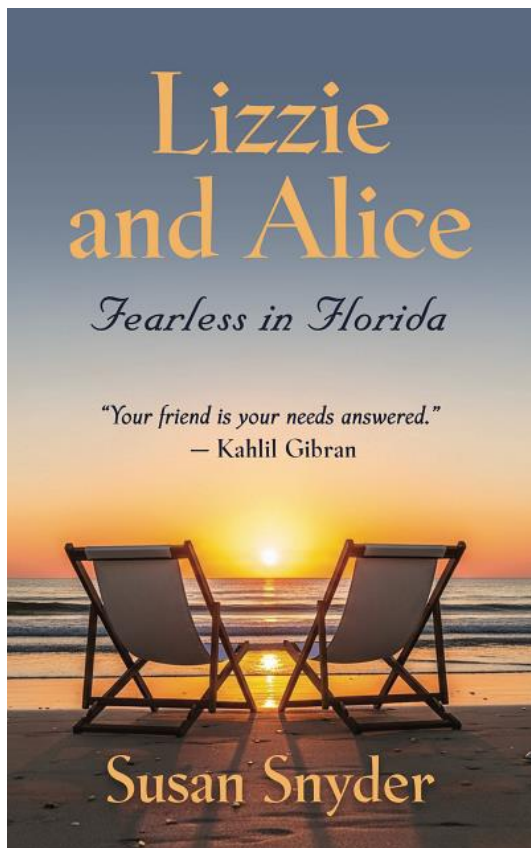




A 69-year-old widow from Philadelphia and a 67-year-old retired teacher from Hershey expand their friendship through shared life experiences, hoping for a lasting and meaningful connection.

Lizzie and Alice - Fearless in Florida

By Susan Snyder

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Lizzie and Alice

Fearless in Florida

"Your friend is your needs answered."

— Kahlil Gibran



Susan Snyder

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First Edition

Chapter One

Over the past week, Lizzie had been thinking about calling her new friend, Alice, whom she hadn't spoken to since their day trip to Longwood Gardens in October. She'd reach for the phone, then hesitate, thinking, *Don't be so hasty*. The circumstances of their meeting, along with the fact that they lived some distance apart, made her wonder how lasting their friendship might be. They were two older women who met unexpectedly during a vacation in Albuquerque. What started as a pleasant experience in August turned into a nightmare when Lizzie's niece, Ava, was murdered, which led Lizzie and Alice to get to know each other on a very personal level.

Thanksgiving had come and gone, leaving behind memories of turkey and pumpkin pie. Lizzie spent the holiday with her brother, Howard, his wife, Susan, their daughter, Bonnie, her husband, and their three children. It had been a lot for a 68-year-old, unmarried, retired schoolteacher, but she was thankful not to have spent the day alone. Alice flew to North Carolina on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving to visit her daughter, Denise, and returned home to Philadelphia the first week of December.

This Thursday morning, Hershey, Pennsylvania, experienced a light frost that the bright sun melted within an hour. The air was breezy, with a cold nip indicating that winter was approaching. It was the kind of weather Lizzie loved for walks, so she dressed warmly, wearing the yellow knit hat

Kirsten, her 12-year-old great-niece, had made. She said goodbye to her cat, Buster, and headed to the local park.

Whenever Lizzie walked, she reflected on things she felt needed attention. She hadn't gotten around to doing much fall cleaning and knew there were clothes she no longer wore that could be donated. The back porch needed sweeping, and the garden flower pots had to be emptied and stored in the garage. She couldn't remember the last time she'd vacuumed.

These menial tasks seemed insignificant compared to her main worry, which was the recent death of her beloved niece, Ava. Dwelling on this heartbreak became so overwhelming that her knees felt weak, as if she lacked the strength to stand. She hurried to a bench outside the park fence, sat down, and wrapped her arms around herself. A passerby might think she was cold, but her arms couldn't warm the coldness in her heart. The only thing that eased her torment was talking with Alice.

Alice understood the guilt she carried, her pain, and the comforting words she needed to get through each day. She'd stood by her every day in Albuquerque—learning Ava would be out of town, discovering Ava had been murdered, meeting Nora, Ava's significant other, and Dawn, her daughter, tracking the robber-murderers, their capture, and the realization that they had used Lizzie to get to Ava.

Lizzie didn't know how long she'd sat there, but the blowing leaves had gathered around her feet. Pigeons stared up at her, cooing, waiting for a handout. Her hands felt like ice,

and she looked around as if she had no idea how she'd ended up there. *I've got to pull myself together.*

Arriving home, she removed her hat and paused at the hall mirror, seeing a face she almost didn't recognize. Her red hair needed a touch-up, and her bangs were way too long. When she pushed her hair back, she saw dark circles under her eyes and deep lines along her mouth. *When did I grow so old, and when did the sparkle in my eyes disappear?* She made some Earl Grey tea, carried the mug and her cell phone to the most comfortable chair in the living room, and dialed Alice. After five rings, an out-of-breath voice said, "Is that you, Lizzie?"

"Yes, of course it's me. Did you get back from jogging the streets of Philadelphia?"

"You know me too well. Sitting in my garden, thinking of you, I ran to answer the phone. It's so good to hear your voice."

"So, how did North Carolina go?"

"The twins, now teenagers, had grown so much that I hardly recognized them. They were no longer children, so my way of interacting with them had to change. It took a few hours for the boys to warm up to me, but getting to know each of them on a different level was enjoyable. Denise and Larry have done a great job raising them."

"The two weeks were full of activity, so much so that I needed to head home to rest. They took their boat on Bradley Creek to Masonboro Island, a designated nature preserve. It's

a breathtaking, peaceful place to enjoy the sea, birds, and nature at its purest. Camping on the island is primitive—no bathroom facilities. They even suggest taking pictures of shells instead of collecting them.”

“Have to do some pre-planning before spending the day there,” Lizzie remarked.

“It’s not far to a nearby pier with facilities, and since you can only reach the island by boat, transportation is quick if you need to go. We had a picnic and followed the rule of taking everything back that we brought. Did you ever hear of a Scotch Bonnet shell?”

“I’ve been collecting shells at the Jersey Shore since I was a kid, but I don’t remember ever finding a Scotch Bonnet.”

“Well, it’s North Carolina’s state shell, and I think it can be found as far south as Florida, mainly on the barrier islands. I saw four while walking the beach, thought of you, and took pictures. I snapped a few of egrets and a lone heron trying his luck at fishing. Think I might take some photography classes, a hobby I’ve always been interested in. Are you still house hunting in Wildwood Crest?”

“Yes, but nothing has caught my eye yet. Some are too small, too big, or too expensive. I want to be a few blocks from the ocean, but even those homes cost a lot. I wouldn’t want to move until spring anyway, so I have plenty of time. Now that you’ve seen Denise, are you still planning to go to Maine for Christmas to see your other daughter?”

"I talked to Roberta while in North Carolina, filling her in on what Denise and her family are up to. At the end of the conversation, she asked when I would visit Maine, so I'm flying to Bangor the Friday after Christmas and staying until January 2nd. Hope I can last that long."

"Oh, enjoy the scenery and breathe in all that fresh, pine-scented air. It'll do you good."

"Have you heard from Nora, Ava's friend?"

"She texts me about every other day, keeping me informed on how she and Dawn are doing. Still grieving hard for Ava, but her daughter is so upbeat that it seems to help her cope. The lawyer stuff is working out. She even received a couple of calls from stepfather Ray, who gave her tips on things she needed to do."

"Well, that was nice. Things will work out, and I believe they'll visit you sometime this summer. I assume Thanksgiving had to be tough for you."

"Once the family got over asking questions about Albuquerque, everyone started treating me with kid gloves, as if I were breakable. Watching the family's loving interactions reminded me of the loss many now feel after Ava's death. I put on a smile, but tears often welled up. I think I'll escape somewhere for Christmas, maybe to the beach."

"Do you think that's wise, being alone?"

"Things come together in my mind while walking on the beach. My mother loved the ocean, and I know it might sound

kooky, but I still talk to her from time to time. I also find it's a great place to pray, walking along and staying open to the Lord. The beach is usually quite empty at that time of year. I'll bring Buster with me. Take some drives, maybe down to Cape May. I love walking around town and checking out the Victorian homes."

"When will you go?"

"I think the Sunday before Christmas. I want to avoid the Christmas rush on the road, arrive, and settle in before the holiday. Keep it low-key, no fuss."

"Well, I'll text and call often, so keep your phone charged. Sorry, I have to end the call, but I need to change my clothes and keep a mammogram appointment. Don't want to miss the yearly day of torture, do I? Call me whenever you feel the need. After Christmas, we'll devise some plans for the new year."

"Yeah. Take some healthy pictures, and I'll call again soon. See you."

"Bye, Lizzie."

Chapter Two

In the days that followed, Lizzie went online and rented a two-bedroom cottage three blocks from the ocean, starting the Sunday before Christmas. She planned to attend church that morning and then head out around 11. She was glad only her immediate family knew about Ava's death, and she attended a different church from them. Keeping everything in wasn't healing, but Lizzie wasn't ready to face the questions others might ask. She kept her cell phone fully charged and habitually checked for text messages two or three times a day. Any message from Alice meant a lot.

In the middle of the week, Lizzie received a text notification and, after learning more about using her cell phone, found the message easily.

Alice: Are you still planning to go to the beach?

Lizzie fumbled with her response, beginning to get the hang of how the phone filled in words.

Lizzie: Yes, I'm leaving on Sunday — after church.

Alice: For how long?

Lizzie: Not sure, probably home by Saturday.

Alice: Should we talk on the phone? I want to be sure you're okay.

Lizzie: I need some time to think. I'll be okay

Alice: Promise to call if you need to talk?

Lizzie: Yes, I promise. What are your plans for Christmas?

Alice: Sounds weird, but I plan to visit the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It's open Christmas Eve until 4. On Christmas Day, I'll take a nice walk if the weather is good and maybe find a cozy café for dinner. How's that for an independent woman?

Lizzie: Will you be safe?

Alice: As safe as I'd be in any city. I'll take the bus to the museum. Have my pepper spray. Ha! Ha! I think I'll go to midnight church service this year—something we used to do as a family.

Lizzie: Send a message on Christmas Day, so I know you're okay.

Alice: Of course, I have to wish you Merry Christmas! Please text me when you arrive at Wildwood.

Lizzie: I will. Okay, bye.

Alice: Bye

Sunday's church sermon touched on how difficult the holidays can be for many, especially those struggling with illness, those who had recently lost loved ones, or those who were far from family and friends. The scripture, Psalm 34:18, stayed with Lizzie as she left the church: "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." She thought it could serve as her mantra as she walked along the beach.

Driving to Wildwood could take 3½ hours if she took the Pennsylvania Turnpike, Schuylkill Expressway, and the Walt Whitman Bridge, but she hated going through Philadelphia. She'd been going to Wildwood since she was 7, and her father always took Route 283, connecting with Route 30 through Lancaster. They often saw Amish buggies, especially on weekdays or Saturdays. As a child, she'd dreamed of what it would be like to live Amish. During the drive, she'd wave to children looking out the back of their buggies, and sometimes they waved back, but most of the time they stared at her as if she were the odd one.

With her father driving, they'd crossed the Commodore Barry Bridge, and she knew they were about halfway there. Route 55 to Millville used to be a two-lane road, but now it's a four-lane highway that moves traffic to the shore even faster. Once the car reached Cape May Courthouse, she could smell the ocean because Stone Harbor was only 5 miles offshore, but it would still be about 20 minutes before reaching Wildwood.

Lizzie reviewed the New Jersey map on Saturday night because her mind wasn't as sharp. The last time she drove that route was two years ago. She jotted down a few route numbers and turns, but she felt she would remember landmarks. Lizzie had the car packed before church, put Buster in his carrier, and was ready to go.

Buster, who has been part of her life for the last four years, was adopted from the local humane society. He is a domestic short-haired cat—an easy way to say a mixed breed. Lizzie had

a cat in her forties, whom she raised from a kitten. The cat lived for 16 years before dying of kidney failure. Beauty slept in her bed, loved to cuddle, and broke her heart when she died. Her litter box and dish were tucked away in a closet until Lizzie retired. One day, on a whim, Lizzie visited the local pet adoption center, where they invited her to sit in their cat room to see if she felt a connection. After sitting alone and watching most of the cats sleep, one with white paws, black-and-gray stripes, and yellow eyes walked over to check her out. They stared at each other for several minutes, then the cat padded softly onto her lap as if to say, "You'll do." Lizzie didn't have the heart to walk out without him. The veterinarian guessed his age to be around two, so they'd have a decent amount of time together.

"Are we doing this, Buster?" Lizzie asked, sitting behind the wheel of her 10-year-old Volvo. He responded with a low, rumbling growl. "I guess you're not sure either. It sounded good days ago, but I'm not so sure right now. Okay, let's head out. We'll feel better when we're watching the waves roll in."

It was after 3 when Lizzie pulled into the driveway of her rented cottage. The front porch had a bench that looked comfortable and sheltered from the weather. Since it was off-season, most of the surrounding homes looked unoccupied. The realtor had said the key would be under a mat at the back door. Not wanting to leave Buster alone in the car after he'd been meowing for the last hour, she took him out on a leash and headed around back.

The key required some wiggling to work, and the door was slightly warped, so she had to give it a firm push. The kitchen was small, with an eat-in table and chairs, and it smelled clean and fresh, like lemon, which was always a top concern for Lizzie.

Speaking to Buster, she said, “Okay, now you can settle down and get adjusted. I’ll take you into the living room, secure the leash, and collect my things. Then we’ll check out the place together.”

Buster was draped over the sofa’s top edge when Lizzie returned, looking out the bay window. “Found your spot already, have you?”

She chose the front bedroom because it received more sunlight. The house had electric heat, but it was nice to have some extra warmth this time of year. The bed linens, with a seashell print on the comforter, appeared to be recently purchased.

She returned to the living room, let Buster off-leash, sat in a high-backed chair upholstered in light blue velour, put her feet up, and took a deep breath. “Well, I’m here. Not sure what this is about, but I’ll make the best of it. I’m used to being on my own.”

Buster leaped onto her lap and began purring persistently. Lizzie had placed her purse on the table in front of her, and the chime from her phone startled her. “Now, who would be calling me? Probably the realtor, wondering if I’ve arrived.”

By the time she grabbed her phone and remembered how to answer, it had quit ringing. She scrolled through the contacts and saw something labeled recent calls, so she wasn't sure what to do; she redialed the unrecognized number.

"Hello, this is Alice. Please leave a message after the beep."

Lizzie, unsure of what she wanted to say, hung up. Since she had never set up phone messaging, she thought Alice might be trying to leave a message. After waiting a few minutes, she redialed.

"Hello, Alice?"

"Yes. I tried sending you a couple of messages. I was worried about you."

"Sorry. Haven't gotten around to setting up voicemail. You shouldn't be worrying. I'm okay."

"How was the drive?"

"Uneventful. Traffic in the cities, doing last-minute Christmas shopping."

"Is the house okay?"

"Only been here about 15 minutes. Haven't unpacked. It's cute, simple. Just right for Buster and me. The realtor had already turned up the heat, so it's nice and toasty with the sun shining in."

“What’s the weather doing there this week?”

“You know, I didn’t even check. Hope no snow in the forecast. How about Philadelphia?”

“We might get some snow after Christmas. It had better not interfere with my trip to Maine. Well, I’ll let you get settled. You are okay, aren’t you? You know what I mean.”

“Yes. I’m not going to sit here and weep. I’ll check out the TV. Maybe binge on Hallmark Christmas shows. I bought a couple of books I’ve meant to read, and if the weather isn’t too windy, I’ll walk on the beach. I’m sure I won’t find any Scotch Bonnets on this shore, but I love looking for shells, just like my mother.”

“I’ll call again on Christmas, around noon. We’ll exchange notes on our adventures as independent women.”

“I’d love that. Thanks for calling, Alice.”

“Yeah, goodbye.”

Chapter Three

At this point, Lizzie felt drained, closed her eyes, and drifted off with Buster on her lap. She woke to the doorbell ringing, sitting in the dark. Cautiously, Lizzie peeked out the front window and saw a short, middle-aged woman with dark hair standing on the front porch. She wanted to ignore the person, probably selling something, but the doorbell rang again, so she stepped over and opened the door.

"Hello. I'm sorry to bother you, but I saw you drive up earlier. Your car was still here, and the house lights were off when it got dark. I hope you are all right?" The woman appeared to be of Latino descent and had a mild accent.

"Yes, I'm fine. I guess the drive here wore me out. Do you live nearby?"

"Yes, across the street, closer to the corner. There aren't usually many tourists this time of year, so when I see one drive up, it catches my attention. Sorry for being so nosy. My husband says I overthink."

"Well, I thank you for checking on me. I'm here until sometime after Christmas. Now that I'm awake, I'd better get unpacked."

"It's almost 6. Have you eaten supper?"

"No, but I'm not really that hungry. I'll need to do some shopping tomorrow morning."

“Please come for dinner. We’re used to adding people to our table, and if you can stand being around three overactive children for a short while, we’d love to have you. Nothing fancy, just beans and rice with tacos. I’m Mariana.”

“That’s so sweet of you, Mariana. Hearing you mention that food has started my stomach rumbling, so yes, I’ll come over. I’m Lizzie. Give me a few minutes to freshen up. What’s your house number?”

“301, but I’ll wait. Don’t want you walking over alone.”

Lizzie carried her overnight bag into the bathroom to comb her hair, use the toilet, and check herself in the mirror over the small, compact sink. *She thinks I’m old and might need help crossing the street. Hope I’m not getting myself into something I’ll regret.*

When Lizzie returned to the living room, she saw Mariana waiting on the porch. “Okay, I’m ready,” Lizzie said, locking the front door. *Who knows? This might be a setup to rob me. At least she’ll know I locked the door.*

“Are you staying here alone?”

See, there’s the question. What should I say? What would Alice do if she were here?

“No. I expect a few family members to join me in a day or two. We love the shore, so we thought it would be something different for Christmas.”

"Oh, that's lovely. The house with the porch light on is mine."

"You live here year-round?"

"Yes. Moved to Wildwood Crest about five years ago, when the children were small. My husband is an electrician and has found steady employment at the many motels. I do cleaning, so I could go to work once the children were in school. It's been a beautiful place to live."

They entered the kitchen, where food was steaming on the electric stove. The table was set for five, and the rest of the family appeared to be in the living room with the TV on.

"So, was I right, Mariana? No one was home." A tall, muscular man entered the kitchen and smiled at Lizzie. "Oh, excuse me. Welcome to our home. I'm Arturo."

"Hello, I'm Lizzie." The children stood behind their father, checking Lizzie out.

"Children, wash up and take your seats. Lizzie is our guest tonight. I'll set a place for you right next to me so we can get to know each other."

Once the food was on the table and everyone was seated, Mariana said, "We say grace. I hope that's okay."

"It's fine with me."

"Dear Lord, thank you for this day and for the blessings on our family and our guest, Lizzie. Bless this food we are about to eat and make us strong in your service. Amen."

As family members passed the food around, Mariana said, "Lizzie is celebrating Christmas with her family here at the beach. Do you mind if I ask where you live?"

"I'm from Hershey, Pennsylvania, where they make Hershey's candy."

The youngest child asked, "Did you bring any?"

"That's not a nice thing to ask," their mother said.

"Oh, that's okay. Everyone loves chocolate candy. What's your name?"

"Abril, I'm seven."

"That's a lovely name."

"And my other daughter is Elena. She's nine. The one with the stern expression at the end of the table is my son, Lucas; he's eleven."

"Nice to meet everyone. This food looks and smells delicious."

She glanced around the room while eating, trying not to seem like she was scrutinizing their home. The kitchen was cramped but neat, clearly a place where Mariana ruled. The dinnerware was a mix of colors and patterns, Melmac from years past, probably picked up at local yard sales. Surprisingly, it seemed to match, adding a festive vibe to the table. Some of the glasses were jelly jars with cartoon characters printed on them, but she noticed her water glass had a crystal pattern, making her feel like a guest of honor. There wasn't a

tablecloth, but there were woven tan placemats that had seen many washings.

It was clear the family had evening meals together, though the boy seemed ready to bolt the minute he was excused. He'd glance up from his plate, scowl at Lizzie, then shove food into his mouth. The girls giggled, looked at their mother, received an unapproving look, lowered their heads, and ate in silence. It was obvious that having a white grandmother figure in their home was a new experience for all of them.

"Are the children off for Christmas vacation?"

"Yes," said Mariana, "until January 2nd. I hope the weather stays balmy so they can spend most of their time outdoors. My mother comes over during the day to supervise while we work. We're very fortunate to have her close. You said your family is coming to celebrate the holiday. I'm sure that will be delightful. If you don't mind my asking, do they live far from here?"

Suddenly caught in a lie, Lizzie blurted, "They live in Philadelphia."

"Oh, that's where we moved from. I was born and raised there, but Arturo is from a small town in Northern New Jersey. We met at a laundromat when he was doing electrical work for the company he used to work for. One cup of coffee led to lunch, then dinner." Looking at Arturo with a loving smile, she said, "I think he was coming up with more projects to keep him in Philly."

Lizzie glanced at Arturo and noticed he was looking at Mariana with the same loving smile. He seemed a man of few words, content to let Mariana run the show.

The dinner continued with relaxed conversation about Christmas, decorations, and shopping. "Our custom is to decorate on Christmas Eve. Arturo has purchased the tree, and it's sitting in a bucket of water out back."

Mariana cleared the table and served dessert. Lizzie immediately recognized them as churro cookies, the kind she and Alice had eaten on their first evening in Albuquerque. The thought brought Ava and her death front and center, and as Lizzie stared at the cookies, tears filled her eyes.

Mariana looked concerned and, trying to spare Lizzie any embarrassment, said, "You children can each take two on a paper plate and head to the living room. I'm sure Lizzie has enjoyed your smiling faces long enough." The cookies were grabbed, and the children saw it as an unexpected escape to watch TV.

Lizzie had composed herself by then; Arturo quietly stood and pushed in his chair, giving the two women time alone. "Holidays can be a hard time for many. I see sadness in you, Lizzie, and hope we didn't add to it."

"Oh, no. I had a niece pass away in August, and she lived in Albuquerque. Seeing the cookies reminded me of the time I spent there." As Mariana sat, thoughtful, Lizzie relayed the story as briefly as she could: the anticipation of vacationing with her niece, a robbery at her home that led to her niece's

death, and the discovery that two men had set up the robbery by scamming her. She still felt incredibly guilty about how the man on the plane had used her cell phone to instigate the robbery. Eventually, tears sprang to her eyes again, and Mariana reached over and placed her hand on Lizzie's.

"You must allow your heart to grieve and lift those feelings of guilt to a higher power. I lost my father in the spring. He was a cantankerous fellow, always complaining about something, but he had a good heart and was willing to help others. We argued before he died, something I am ashamed of. It's been hard for me to forgive myself. I know it was just another day; how would I have known he would die before I had a chance to turn my words into joy? You loved your niece and would never have done anything to harm her."

"I must confess, since you're being so honest with me, I don't have anyone coming to stay. I love the tranquility of the beach and the ocean, so I thought coming here would help me sort things out—time alone to meditate and, hopefully, heal."

"Some people heal that way," said Mariana, "but some need the interaction of others to bring it about. Of course, time is a huge factor. I don't intend to interfere in your healing process, but feel free to lean on me during the days you are here; maybe we can heal together."

At that moment, Abril entered the kitchen and began telling an exciting tale about a dragon she had seen on TV. The women held their gaze for a moment before turning to Abril. She spoke of fairy dust and a castle in the sky, bringing

happiness to a dragon in need of a friend, and the three of them smiled.

“Here, let me help you clear the table,” Lizzie said, standing up.

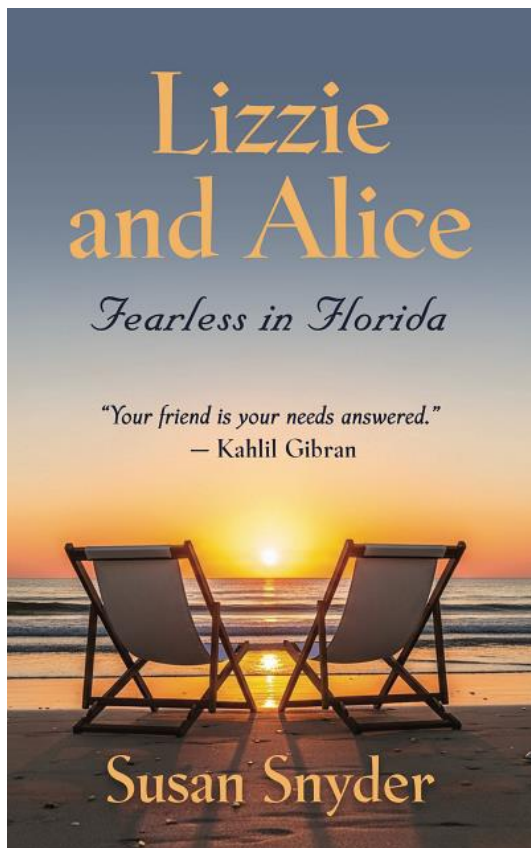
“No. Doing the evening chores gives me a brief moment of peace while the rest of the crew settles in for bed. You go ahead and return to your cottage. I’m sure you have tasks to complete since you just arrived. We’ll talk again, I’m sure.”

“Thank you, Mariana. Abril, it’s been a pleasure meeting you. I hope we can talk more about the dragon later this week.”

“I’ll draw a picture so you can take it home with you.”

“That would be wonderful.”

Mariana moved closer and hugged Lizzie. “It’s supposed to be sunny tomorrow, so it’ll be a good time to take a walk on the beach and get refreshed. Keep in touch.”



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