

CHAPTER ONE

TICK-TOCK



The ancient offices of Mizzen, Mainbrace, Windvane and Splice, “Lawyers to the Pirate Community, by Appointment to the Pirate Federation, since 2015”, were located at the top of a cliff and took the form of the upper three decks of a pirate galleon, which had been braced directly onto the rock itself. The impression was of a ship sailing – indeed flying – right off the peak into the bay far below. The main conference room of the famous maritime firm of solicitors had once been a pirate captain’s cabin and possessed floor-to-ceiling windows. Once these windows had given out onto a seeming infinity of ocean; now they afforded a queasily vertiginous view down the cliffs.

It was before these windows that old Mr Mizzen currently stood, his back turned – though with no intention of rudeness – to the other inhabitants of the room. Mr Mizzen’s still keen aquamarine eyes travelled from the similarly coloured waters of the bay below up to the ticking clock on the conference room wall. There was reassurance to be found in the tick and the tock, but also a warning. Old Mr Mizzen was under no illusion – the clock was always ticking. Whether fate decreed that one was gently eased out of this life by natural means or snatched from it in the

cruellest terms possible – as Molucco Wrathe had been – it was advisable to make the necessary preparations for that final voyage.

A not entirely discreet cough sounded close by Mr Mizzen's right ear. A sudden arctic chill caused the profusion of white hairs protruding from said ear to stand up on end. Turning away from the window, Mr Mizzen saw that he had been joined by Trofie Wrathe. The glamorously intimidating deputy captain of *The Typhon* was dressed from head to toe in black. A lace veil – patterned with skulls – covered her face, while her legendary golden hand was, for the moment at least, encased in a long black glove, as was her other, regular, hand. It was not uncommon for visitors to wear black to attend these offices – but though *de rigueur* for funerals, it was not required for the reading of a will. Even through her veil, Trofie Wrathe's penetrating stare caused Mr Mizzen's old eyes to smart a little. She raised an eyebrow inquisitively before asking in her distinctive accent: “*Must* we wait any longer?”

“I'm afraid we must, Madam Wrathe. It is a matter of some importance that we do not begin the reading of your brother-in-law's will until *all* the beneficiaries have arrived.”

“*Who* exactly are we waiting for?” she asked. “Don't they know that time is short? There's a war on, in case you'd forgotten!”

Mr Mizzen heard her words but chose, as he sometimes did, to feign deafness. Instead, he surveyed the others, who were also waiting in the room, with varying degrees of irritation, for the formalities to begin.

In the front row, on either side of the chair temporarily vacated by Trofie, sat her husband, Captain Barbarro Wrathe, and her teenage son, Moonshine. Barbarro looked solemn. He was the last Wrathe brother standing – the Vampirates having claimed his

younger brother Porfirio's life before finally closing in on Molucco.

Moonshine Wrathe had yet to prove himself worthy of the family name. Still, Mr Mizzen noted there had been some improvements since last they'd met at his uncle's funeral. Moonshine's skin was now clear and his hair tied back from his face. His locks were as long and black as his father's but without the lightning-strike of silver shooting through them. He was neither handsome nor otherwise, and it was hard to believe the young pirate was heir to such fame and fortune as came with the Wrathe name.

On the other side of Barbarro – separated by another empty chair – sat Matilda Kettle, owner of the eponymous tavern, which had been drawing in the pirate hordes for as long as anyone could remember. Once, “Ma” Kettle's beauty had been the feverish talk of the oceans. She was still attractive, granted Mr Mizzen, but: *tick-tock* . . . He smiled ruefully. No, he thought, it was not the tick and the tock which had stolen away Ma Kettle's looks. Molucco's exit had done that. It was no secret that Ma Kettle had been close to the rebellious captain for many a year and Wrathe's sudden death seemed – if a maritime metaphor might be forgiven under the circumstances – to have taken all the wind from her sails.

Where once she might have worn a fur stole or a feather boa, now Ma Kettle sported something equally colourful but rather more unusual. Wrapped about her sinewy neck was Scrimshaw, the dead captain's beloved pet snake. Ma had taken the snake into her keeping since the captain's demise. The reptile's glassy eyes were like two mirrors, reflecting the woman's lost expression back at her.

Mr Mizzen's eyes migrated to Matilda Kettle's travelling companion – a decidedly exotic creature who went by the name of

Sugar Pie. Some kind of barmaid-cum-burlesque artist, according to the notes which young Mr Splice had prepared for him. Faced with the general mood, Mr Mizzen found Sugar Pie to be a veritable oasis in the desert. True, her face was solemn – her eyes darting frequently to her aged companion – but a dazzlingly pure light seemed to emanate from those eyes. It seemed to Mr Mizzen as much a cause for hope and celebration as sunlight.

To Sugar Pie's side was another empty chair. Seeing this, Mr Mizzen was brought back to the matter in hand. His smile faded. He glanced again at Trofie Wrathe, who was still pacing back and forth. Catching his glance, her eyebrow lifted inquiringly once again. *Tick-tock*, he heard, *tick-tock*. Perhaps he would have to make a start after all.

Just then, there was the sound of footsteps out in the corridor. Trofie stopped pacing and turned towards the door. Mr Mizzen's eyes travelled in the same direction, as the door opened and the young and breathless Mr Splice entered the room, nodding reassuringly at his superior whilst holding open the door and addressing someone out in the vestibule.

"Please, come this way. The others are waiting in here."

All eyes turned towards the open doorway.

A figure stepped into the room then paused, turning to face the others.

"I'm so sorry we kept you waiting," said Catherine Morgan, Molucco's deputy captain, most often known as Cutlass Cate. Her trademark russet hair brought to mind a dramatic sunset.

"It's good to see you again, Cate," boomed Barbarro Wrathe, rising to greet her. Taking her arm, his fingers briefly brushed the black armband she had sported for the past several months.

She was a woman in mourning too, but not, primarily, for Captain Molucco Wrathe.

Releasing Cate's hand, Barbarro indicated the chair which lay vacant between himself and Ma Kettle. Nodding and smiling politely at the others, Cate took her seat, as Trofie sighed with relief. But, as the captain's wife adjusted her skirt, she had a sudden realisation. Cate had said, "Sorry *we* kept you waiting . . ."

As she thought this, a young man strode through the door. A man of equal years to her own son but whose journey had been charted across far different waters. It was Connor Tempest – the shipwreck victim who had become a pirate but, more than that, the closest thing Molucco had had to a son. Their relationship, like so many of Molucco's, had hit the rocks and ended when Molucco burned Connor's articles. Yet here he was, as dependable as the tide, come to take his seat beside the others. Smiling minimally, Trofie turned to face the front.

"Connor." It was Ma Kettle who spoke first. "Of course. We should have guessed you'd be here."

Connor looked awkward as he stepped into the room, hovering before the others as if recognising that he was the last and least welcome guest.

"Mister Tempest," said Mr Mizzen, lifting his eyes from Mr Splice's excellent notes. "I believe there is a spare chair for you, to the right of Miss, er, Pie. Please sit down and we will commence our business."

"About time," hissed Trofie to her husband.

Yes, thought old Mr Mizzen, once more attuned to the merciless rhythm of the tick and the tock. *When all is said and done, it's always about time.*