

Lizzie Rowell

January 1790

On the Road to Salem

Lizzie shrank into the stagecoach's corner with her canvas bag tucked beneath her feet. She kept her eyes steadfastly focused on the window, though there was little to see as the twilight dimmed.

"Probably another couple hours afore we reach Salem," the grizzled man sitting across from Lizzie said. "Ya goin' on ta Boston tamorrow?"

The stranger stank of stale tobacco and rum. Lizzie pulled her shawl closer and ignored his question.

"You awake, girl?" The man kicked Lizzie's ankle.

"Leave 'er be," the stranger on the opposite end of Lizzie's bench said. "You kin wait till mornin' to find out."

Lizzie clutched the window shade as the stage wove around the deepest ruts in the road.

"So, yar awake," the first man said and kicked Lizzie's ankle a second time.

"Ouch! What's wrong with you?"

He snorted. "Been tryin' ta talk ta ya."

"Well," Lizzie replied as she drew herself up into a straightened sitting position, "I don't feel like talking."

The stranger stretched his long legs until they reached Lizzie's bench. Her heart pounded. Surely, the stage would arrive at Salem soon. They left Haverhill at three o'clock that morning, and it was about twenty miles to Salem. The stranger continued staring at Lizzie, who avoided his eyes.

After what felt like the longest hour in Lizzie's life, the horses slowed to a stop in front of the tavern Traveler's Rest.

Salem!

Lizzie waited for the men to disembark before she moved toward the door, where the unwashed stranger loomed in front of her. She shrank back down on the bench, unsure what to do.

The stage driver stuck his head inside. "Ye have to get out now, miss."

Lizzie glanced out the door.

The driver gave an understanding nod. "I'll walk ya inside. Is someone meeting you?"

"No." Lizzie shook her head. "She doesn't know I'm coming."

"Who doesn't?"

"My cousin Anna Shipman. She runs the—"

"Ship Tavern at the top of Derby Wharf. I know it well. Wait inside by the bar; I'll walk down with you after the stable lad takes the horses. Young woman like yerself shouldn't walk alone after dark."

Once they acquired pints of ale, the stranger and his companion seemed to lose interest in Lizzie. There were certainly enough unattached women on the main floor to catch their eyes. Eventually, the stage driver appeared at the door and motioned Lizzie to join him. Clutching her bag, Lizzie adjusted her cloak and stepped into the darkness.

"Name's John. I do the stage run from Haverhill to Boston and back again." John tucked Lizzie's arm under his elbow. "Salem's a nice town. Busy. You say yer cousin runs Ship Tavern. She know about you?"

Lizzie hesitated. John seemed nice, but it probably wasn't a good idea to share too much information.

"Yes. She's expecting me," Lizzie lied and decided to change the subject. "I've never been near the sea before."

"Bit different from Haverhill. We started walkin' from Traveler's Rest on Essex Street, and now we're walkin' down Orange Street to Derby Street. An' Ship Tavern is just on the corner. So if you cross Derby Street from the tavern, you'll be on the wharf. Ye'll get yer bearings soon enough."

Lizzie saw several young men walking in both directions on Orange Street and was glad John had taken an interest in protecting her. She'd be terrified traversing the street alone in the dark.

As they neared the corner, Lizzie saw light streaming from the tavern door as it opened and closed. Sounds of laughter spilled into the street.

"This is it," John said, opening the door.

Coming in from the dark, Lizzie paused for her eyes to adjust to the light emitted by the large fireplace on the opposite side of the great room and stamped her feet to avoid tracking any more mud than necessary inside.

“We’ll go ta bar an’ ask after Anna.”

John guided Lizzie through the entryway to a long bar with a selection of glass decanters holding various spirits behind it. A lad who looked to be about twelve years old stood behind the bar polishing glasses.

“What’ll it be?” he asked.

“I’ll have a cider, and the young lady . . .” John turned to Lizzie. “Perhaps a small glass of Madeira?”

“Yes, please. Is there anything to eat?”

“Supper finished a while ago. I kin get you some bread and cheese.”

“We’ll both have that,” John ordered. “Bring it to the table in the corner.”

“Wait,” Lizzie said. “I’m looking for my cousin Anna Shipman. Do you know her?”

“I should. She’s my mam. I’ll let ’er know yer lookin’ for her. Take yer drinks ta table.”

As they made their way to the corner, Lizzie eyed the busy room with apprehension.

“How long will the tavern stay open?”

“Prob’ly till midnight or so,” John replied. “Once I know yer in good hands, I’ll shove off back to Traveler’s Rest. We leave at three o’clock in the morning tamorrow.”

“It’ll be a short night for you, then.” Lizzie twirled the wine in her glass, wondering what she would do if her cousin didn’t accept her.

A woman of medium height and light hair streaked with gray came to the table with a basket of bread and a plate of cheese.

“My lad said you want ta speak ta me?”

“Are you Anna Shipman?” Lizzie asked.

“I am, and who might you be?”

“I’m your cousin Lizzie Rowell. Well, it’s Elizabeth, but everyone calls me Lizzie. And, um, my mother—your aunt—died last week. She told me if she didn’t pull through, I should come to you.”

In the far corner, a shout went up as a game of darts concluded.

“They’ll be wantin’ another round!” Anna shouted to her son. “So, Lizzie, how old are you, and what do you think I can do for you?”

Lizzie licked her lips. “I’m nineteen, and I need a place to stay. I’m happy to work for my keep. I’ll turn my hand to anything.”

“If I let you stay, you’ll be behind the bar when we’re open and other- wise do what needs doing. But no funny business with the customers. The Ship caters to sailors but is respectable for all that. Mr. Derby doesn’t allow debauchery so close to his wharf. So mind none of the young men who pass through here sweep you off your feet. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“When you finish your meal, my son will show you where to wash up and take you to a room in the attic. It’s cold in the winter, but you’ll be busy down here most of the time.”



In the predawn darkness, an errant piece of straw pierced Lizzie’s thin mattress cover and scratched her face. She woke with a start in the dark room and took in her surroundings. The room was small, furnished only with a broken chair, a dressing table with a porcelain bowl and pitcher on the surface, and the rope bed Lizzie occupied, with its thin straw mattress and thinner blanket. She drew the blanket back over her coat.

I wonder if Cousin Anna has extra blankets or if I have to make my own quilts.

Lizzie sighed. She hadn’t expected luxuries, but the accommodation in her father’s barn was better than this. At least the cow and horse had provided some heat.

Better get downstairs and start working before Cousin Anna changes her mind. Lizzie shivered and swirled her chestnut hair under a mop cap.

Downstairs, the girl skirted frozen puddles to the outside privy, grateful her sturdy shoes kept her feet dry. Finishing her business, Lizzie added a chamber pot and warmer clothing to her list of items to get.

Maybe there’s extra from the guests’ rooms.

Inside the kitchen, Anna’s son added logs to the cook fire.

“Yer late,” he said.

“It’s not light yet.”

“Don’t matter. Ye can’t wait fer sun in winter. I’ll come up an’ bang on your door tomorrow. There’s a mess of vegetables on the counter. You need to chop ’em for the stew.”

Lizzie eyed the iron cauldron that was probably the stewpot. *That will be a lot of vegetables.* She sighed. “Is there meat to add?”

“Salt pork’s already in the pot. Fill up the rest with potatoes and such. I’ll help ye add the water. Well, don’t stand there gaping. Start chopping or we won’t be ready for dinner.”

Lizzie lifted a basket of potatoes onto the top of the wooden kitchen table and started peeling. After an hour, she finished the basket and started in on the carrots, which she didn’t need to peel. The boy moved to the other side of the table and began chopping onions.

“I’ll help you now, but tomorrow you’ll have to do it all yerself.”

Tears started streaming down both their faces.

“You never told me your name,” Lizzie said, wiping the tears away with her sleeve.

“Most people call me Matt,” he replied around a hiccup.

“Thank you, Matt. I’ve never done this kind of work before.”

Matt snorted. “Yeah. By the time we get the stew going, Samson’ll be here to take care of breakfast, and we’ll go set up the bar. I’ll show you how to serve. By then, folks’ll be comin’ in. You can shadow me today. Tomorrow, ye’re on your own.”

Lizzie nodded. Not all her tears were from the onions.