meet up with Jake after fencing some stolen jewelry, and hearing Lizzie talk about Ava has given him a plan. Carl knows he’ll have to act fast to make it work.

The two exchanged pleasantries for the first hour, and then Alice was thankful Lizzie fell asleep with her head against the airplane window, a thin line of drool leaking down her chin. Thinking of all the things that could go wrong on this vacation, Alice dozed intermittently. Her daughter in North Carolina had been totally against her traveling alone and had filled her head with fears. What would she do if she had a medical emergency? Think about all the crooks preying on innocent people, especially older adults. How would she get from one place to another without someone giving her directions?

First off, Alice thought, her health was impeccable. Every year, she saw her primary physician with a satisfactory report. Her only prescription medication was a statin to keep her cholesterol in check. As far as getting scammed or robbed, Alice had learned plenty from her detective husband regarding being observant of her surroundings, keeping tabs on her credit card, checkbook, and the pocketbook she carried them in. Purchasing pepper spray and carrying it in her purse had been his idea after stories he'd read in the Philadelphia Inquirer. Living in Philadelphia had given her plenty of driving practice since, on vacation, she usually did the driving so her husband could answer calls from work that couldn't wait until he returned.

It wasn't those things that bothered Alice. It was being alone, doing something exciting without someone to share it with at the end of the day. Sitting in a restaurant, enjoying a meal, not knowing where to look so she would feel less lonely. Everyone in a crowd would have someplace to go, someone waiting for them, and her life might feel pointless. *Well, I'll see how this goes; it might be the first and the last.*

Carl had his laptop open, and Alice couldn't help glancing over to see he was typing to someone named Jake. It looked like a long list of prices, but didn't he say he bought and sold items? The words "need to come up with a plan" stood out from the rest. *What's wrong with people displaying their personal information for everyone to read?* It frustrated her when individuals walked around the supermarket conversing

on the phone. She'd stopped and stared several times, thinking they were talking to her.

Lizzie woke up close to their arrival time, fluffed her hair, took out her cell phone, and began pressing icons. "I only bought this phone two weeks ago and have no clue how to program it," she said.

Carl jumped at the chance to intervene. "What are you trying to do?"

"Put in my niece's number and address, so I'll be ready when we land. I told her I'd call after I collected my bag. She's only 20 minutes from the airport and plans to pick me up."

"Do you have the information written out?"

Lizzie pulled a folded piece of stationery out of her purse and handed it to Carl. Alice could read Ava's Mountain Studio across the top, with two phone numbers and an address on the paper.

"This is easy. Here, hand me your phone. First, let me familiarize myself with the model; then, I'll put the information in and show you how to retrieve it." Alice glanced over at the two, amazed at Lizzie's trusting nature.

For the next several minutes, Carl worked with Lizzie's phone. Being a crook with an expensive lifestyle, he recognized an opportunity for some easy money but needed a time frame to complete the burglary. So, with a flick of his fingers, Carl sent two text messages and inserted an incorrect



phone number to delay Lizzie and her niece's reunion. When finished, he slipped the piece of stationary into his pocket.

"Well, that's all taken care of." He held the phone toward Lizzie. "Here's where you get your contacts: your niece's name, address, and phone number. Her name's Ava Jablonski, right?"

"Yes. Ava's my deceased brother's daughter. Thanks a lot, Mike." After reviewing the information, she returned the phone to her purse.

Shortly before landing, Carl sent a message to Jake, and Alice couldn't help but notice, written in capital letters: GOT A HOT NUMBER. WE COULD GET LUCKY ON THIS ONE. PICK ME UP OUTSIDE BAGGAGE. COMING IN AT 10:00. Alice, understanding how men talked, figured the hot number must relate to a woman.

## Chapter Three

Ava Jablonski, Lizzie's 36-year-old niece, had gotten up just before sunrise, the best time to see the Sandia Mountains in their most significant depth and artistic lighting. The sun reflecting off the mountain range brought out the sparkling granite threaded throughout the rock layers. A cup of ginger tea sat steaming on the table next to her while she watched the sunlight fluctuate through the large picture window of her studio. A white canvas sat on the easel, waiting for her first strokes, and her cell phone lay beside her teacup, waiting for Lizzie's call.

She'd bought this secluded home at the base of the Sandia Mountain Range right after she turned 30. It was a one-story, built in the 80s, that needed a facelift. Half of her savings went into the project, but she loved what she designed. The house now was modern, open, and airy, with a full extended porch in the back serving as her studio. Locally, Ava's art brought in good money; she loved collecting and filling her home with creations by native artists.

The sun's rays on the face of the mountains contrasted with the blue sky, lacy white clouds, and the green of the scrub pines. She'd seen this scene many times before, but each time something new emerged. Depending on her creative mood, she could paint realistic, impressionist, or abstract using watercolors, the medium she loved best.

Before beginning to paint, Ava slid back the porch windows for an unobstructed view while the screen door allowed the breezes to flow, keeping her moderately cool while she worked. As she picked up the brush, her thoughts went to Nora and the time they'd spent together earlier this week. She'd met her almost three years ago at an art exhibition honoring local artists. They started a conversation with a glass of wine at the exhibit and coffee later at a café up the street. It felt apparent right from the beginning that their relationship would be more than just friends. It was two weeks before Christmas, and their bond seemed magical.

Nora was a petite, thin, young woman with cropped auburn hair and twinkling green eyes. Ava had dived into those eyes head first, not wanting the first evening to end. They got together at least once a week during the first year. Ava liked Nora's independent nature but feared she'd bore her with her sedentary lifestyle. Nora's job for a hospital management company involved traveling all over New Mexico and conventions in other states, allowing opportunities to meet new and exciting people. Ava, being quieter and more reserved, felt at home in her studio, recreating the beauty out her window. This week, Nora was in Washington State for three days, setting up a medical clinic, planning to return late Wednesday. Ava wanted to drive Nora to the airport, but she had insisted on driving since her Aunt Lizzie was arriving that day.

There were some complicating factors early in their relationship, ones Ava knew her mother would object to. She

and Nora were beginning to work through them, even discussing marriage plans, but before announcing to her mother any of her life alterations, the biggest one would be that she was gay.

By now, it was 7:30, and Ava figured she'd have about 2 hours before she'd get Lizzie's call. She started with light strokes, more water than color, to keep it looking transparent. At 9:30, the ping of her phone startled her.

Ava was puzzled as she read Lizzie's text since she knew how excited she was to get together. They had always been close when she was growing up, but since she'd moved to New Mexico six years ago, they had only seen each other three times, and that was when Ava traveled to Pennsylvania for family get-togethers—the last time had been over a year.

“Drained from the flight. Taking a cab to the Inn and then a nap. Will call around three, then we can plan dinner.” Ava felt the text didn't sound like Lizzie's, but texting can sound awkward. Also, she was getting older; hopefully, it wasn't something health-wise slowing her down.

She sent back a text, “Is everything okay?” Then a return text said, “Yes, fine. See you later today.”

Knowing she'd have all morning to paint, she went to the kitchen, made another cup of tea, and grabbed two shortbread cookies to nibble on. She deliberately turned off her phone and left it on the kitchen counter. She planned to check it later in the afternoon in case Lizzie changed her mind.

As Ava painted, her thoughts returned to Nora and their future together. Ava had known she was gay since starting college, but it took her until her senior year to come out to her close friends. She hadn't confided in her aunt but knew she'd accept whatever made her happy. Lizzie was the one who encouraged her to follow her dreams, being more open-minded than her mother. She was ready to introduce Nora to Lizzie when she returned on Wednesday.

Drawing was Ava's passion from the time she could handle a crayon, and her art teachers at her Pennsylvania high school encouraged her artistic abilities. Her mother always saw it as a hobby, not a career. When college choices became an issue, she coaxed her into an excellent liberal arts school, taking a minor in art. She could see her daughter as a professor of literature, another path Ava excelled in.

By Ava's second semester, she knew the school wasn't for her. Although more than adequate, the art department was not the level of learning she craved. After having a heart-to-heart talk with her parents, her father, against her mother's wishes, allowed Ava's transfer to Swarthmore, an hour-and-a-half drive from home. Within two weeks, she had the transfer complete, a dorm room secured, and her car packed. Three years later, she'd graduated with a fine arts major and a business minor.

## Chapter Four

By 10:00 Mountain Time, the plane landed. Alice felt a sense of superiority because she was out of her seat first and heading down the aisle before the other two could stand. The baggage claims directions twisted and turned throughout the terminal. By the time she arrived at the baggage carousel, she felt worn out mentally and physically. She found a bench and watched the bags circle. Although she saw hers, she felt the need to rest.

Looking around, she saw Lizzie standing with her bags, talking to the man called Mike. She figured she'd come over by transport; there was no way she could have gotten here faster than her and looked so relaxed. They stood close, exchanging information, and then he shook her hand and headed out the door.

Out on the street, Carl checked his phone and saw Jake's text asking him to meet him at the short-term parking lot across the street. He spied Jake's faded-red, dented pickup with the motor running, jumped in, and Jake headed for the exit ramp.

"So, tell me, what's this about a big haul? How'd you manage to set this up on the plane?"

Jake seemed the exact opposite of Carl. His clothing consisted of T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers, all needing a good wash. His black hair looked dirty even when clean, and dark

whiskers implied rough nights, which was usually the case. His piercing brown eyes made most people turn away in fear, and his low, growling laugh brought chills to new acquaintances. Even those he was close to kept a distance when he drank, which was always whiskey straight. He was known to fly into a rage over minor issues that didn't go his way.

Five years ago, Jake served three years for aggravated assault and attempted murder that started as a bar altercation. A guy made a crack about him and a girl he was hanging out with. It got him steaming, so he hung around for the rest of the evening. At 1:30, the guy went for the exit, and Jake followed. He grabbed him in the parking lot, pushed him against a car, and began to beat him senselessly. Ready to put a knife in the man's chest, three guys jumped Jake. Unknowing to him, they'd been watching and were tipped off by the bartender when he followed their friend outside.

The judge gave him the highest sentence because he'd gotten off six months prior for being an accomplice in a gun-related holdup. His lawyer had worked magic then, but the judge held him accountable this time. Jake, who thought he was at the top of the pile, became a battering ram in prison.

On the other hand, Carl thought of himself as a business entrepreneur, even though the overall business was scamming and robbing others. As a child, he'd felt invisible, small, pale, and fading into the background of home and school. His parents fought a lot, so Carl kept his distance since sometimes the anger overflowed on him. He learned how to do what he wanted, whenever he wanted since no one

seemed to notice. By his teens, Carl could shoplift in almost any store, which elevated him in the eyes of kids older than himself. He became a valuable commodity for the gangs he chose to hang out with.

By the time Carl graduated, the shoplifting had elevated to stealing cars and armed robbery at convenience stores. He took each job as a challenge, never getting caught until the liquor store robbery. He remembered it was too spontaneous and appeared effortless, but without surveillance, no one knew the owner had a pistol under the counter. He got stuck in the front aisle while the two others dashed out the back door. No matter how hard they leaned on him afterward, he wouldn't give up his partners, so he served his time alone.

His prison sentence came briefly to mind, something that still haunted him in the deepest part of the night. The first month, he was scared out of his mind. It seemed like everyone was out to get him, and he had nowhere to turn. He began using his charisma and cunning to fool inmates and guards, earning him special privileges and good standing in the inner circles. Without that, he would have been a pawn to use as others wished, which happened to weaker prisoners.

He met Jake through a mutual friend, Lenny, during their time in Denver. Carl was the con man, and Jake was the muscle behind the action until splitting the profits with Lenny wasn't working. Albuquerque seemed an excellent place to hide out and begin their networking.



Carl filled Jake in, and he got more inclined as the story unfolded. “This dumb broad was easily duped into telling me everything. I set up a decoy on her phone so she’ll be out of the picture until we rob her niece blind with little effort. Am I a master at my trade, or what?”

“So, how do we pull this off?”

“Got it all figured out. We go to the warehouse by the river and pick up Benny's old utility van, which everyone borrows. He leaves the keys in a file cabinet in that room he used as his office until he retired. No one hangs around those garages; he never even locks the doors. There's space inside the one bay where we can store some of the artwork until we can move it. The tricky part is getting inside Ava's studio, but it looks like her place is secluded, so we'll play it by ear.”

“Maybe she won't be home. We can walk in, load up the stuff, and she comes home to an empty studio,” Jake laughed.

“That would be great, but we need to work fast in case either one becomes suspicious and somehow connects. I don't want anyone getting hurt; I know how your actions can get physical. We'll enter with ski masks, take control of Ava, and lock her in a closet. I'm sure the aunt will check her place out by Wednesday if she still hasn't heard from her. She won't die of hunger or thirst by then.” They continued formalizing details on the way to Jake's, where they had ski masks, zip ties, ropes, bungee cords, and blankets to protect the artwork.

## Chapter Five

At the airport, Lizzie walked up the street a short way, found a bench, and dialed Ava. When she heard a piercing beep, like the one you get if you dial a fax machine by mistake, she tried again with the same result. Lizzie thought Mike must have messed up when he entered Ava's number. After rummaging through her purse, she felt defeated not finding the paper with Ava's information. *Now, what do I do? Maybe go back into the baggage area and call a cab?*

Alice rested in the baggage area for a few minutes, then noted that her suitcase was the only one left on the belt. A porter saw her walk over and helped by lifting the heavy bag. The next stop was to the rental car agency for the car she had reserved months ago. Fortunately, the counter only had one other customer, but after she finished registering, there was a long walk to the parking garage. *I shouldn't have been too proud to ask someone to bring the car around.* After walking several aisles, she found the vehicle, a red, compact Nissan. She loaded her luggage in the trunk and then climbed behind the wheel. After familiarizing herself, she pulled a map from her purse and finally felt ready to venture into the city.

She missed the airport exit and found herself circling the departure lane twice. It was after eleven, and the hot airport sidewalks looked deserted, but something bright caught her eye- an orange scarf around Lizzie's neck. She was sitting on a bench, watching the road intently.

Her first thought was just to keep going. Her inner consciousness was saying, *what if that was you, waiting for someone to pick you up in a complicated city?* Not knowing if security would permit this, she pulled to the curb, rolled down the window, and yelled, “Is someone coming for you?” Lizzie, startled, jumped from the bench, dragging her suitcase behind her.

“My niece, Ava, was supposed to meet me. I tried calling several times, but it won’t connect. I believe Mike entered the number wrong, but I can’t find the paper with her information. I must have left it on the plane. I was sitting here hoping she’d wonder about me and call.”

“I’m heading to the Old Town section. I could give you a lift somewhere if that helps?”

“Oh, thank you. I was feeling discouraged on my first day. I don’t know how to use this Android phone, even to look up a cab. I have a reservation at an inn near Old Town. The address is here on my receipt.”

Alice shuddered when she realized the address matched the information she’d put into her phone’s GPS. “Looks like it’s only a 10-minute drive. We’re going to the same place.” She popped the trunk and heard Lizzie throw in her bag.

Lizzie climbed into the passenger seat, saying, “Two great minds think alike. I can’t thank you enough since I need time to acclimate to new areas. It always takes me a while to get organized.”

They remained quiet for the 10 minutes it took to reach the inn. Alice pulled into the small lot of Casa del Sol, which was within walking distance of Old Town and had the Southwest ambiance promised on the internet. The adobe two-story stucco building was painted pale peach and housed the office. The dark wooden door had elaborate carvings; the window frames were teal. One long flower bed across the front contained various cacti and flowers of yellow, purple, and white. The home sat just off the street with smaller stucco cottages in a garden behind it—an oasis of peace and tranquility.

“Quite charming, isn’t it?” said Lizzie. “Can’t wait to see the inside.”

A bronze statue of an Indian on horseback sat on a low coffee table in the middle of the lobby. The walls were cream-colored stucco with a built-in fireplace at the far corner. The overstuffed leather chairs looked comfy with bold geometric pillows of rust, blue, and shades of brown. A beige and gold woven rug warmed the weathered cedar floorboards. The reception area, highlighted by a floor-to-ceiling window, had a door leading out onto a floral garden.

In the garden’s center were three ceramic jars painted cobalt blue with water bubbling up and out into a small pond. An ironwork-scrolled fence surrounded the garden area, with flowers and shrubs planted in multiple layers. A paved walkway led to a slate patio with bright green, blue, and orange chairs and wrought iron tables with yellow umbrellas.

“Even more appealing than the picture. It makes you want to spend your whole vacation sitting at a table in the shade listening to the sounds of the fountain,” said Lizzie.

“Yes, they’ve done a fantastic job decorating and creating a calm atmosphere. The building itself, I understand, was built back in the 1930s. It seems we picked it for its proximity to Old Town,” replied Alice. They approached the reception desk, and Lizzie lightly tapped the bell.

Within a minute, a woman in her fifties, jet black hair with streaks of gray, came from a back office. “Good morning, ladies. Welcome to Casa del Sol. My name’s Brienne.” Her white teeth and red lipstick emphasized her smile. “I assume you arrived from the airport. Both from Pennsylvania, is that right?”

“Yes,” said Alice.

“If I’d known you were vacationing together, I would have assigned you side-by-side casitas.” Casa del Sol’s office building was in the middle of ten casitas, individual cottages with bedrooms, baths, and mini kitchens. The owner had already assigned Lizzie to #10 and Alice to #5.

“Oh, we’re not vacationing together,” Alice remarked. “We met on the plane. Lizzie needed a ride, and we happened to be staying at the same place. I’m sure we have different agendas while here.”

“Well, whatever your plans, I hope you enjoy your stay in Albuquerque. If I can help in any way, please let me know. I

have two women who run the café, Darla and Fran, who are very accommodating for meals inside or in the garden. We just ask for some notice in advance. We're not busy this time of year due to the heat. Two other casitas have occupants, but you probably won't see them much: a newlywed couple who plan to do a lot of hiking and a retired couple who arrived early for their high school reunion festivities this weekend. Your accommodations are ready, so here are your keys, and I'll get the porter to bring in your luggage. Go out the door into the courtyard; the casitas numbers are on the doors."

"Would you have a phone directory? I've misplaced my niece's phone number, and I'm sure she's anxious to hear from me," said Lizzie.

"Sure." Brianne pulled a directory from under the counter and placed it in front of Lizzie. Alice walked into the lobby to check out the artwork displayed while Lizzie looked up Ava's Mountain Studio in the Yellow Pages and dialed her number. After several rings, it went to voice mail. She left a message at the beep, "I lost your number at the airport and was fortunate to have a kind woman drive me to Casa del Sol in Old Town, where I'm staying. Please call my cell number when you get this message."

"Thanks, Brianne. I'll check back at the desk later in case she calls here."

Lizzie joined Alice in the lobby; then they entered the garden. Purple yarrow, tall and feathery, swayed in the light breeze. Silver-green sage plants covered the ground, and red

sagebrush flowers added more color. Alice, who flourished in her townhouse garden in Philadelphia, recognized clematis, daisies, coreopsis, and poppies. She couldn't wait to walk the garden paths and learn more about the native plants. The soft bubbling of the fountain and birds chirping made them realize how drained they were after the long morning of traveling. Both needed a short nap to revitalize before heading out for the evening. Alice got to #5 first.

"I tried connecting with my niece but could only leave a message. I'm starting to worry about her. When I connect, I'd be more than glad to have you join us for dinner this evening; my treat for helping me out. I can give you my phone number."

"I don't have any set schedule. I guess I could." They exchanged phone numbers, and Lizzie put the contact into her phone.

"At least that's something I know how to do."

"Do you know how to check text messages?"

"No, could you look for me? Maybe she left a message saying something happened or a reason for being detained."

Alice took the phone and went to the text site. "Yes, look here. There is a text from her." She handed the phone back to Lizzie.

"It says, I'm sorry. Called away for an important art purchase. Most likely won't be back in town until Wednesday. Hope you can enjoy a few days on your own. I'll be in touch."

Well, isn't that strange? We've been planning this visit for months."

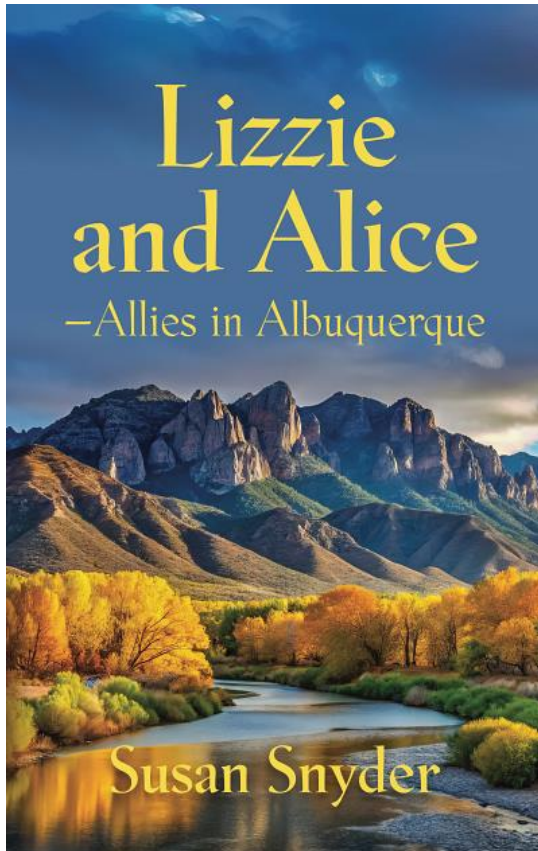
"I guess in her career, things change. Someone who couldn't wait until your vacation was over. Look, how about we plan to meet in the garden around 4:00. We can walk over to Old Town and pick a place for supper. I'm going to unpack and take a short nap."

"Oh, thank you. I hate to eat alone. I'm sorry if I'm interfering with your plans."

"I have some idea of what I'd like to do while here but didn't set anything up. I'll check with the owner. See what she recommends, and maybe we can do something together tomorrow. Since I have a car and don't know my way around, you can help navigate."

Both ladies entered their casitas. The décor matched the inn lobby with lovely desert landscape prints and watercolors on the walls. Alice checked to see if any were Ava's but didn't see her name. She unpacked, sat in the overstuffed chair, propped up her feet, and closed her eyes but didn't feel sleepy. Something about the text from Lizzie's niece bothered her; too many years of listening to her husband's detective stories. The pieces didn't seem to fit.





*A 68-year-old-widowed homemaker from Philadelphia and a 67-year-old single retired teacher from Hershey interact on a flight to Albuquerque. Their sightseeing adventures, horror, grief, and love experiences form an enduring friendship.*

## **Lizzie and Alice - Allies in Albuquerque**

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