

PREVIEW
SALEM STORIES BOOK 3

Captain Nathaniel Silsbee

April 1798

Abord the Portland, Alboran Sea

“We’ve passed Gibraltar but we’re not home free yet. Keep our ship steady in the middle,” Nath ordered his helmsman. “We’ll add more sail and push into the Mediterranean.”

“Aye,” Ezra answered. “And we’ll keep her clear from the coasts.”

“Good man.” Nath cupped his hands around his mouth. “Hoist the sails!”

“Hoist the sales!” The echo bounced to crewmen on the rigging. Quickly the sails unfurled and filled with the easterly wind coming off the Atlantic. The *Portland* began picking up speed.

“Sail ho!” a sailor shouted from the crow’s nest.

“Add more sail,” Nath ordered before raising his spyglass. He swept the open sea before him but didn’t see any sails.

“William, what can you see?” he called to his brother on deck.

“Nothing yet.”

“Port side!” the lookout shouted down.

Damme and blast! “Crew to battle stations!” Nath ordered and jumped down onto the deck.

William kept his spyglass in position and pointed with his left hand.

“Looks like she’s coming out from Málaga, moving fast.”

Nath lined up his spyglass, sweeping it over the intruder’s deck. *Too many men on deck for an honest ship, and they’re holding grappling hooks.*

“More sail!” Nath ordered.

Even with all his canvas unfurled, Nath felt exposed. The interloper continued her swift approach.

“We can’t outsail her!” William shouted.

The attacking brig gained more distance and turned to expose her gunports.

“Nath, she’ll sink us with one volley. We have to yield.”

Nath clenched his jaw. Distance between the ships continued to close.

“*Bonjour! Frappez vos coulierus. Préparer l’embarquement.*”

“He said—” William began.

Nath snapped his spyglass closed. “I know what he bloody said. Give the order to strike our colors and order the crew to stand down. I’ll be in my cabin.”

###

Nath opened the *Portland*’s logbook, noted the date, time, and ship’s position, and recorded *Portland*’s capture.

As I write, French corsairs board the Portland. They have no grounds to sequester our ship. They will discover nothing on our ship of British origin. Nevertheless, we are on our way to a prize court.

Nath closed out the entry as the invaders attached grappling hooks to his ship. The *Portland* shuddered when men crossed onto her decks. He heard William order the crew to take positions on the main deck. Nath closed the logbook, put on his coat and tricorne hat, and went on deck to meet his adversary.

A man wearing an elaborate uniform with gilded epaulets soon stood before Nath.

“*Je suis Capitaine Moreau*, and your ship is now ours. Pleased to see your cargo and crew manifest.”

“Captain Nathaniel Silsbee,” Nath responded. “I place the strongest possible objection to your intrusion, which is entirely illegal. We have nothing on board of British origin.”

Moreau glanced at the papers Nath handed him and put them in his pocket.

“Your response is noted. Please to join the others on deck. We’ll sail the ship.”

The prize crew raised a French flag over the *Portland* and sailed toward the Spanish coast. Nath joined his men, who lounged near the starboard rail under a watchman’s indolent gaze.

“They don’t seem concerned about us,” William whispered.

Nath shrugged and swallowed his anger. *Better to save it for the prize court.*

“No reason they should be,” Nath calmly replied to his brother. “We’re outnumbered, outgunned, and can’t subdue them quickly enough to escape. Especially since the corsairs are escorting us. Now you understand the precautions we took to remove British products.”

Nath gestured to French sailors going belowdecks. “No matter how hard they look, they won’t find anything to support sequestering us. And our crew will never admit being aboard before we loaded our cargo. We’ll be on our way soon enough. It’s the loss of time I object to.”

A shout went up from the French crew when a school of dolphins passed by the ship, their graceful leaping arcs drawing everyone’s eyes until the *Portland* turned into the natural harbor at Málaga.

Dozens of American and other neutral ships flying French flags bobbed offshore. A castle loomed behind the shoreline, its walls matching the dry, sandy soil around it. Nath felt his stomach plummet. *Are all these ships awaiting a hearing?*

Men turned the capstan, releasing *Portland*’s anchor chains. When the longboat from shore arrived, the bosun dropped a rope ladder down for Captain Moreau. Nath grabbed his hat and rushed to join his captor.

Moreau turned in surprise. “*Non*. Remain here.”

“I demand to see the American consul.”

“*Non*.” Moreau flicked his fingers, shooing Nath back toward the deck. Three members from the prize crew took positions around Nath.

“Wait,” Nath said. “Let me write a note. You can read it.”

“*Non*.” Captain Moreau swung his foot onto the ladder. “*Au revoir*.”

###

At twilight, the French cook brought stew for the Americans. Nath thought about throwing it over the side.

“You should eat,” William said, scraping out his bowl. “It’s tasty.”

“It’s French.”

“That too. We don’t know when we’ll have our next meal, so you should take advantage of this one. You’ll need to be sharp tomorrow.”

Nath nodded, the stew sticking in his throat.

Darkness descended over the harbor. A few lights twinkled from the town. Glimpses of cooking fires from the surrounding ships were visible. Ropes and anchors creaked and moaned. Small waves lapped against the ship.

“Nath,” William whispered. “What do you think will happen tomorrow?”

“Nothing. Moreau will file his report, and we’ll sit here wasting time.”

The next day, no one came to the ship. Nath paced the deck in a clockwise direction before reversing to pace the opposite direction. The crew played cards or slept.

On the third day, a longboat came out to the *Portland*. The French first mate dropped the rope ladder over the side and motioned for Nath to get off the ship.

“You’re in command,” Nath muttered to William. “If you find a way to escape, take it. I’ll catch up when I can.”

“Aye. Keep your temper, Nath.”

“Humph.”

When Nath reached the last link on the ladder, burly arms pulled him into the boat and slammed him onto a seat. Four soldiers kept him anchored while sailors rowed the longboat ashore. After they beached the boat, the soldiers marched Nath to the French consul’s office. The room had plain whitewashed walls. Bright sun poured through large windows. A clerk sat to the side, away from the sun. He gestured toward a bench. “*S’asseori*.” Nath remained standing.

At nine o’clock, the outer door opened and a well-dressed French official entered, followed by several men. Nath recognized Captain Moreau.

“Consul Dannery,” the clerk announced.

“Sit, Capitaine Sizbee. There is no reason to stand. You know Capitaine Moreau.”

Nath nodded.

“This is Monsieur Bachelot, owner of the *Hercule*. I have your papers. According to government decree, any ship with cargo from Britian or her possessions is considered a good prize. You understand? We will keep your ship.”

Nath took a slow breath. “We have not violated the decree.”

Dannery handed the *Portland*’s cargo manifest to his clerk.

“Etienne will read out each item on the list. In five words, explain where the articles were produced, who brought them to the États-Unis, and how they came into your ship’s possession.”

Nath bristled but held his temper. “Monsieur Dannery, there is no reason to prolong this investigation. May I suggest you ask about items that cause concern. You will see that everything is correct and release the *Portland*. But I must judge the length of my explanation, not you.”

“Monsieur, you are not here to make demands.”

“You are correct, but neither can I be denied the opportunity to fulfill my duty to the owners of the property I supervise.”

Consul Dannery drew his lips into a thin line, leaned toward Nath, and said, “I suggest you remember your place. I have no reason to regard anything you have to say.”

Nath’s temper began simmering to the surface. “The innocence of my ship and her cargo is evident. We have no British goods of any kind; a fact that is so clear you could decide it in less than an hour.”

“I am the one to decide when your case is decided. I advise you to remember that. And also that I am losing patience with your claims.”

“I am aware of your power. But I shall not leave your office until the matter is decided.”

“Gentlemen,” Captain Moreau interrupted, “perhaps we can return to the matter at hand. I observed several navigational instruments with no marks to indicate their origin. I suggest they are British.”

“But you have no proof,” Nath growled.

“No instrument is made without a mark,” Moreau retorted.

With nightfall, the office grew darker, but the interrogation continued until Consul Dannery pulled out his pocket watch.

“Enough. It is the middle of the night, and I want my dinner. Guards, escort Capitaine Sizbee back to his ship.”

“I told you before, I will not leave this office until the *Portland* is restored to me. I have violated no laws of France, and I demand my hearing.”

Consul Dannery sighed. “You try my patience. Very well. Stay here tonight. It’s not as if you can escape. Come, gentlemen, we will return tomorrow.”

“Why waste time?” Captain Moreau asked. “It is standard practice to condemn neutral shipping. Every one of them carries contraband.”

“*Non*. We are leaving. *Bonne nuit*, Capitaine Sizbee.”

The clerk picked up the papers on his desk and followed the mariners out of the office. The guards yawned and gave Nath one-fingered salutes, stretching their arms as they left. Porters came in and began cleaning. A watchman sat in the consul's chair and gestured for Nath to take the bench on the opposite wall.

Mentally going over the day's events, Nath doubted he could persuade the consul to release the *Portland*. He could appeal the decision to the civil court at Aix-en-Provence on lack of definite evidence. But an appeal would take months, possibly years. Unsettled, Nath lay down on the narrow bench with his arms under his head and listened to the watchman snore.

###

Eventually, the long night ended. Nath swung his feet to the floor, wincing when his back complained about the bench's narrow, hard surface.

"I might have done better to sleep on the floor," he mused.

Nath's stomach grumbled. He walked over to the desk and shook the watchman.

"*Bonjour*. Time to wake up."

A guard entered and waved the watchman away. Nath walked around to get some feeling back into his legs.

The clerk walked into the room with his sheaf of papers. When he saw Nath, he raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

"*Quelle heure?*" Nath asked.

"*Neuf.*"

Nine o'clock then. The consul should arrive soon.

A few minutes later, Consul Dannery, impeccably dressed and groomed, entered.

"Capitaine Sizbee, you are still here."

"I told you I won't leave until my case is decided."

Dannery took a seat behind his desk and steepled his hands. "Very well. Write an order to your crew. I will send men to examine your ship. They will look at everything on board and record their origin. Then we shall know the truth."

Nath rubbed his chin. "I can write such an order, assuming your men will make an honest account."

Dannery bristled. "I give you my word."

Nath gestured to the clerk for writing material and gave the written order to Dannery, who passed it to the guard.

“*Bon*. It is done. There is no reason for you to remain in my office. I have other business to conduct.”

Nath sat back down on the bench, folded his arms over his chest, and leaned his head against the wall. Petitioners came and went. The consul left for lunch, coming back in the late afternoon.

“*Bon après*,” Nath said.

Dannery slapped papers on his desk. “I have the report on your ship. You have not been forthcoming with the truth. Every article on the *Portland* is a product of British colonies. Your ship is condemned without any appeal. What have you to say to that?”

Nath shrugged and spread his hands. “The outcome is as we both expected. How could it be otherwise? I sincerely hope that a man such as yourself serving in such a high office will not allow himself to be influenced by a report filled with falsehood. What British colony, for example, produces the spice called mace? Please tell me.”

Dannery blanched. “I assure you I am a man of honor. I will get to the bottom of this affair.”

The consul sent his clerk out with a note. Nath sat down on the bench again. Outside, a few stars twinkled in the twilight.

To Nath’s mild surprise, Captain Moreau entered the office with Monsieur Bachelot, the privateer’s owner. Dannery called for brandy. The men talked and smoked while Nath watched. The conversation became heated at times with what sounded like protests, until Dannery slapped his hand on the desk.

Nath straightened in anticipation. Dannery wrote out a document and handed it to Captain Moreau, who signed it and passed it to Monsieur Bachelot who also signed. Dannery signed at the bottom of the page and gestured to his clerk who handed him a sheaf of papers.

“*Capitaine Sizbee*, please take all your papers. Here are your cargo inventories. Here is permission to take your ship and go to the devil with her, or anywhere else you please. And here is an order for the prize crew to depart from your ship.”

A sense of relief flooded Nath’s body. *I can hardly believe it.*

“Merci beaucoup, Consul Dannery. You restore my faith in justice.” And the arbitrary seizures of neutral shipping.

Three days later, with a favorable wind and in company with a Danish convoy, Nath watched Málaga recede like a nightmare dissolving in the light of day.

###