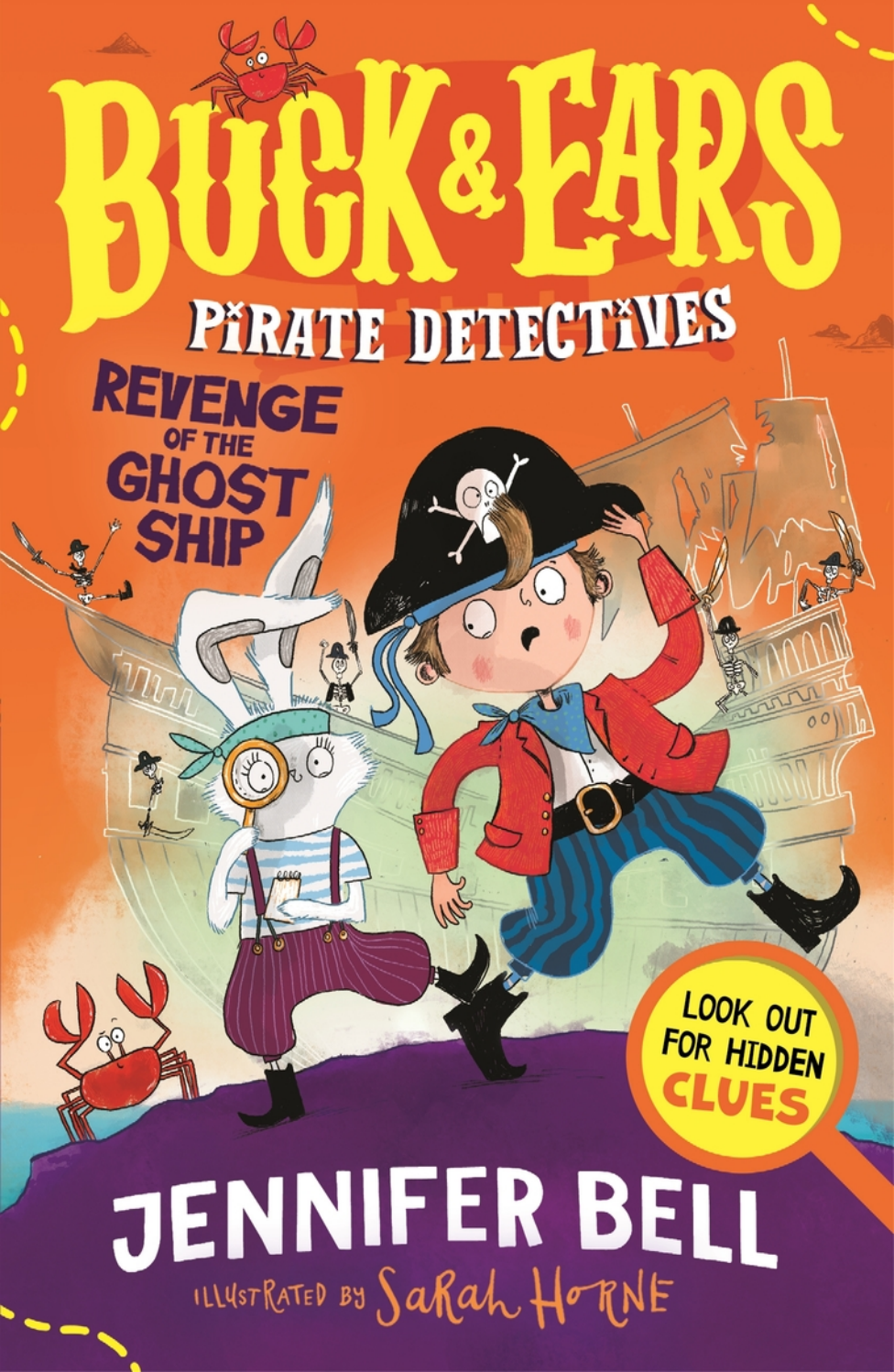
BUCK & EARS

PIRATE DETECTIVES

REVENGE OF THE GHOST SHIP



LOOK OUT FOR HIDDEN CLUES

JENNIFER BELL

ILLUSTRATED BY SARAH HORNE

For Megan and little Ada – J. B.

For Benedict – S. H.

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WALKER BOOKS

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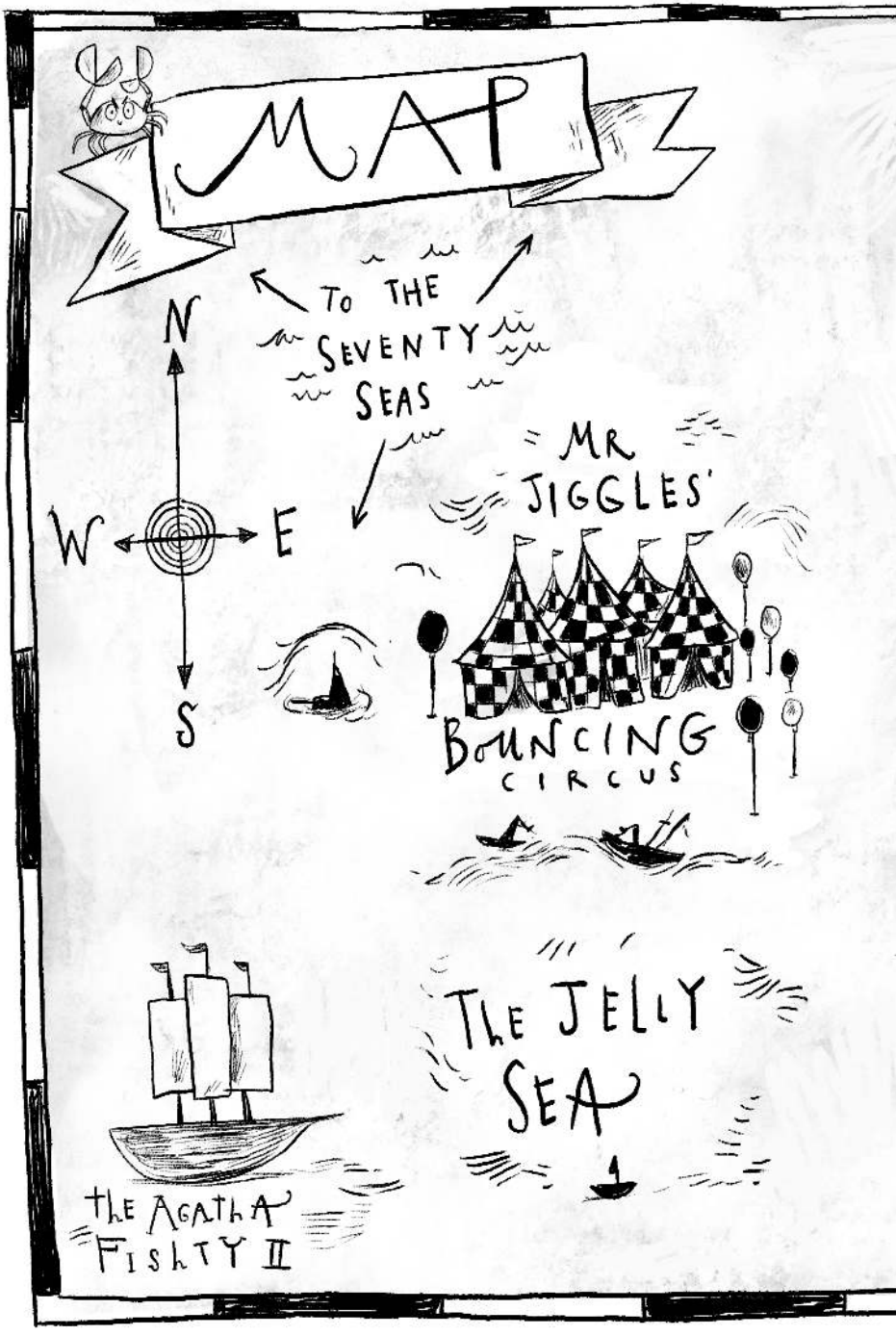

MAP
TO THE SEVENTY SEAS
N
W
E
S
MR JIGGLES' BOUNCING CIRCUS
THE JELLY SEA
THE AGATHA FISHTY II

CRABULA
↓ city
THE FLYING
PHANTOM

BOO!

It is I, Agatha Fishty, the most famous mystery writer on the Seventy Seas! You might know me as the author of thrilling tales such as "A Whale of a Crime", "X Marks the Plot" and "Danger on the Seashell Express". I love reading spooky stories that really SHIVER MY TIMBERS, so when I heard that strange things are a-fin in this new case for pirate detectives Buck and Ears, I had to dive right in!

Do you think you can solve this ghostly mystery before Buck and Ears? If you spot me again, it probably means there's a clue around, so keep your eyes peeled! I'll catch up with you at the end.

Happy sleuthing!

Agatha Fishty

CHAPTER ONE

"WAKEY WAKEY, RISE AND BRINE, CAPTAIN!" shouted a voice in Buck's ear.

"Somersaulting salmon!" Buck spluttered, jolting upright in his hammock. He squinted at the scruffy grey rabbit in a striped shirt and baggy trousers jumping up and down beside him. Then he let out a groan. Henrietta Sharp, aka Ears, was not only his best friend and first mate, but she was also an annoyingly good alarm clock.

"Sorry to wake you, but you've received a message," Ears said excitedly, waving a glass bottle containing a rolled-up piece of paper. "This struck the hull a few minutes ago."

Buck wasn't expecting pirate post. He pulled on his captain's hat, lifted his leg over the side of his hammock…

…and crashed to the floor with a painful

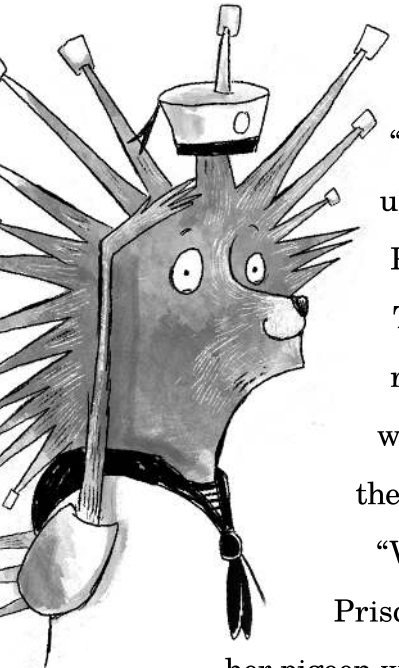
THUDDUNK.

"Not *again*," he moaned. Despite being raised by pirates, Buck had never mastered the art of getting out of a hammock. Rubbing his sore bottom, he stood up and followed Ears out of his cabin onto their ship's deck.

The *Agatha Fishty II* was a splendid wooden frigate with large canvas sails, named after Ears' favourite mystery writer. A flag with a skull and crossed magnifying glasses flew from the mainmast to show other seafarers that they were

pirate detectives – the only ones, in fact, on the Seventy Seas.

The ship's navigator, an apprentice professor giraffe named Darwin, looked up from studying a nautical chart. "Morning, Captain! Have you opened that message yet? We've all been wondering who sent it. Do we finally have another case?"



"I really hope someone is hiring us to solve a mystery!" Huggable Pete, the helmsperson, called. The corks on the ends of his razor-sharp porcupine quills waggled as he hurried over from the ship's wheel.

"Wouldn't that be thrilling!" Priscilla, the ship's lookout, flapped her pigeon wings as she swooped down from the crow's nest. "Maybe a crime's been committed? A theft! Or a kidnapping!"

As the crew gathered around, Buck glanced nervously at the calendar pinned to the mainmast. Today was the twenty-ninth of Fogtober, which meant it had been a whopping eighty-one days since their first and *only* case. He tensed as he pictured the one gold doubloon and three silver sniggarts remaining

in their treasure chest. If they didn't earn more gold soon, they'd have to sell their ship, abandon their dreams of being pirate detectives and find boring jobs that didn't involve looking for clues and solving mysteries (or having on-deck bowling tournaments, chocolate-cake wrestling parties and sea-shanty karaoke evenings)…

"Paws crossed," Ears whispered, passing Buck the message in a bottle.

Taking a deep breath, Buck slid the scroll of paper out and unrolled it. His stomach sank like an anchor as he recognized the spidery handwriting.

It was from his parents.

CHARLIE BLACK-BUCKLE!

Is it true you're running out of gold? A pesky seagull named Billiam Beakerly is telling everyone you're using UNDERPANTS as sails in order to save money!

Have we taught you nothing? When pirates need gold, THEY STEAL IT! You must pillage and plunder! Strike fear into the hearts of other seafarers and show no mercy.

If your treasure chest isn't overflowing with gold by midnight on Shalloween, we shall COME ABOARD AND SHOW YOU HOW IT'S DONE! As for Billiam Beakerly, rest assured we will chop him up into SEAGULL SUSHI when we catch him!

Lots of love,
Mum and Dad xxx

"Midnight on Shalloween!" Priscilla squawked, after Buck had passed the letter round to the rest of the crew to read. She turned to the calendar, where Shalloween – the celebration of all things spooky – was marked in big black letters. "That's in **THREE DAYS**!"

"Oh no, this is a disaster!" Buck exclaimed. "If my parents come aboard the *Agatha Fishty II*, they'll take over and try to rob every ship we see, and then we'll never get hired as detectives again!"

"That barnacle-brained seagull must have seen us hanging out our laundry and assumed we were using our underpants as sails," Ears muttered.

"What are we going to do, Captain?" Darwin asked worriedly. "I'm an apprentice professor of botany, not a thief. I can't pillage and plunder!"

"Me neither," Buck agreed. He knew his parents only wanted the best for him, but stealing felt *wrong*. It was one of the many reasons he'd never succeeded as a traditional

pirate (another being that he liked using soap and wearing clean clothes). “We still have three days. Perhaps if we’re really lucky, we can find and solve a case in that time…”

“But nothing we’ve tried so far to find new clients has worked!” Huggable Pete moaned. “What else can we do?”

“CRISPY CACTUS!”

Priscilla shouted, quickly covering her beak with her wing as if she had just burped. She had a rare condition called alphabet-outbursting, which caused her to shout random words beginning with a particular letter. At the moment, that letter was C. “What I mean to say is, there are still plenty of seas we haven’t yet explored. Why don’t we sail somewhere new and use our cannon to fire more leaflets at passing ships to advertise our detective services?”

"Yes, and this time, we can use waterproof leaflets," Huggable Pete suggested with a sheepish grin, "so they won't turn into papier mâché again."

Buck smiled, grateful to have such a loyal crew, even if they did cause the occasional catastrophe. The thought of not sailing with them any more made his heart ache, and he felt a sudden wave of determination. Finding and solving a case in three days was going to be nearly impossible, but they had to try.

"JELLY!" Priscilla shrieked, pointing at the sea. "JELLY INCOMING!"

His stomach jolting, Buck quickly extended his telescope and peered through the eyepiece. A little way off the ship's bow, the waves turned solid and wobbly. "It's the Jelly Sea!" he realized with a gasp. The Jelly Sea was famously

home to Mr Jiggles' Bouncing Circus and, sure enough, in the distance, Buck spied the circus's unmistakable chequered black and white tents sat quivering atop the waves. Buck had visited the circus with his parents when he was younger and he remembered them pointing out the abandoned ships on the edge of the jelly, where sailors had failed to notice the wobbly waves in time.

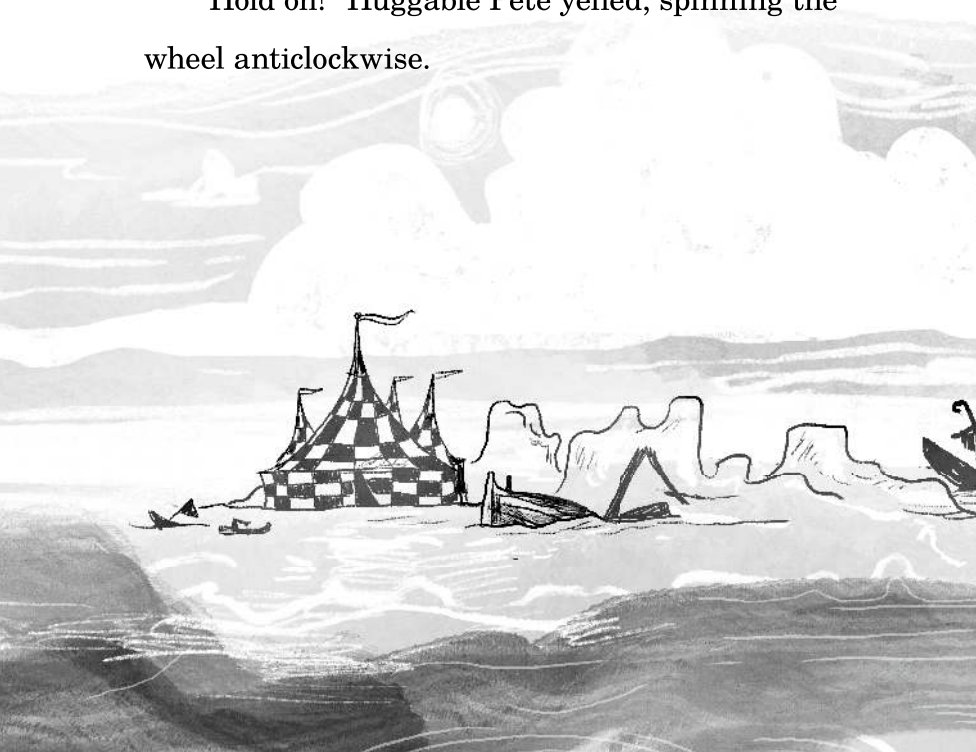
"How fascinating," Darwin remarked, pushing up his spectacles. "Did you know the Jelly Sea solidifies because of a rare coral, *Jellificus wibbilis*, that grows on the seabed?"

“More importantly, if we sail into it, we’ll get stuck!” Buck cried, his heart racing as he shoved his telescope into his jacket pocket. “Lower the mainsail! We need to turn the ship around!”

“Aye, Captain!” everyone called, springing into action.

Priscilla flapped her wings and took off towards the crow’s nest while Huggable Pete raced back to the helm. Ears and Darwin grabbed hold of the halyards and quickly lowered the sail.

“Hold on!” Huggable Pete yelled, spinning the wheel anticlockwise.



Everybody clung on tightly as the ship leaned to port. Seawater splashed over the sides of the hull, and salty spray coated Buck's face, stinging his eyes. His heart pounded as the Jelly Sea loomed closer. "Hurry!" he urged.

"Come on, come on!" Ears pleaded.

"CHAOS CRUMPETS!" Priscilla shouted.

Just as the ship's bow was about to slice straight into the Jelly Sea, the *Agatha Fishty II* turned. There was a loud *squelch* as the hull scraped against the jellified waves, throwing shavings of jelly into the air, which came crashing down on the deck.

SPLAT! SPLAT! SPLAT!

"All clear!" Priscilla called as they sailed away.

Ears' shoulders sagged as she shook jelly off her whiskers. "Phew! That was a close one."

Just as Buck was about to breathe a sigh of relief, something went *bang* against the hull. He jumped. "What was that?"

Up in the crow's nest, Priscilla flapped her wings in alarm. **"IT'S AN ALLIGATOR!"** she shouted. **"AND HE'S WEARING A SUIT!"**

CHAPTER TWO

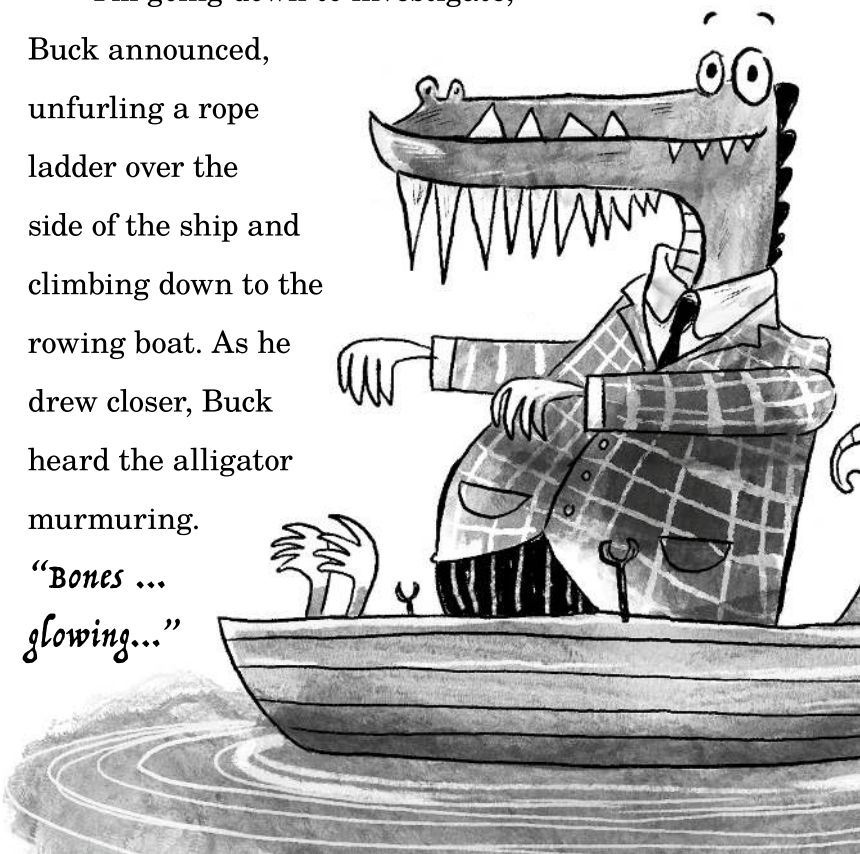
Buck peered over the side of the ship and recoiled when he saw an enormous olive-brown alligator sitting in a rowing boat. His armoured scales were partly covered by a tailored purple suit with a satin pocket square.

"Ahoy there!" Buck called out a little nervously. "Do you need any help?"

The alligator said nothing. He didn't even move. Curious, Buck gazed through his telescope and saw that the alligator was frozen stiff, with his eyes wide open and his front two webbed feet positioned as if he were holding invisible oars.

Something was off.

"I'm going down to investigate," Buck announced, unfurling a rope ladder over the side of the ship and climbing down to the rowing boat. As he drew closer, Buck heard the alligator murmuring. *"Bones ... glowing..."*



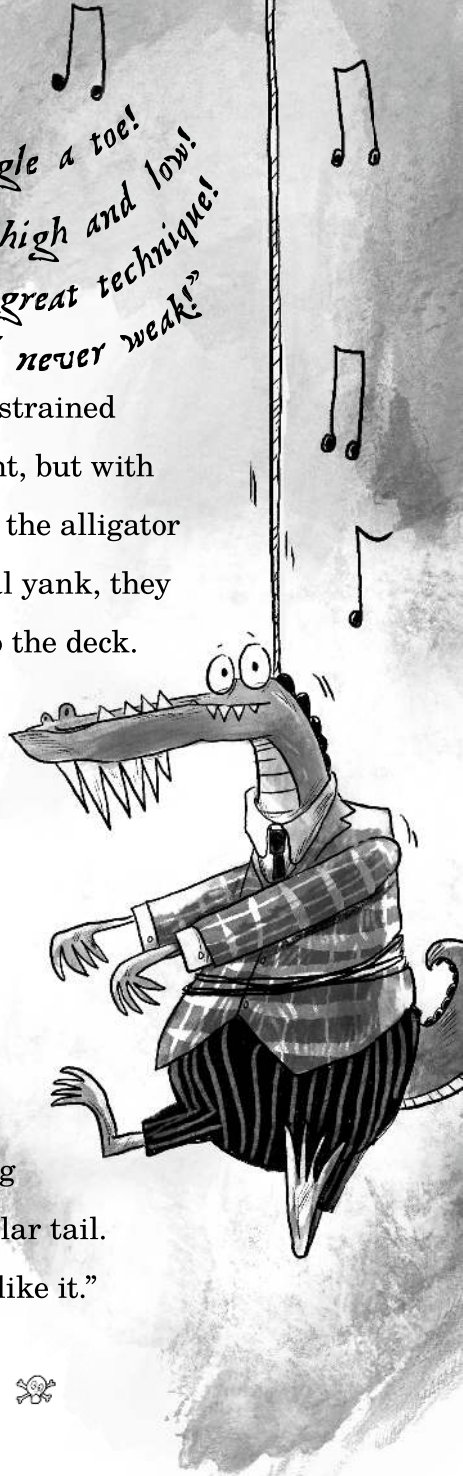
Buck couldn't make any sense of what the alligator was saying, but it was clear by his shaky voice that he was in distress.

"It's all right, Mr Gator. I'm here to help you," Buck said, patting the alligator gently on the shoulder. He flinched when he felt how chilly he was. He knew reptiles were cold-blooded, but the alligator's scales were like ice chips! He noticed frost glistening on the alligator's snout and tiny icicles dangling from his jaws. He must have been stuck at sea for hours! "Prepare to hoist him on board!" Buck ordered.

The crew threw down the end of a rope, and Buck had to press his cheek against the alligator's icy chest in order to tie it around his chunky midsection. Then he called back up,

"HEAVE-HO!"

Immediately, the crew began to sing the traditional pirate hoisting shanty:



"Heave-ho! Wiggle a toe!
Flex those muscles high and low!
Bend your knees – great technique!
We are strong and never weak!"

The rope creaked and strained under the alligator's weight, but with each tug, the crew hoisted the alligator higher. At last, with a final yank, they managed to haul him onto the deck.

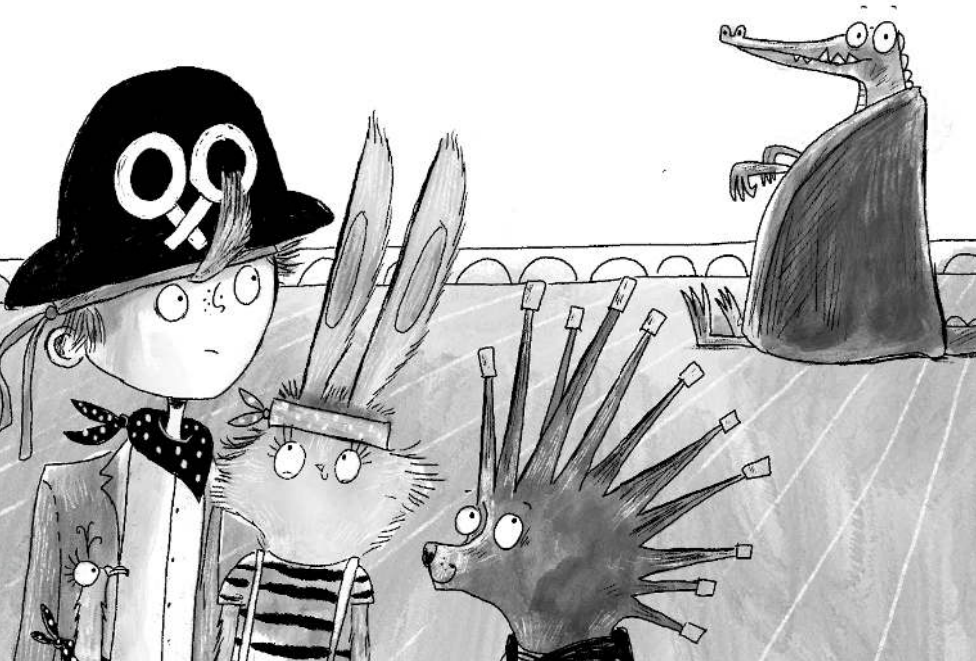
Ears waved a paw in front of the alligator's dark eyes. "Mr Gator? Mr Gator, can you hear me?"

The alligator stared into the distance, his expression blank.

"He's still as a statue," Darwin observed, prodding the alligator's long, muscular tail. "I've never seen anything like it."

"I have!" Priscilla squawked. "My Aunt Flossy calls it The Fright. She works in a theatre, and actors sometimes get The Fright before going onstage. It's when you're so petrified that your muscles freeze, your vision blurs and your mind goes blank."

"That's horrible," Buck said, feeling a pang of sympathy for the poor alligator. He quickly fetched a blanket from his cabin and laid it over the alligator, hoping it would warm him up. "But there are no theatres at sea; I wonder what frightened him."



"And what is he doing out here on his own?" Ears asked, scanning the horizon. "I can't see another ship for miles."

"Look, he's holding something." Darwin gently prised open the alligator's claws and a metal object dropped onto the deck.

Buck picked it up and saw that it was an old compass. It was broken: the needle, which should have been pointing north, was spinning constantly – so fast that it made Buck feel dizzy just looking at it. He turned the compass over and went rigid. Painted on the reverse was a symbol he recognized: a dancing skeleton.

"Surfing seahorses!" Huggable Pete exclaimed, staggering back in horror. "That's the design on the flag of the *Flying Phantom*!"

"What's that?" Darwin asked worriedly.

Goosebumps prickled on Buck's arms as he remembered his parents telling him the legend of the *Flying Phantom* when he was little. "Once upon a stormy night, the crew of the *Flying Phantom*, captained by the cruel pirate Grizzlebones, tried to rob a sea witch," he told Darwin. "In revenge, the sea witch cursed them to sail the Seventy Seas for ever as living skeletons and turned the *Flying Phantom* into a ghost ship! It's said that if you ever hear a mysterious rattle at sea, it's the bony crew of the *Flying Phantom* preparing to attack…"

Priscilla shuddered. "You don't think the compass belongs to one of the crew of the *Flying Phantom,* do you?"

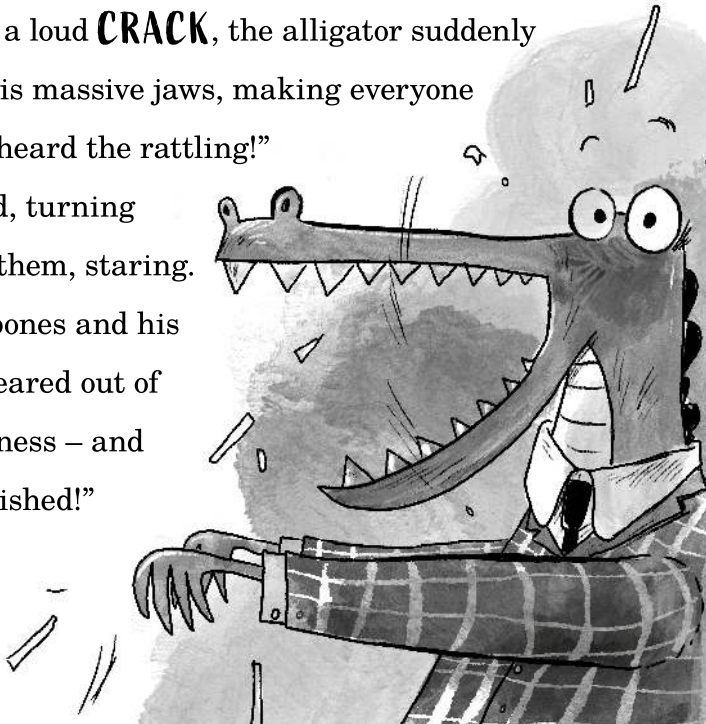
"Or even to Grizzlebones himself?" Huggable Pete added.

"The *Flying Phantom* doesn't exist," Ears said sensibly. "It's just a legend."

Darwin glanced at the calendar. “Yes, and it’s Shalloween the day after tomorrow. Perhaps the compass is part of a spooky Shalloween practical joke?”

Buck didn’t know what to believe. Sailing the Seventy Seas, he’d encountered mermaids and sea monsters. If they were real, then living skeletons and ghost ships could be too. Now that he thought about it, he remembered his parents mentioning ghost ship sightings in a letter a couple of months ago…

With a loud **CRACK**, the alligator suddenly opened his massive jaws, making everyone jump. “I heard the rattling!” he wailed, turning towards them, staring. “Grizzlebones and his ship appeared out of the darkness – and then vanished!”



"Do you mean you saw the *Flying Phantom*?" Buck asked, nearly dropping the compass. "Where? When?"

But the alligator shut his jaws, turned away and fell silent again. Priscilla nudged him gently with her beak, but whatever urge had made him cry out seemed to have passed.

The crew exchanged nervous looks.

"Can it be true?" Huggable Pete asked shakily. "Did Mr Gator really see the *Flying Phantom*? Is that what gave him The Fright?"

Ears shook her head. "I don't believe it. It must have been a hallucination or a trick of the shadows."

A chill ran down Buck's spine as he gazed out to sea, searching the empty horizon. "All we know for certain is that Mr Gator needs our help," he said firmly, stuffing the broken compass into his pocket for safekeeping. "Priscilla, do you know a cure for The Fright?"

The pigeon hesitated. “No, but my Aunt Flossy might. She’s head of costume at the Treasure Trove Theatre in Crabula City. Do you want me to send her a message?”

“Or we could sail there,” Darwin proposed, studying his nautical chart. “With favourable winds, it would only take a couple of hours, whereas pirate post will take days.”

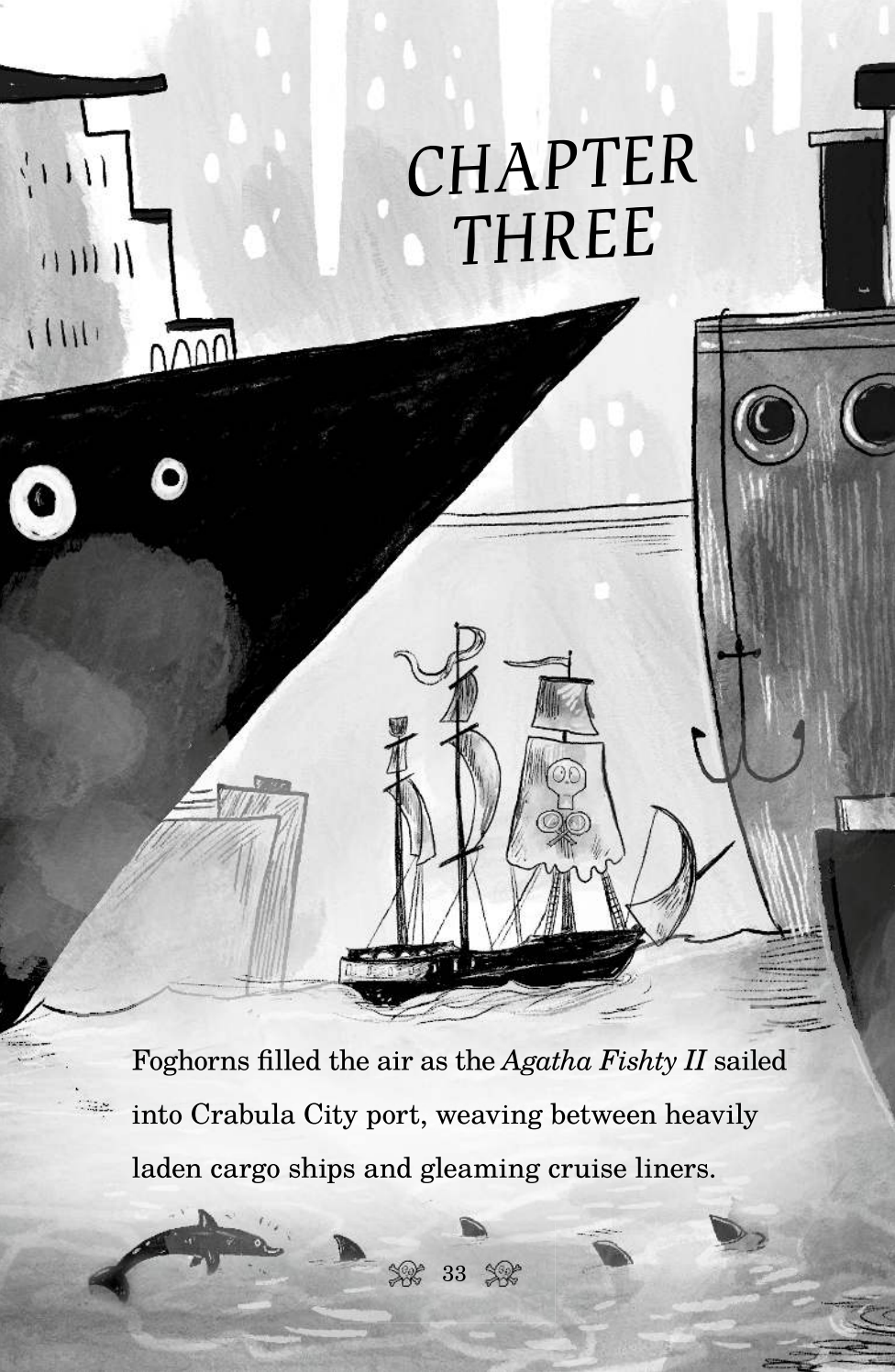
“Captain, we only have three days to make some money before your parents come aboard,” Ears whispered. “We can’t afford to waste time.”

Buck pondered the options. Ears was right: they urgently needed a paid case to solve. But they were also the only ones who could help Mr Gator. He looked at Mr Gator with concern. “*This* is a mystery, and there’s no better detectives on the Seventy Seas than us. We have to try, Ears. Plus, you never know, maybe someone will hire us in Crabula City.”

Ears sighed but nodded in agreement.

Buck turned to their crew. “Set a course for Crabula City!” he ordered.

“And load the cannon with leaflets,” Ears added. “We’ll fire them on the way!”



CHAPTER THREE

Foghorns filled the air as the *Agatha Fishty II* sailed into Crabula City port, weaving between heavily laden cargo ships and gleaming cruise liners.

"Ahoy there!" called a walrus from the deck of a boat painted with the words CRABULA CITY PORT AUTHORITY. He eyed their flag suspiciously. "That looks a lot like a pirate flag to me! Who are you? We've had enough thieves in these waters!"

"We're not thieves; we're *detectives*!" Buck explained, waving his magnifying glass as evidence. "We're here to solve mysteries, not rob anyone!"

"Solve mysteries…" The walrus's eyes lit up excitedly. "Like the detectives in Agatha Fishty's books? I love those!"

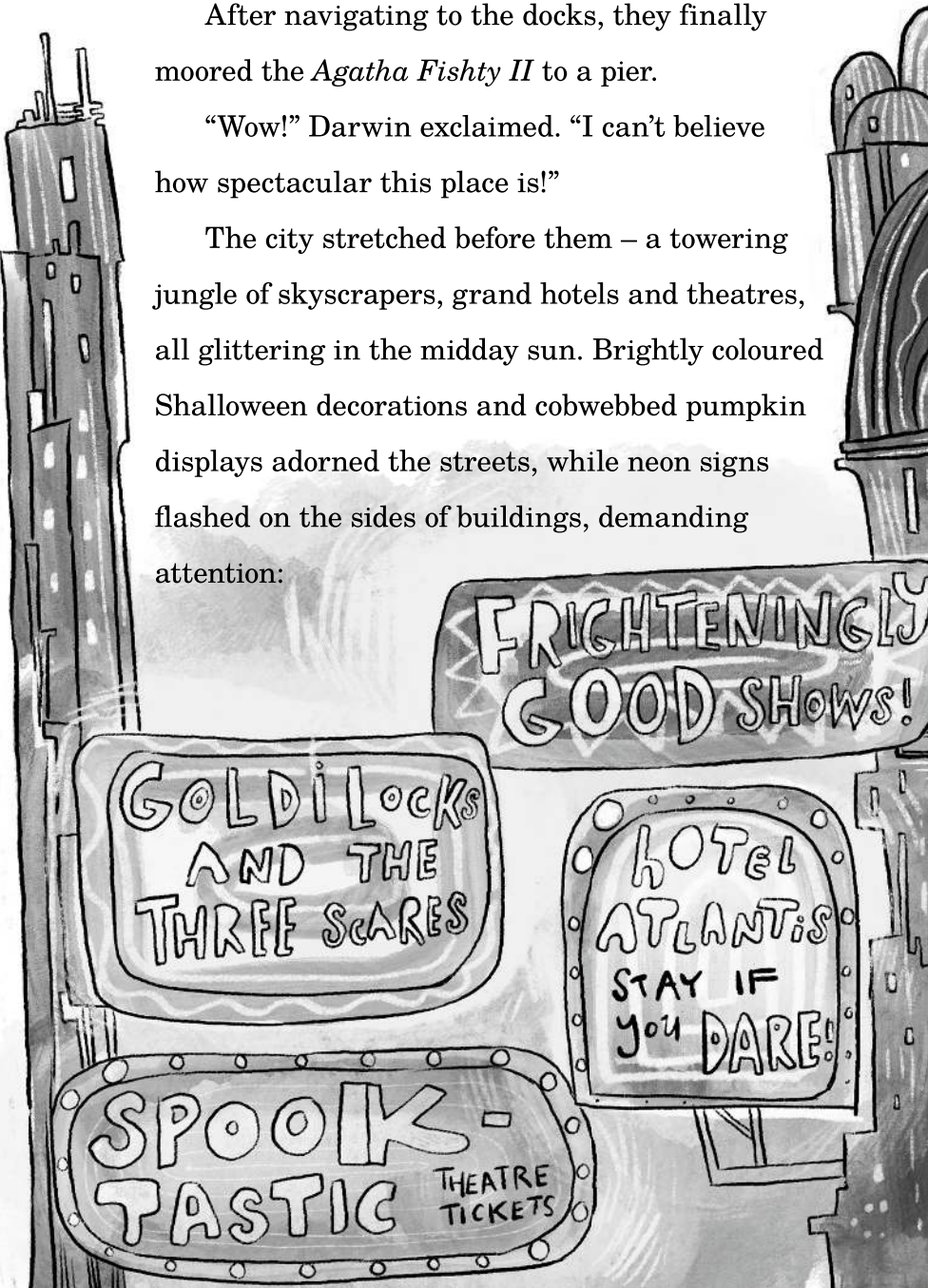
Ears bounced up and down. "Yes, just like them!"

"Very well." The walrus nodded in understanding. "Feel free to go about your business."

After navigating to the docks, they finally moored the *Agatha Fishty II* to a pier.

"Wow!" Darwin exclaimed. "I can't believe how spectacular this place is!"

The city stretched before them – a towering jungle of skyscrapers, grand hotels and theatres, all glittering in the midday sun. Brightly coloured Shalloween decorations and cobwebbed pumpkin displays adorned the streets, while neon signs flashed on the sides of buildings, demanding attention:



The rumble of footsteps, voices and music grew and billowed into the *Agatha Fishty II*'s sails, causing the whole ship to vibrate. Huggable Pete gave an excited shake of his quills, dislodging a few corks in the process. "I've always wanted to visit Crabula City. Rumour has it the pavements are lined with gold!"

"Not any more," Priscilla said. "I heard from a seagull that a pirate named Fish Hook Lil only last week stripped the streets in the middle of the night and used the gold to build a toilet on the *Sweaty Seahawk*."

Buck didn't want to think about pirates stealing gold because it reminded him of his parents' threatening letter. He tried to dismiss a sinking feeling of worry as he emptied their treasure chest and handed Huggable Pete their last gold doubloon and two silver sniggarts.

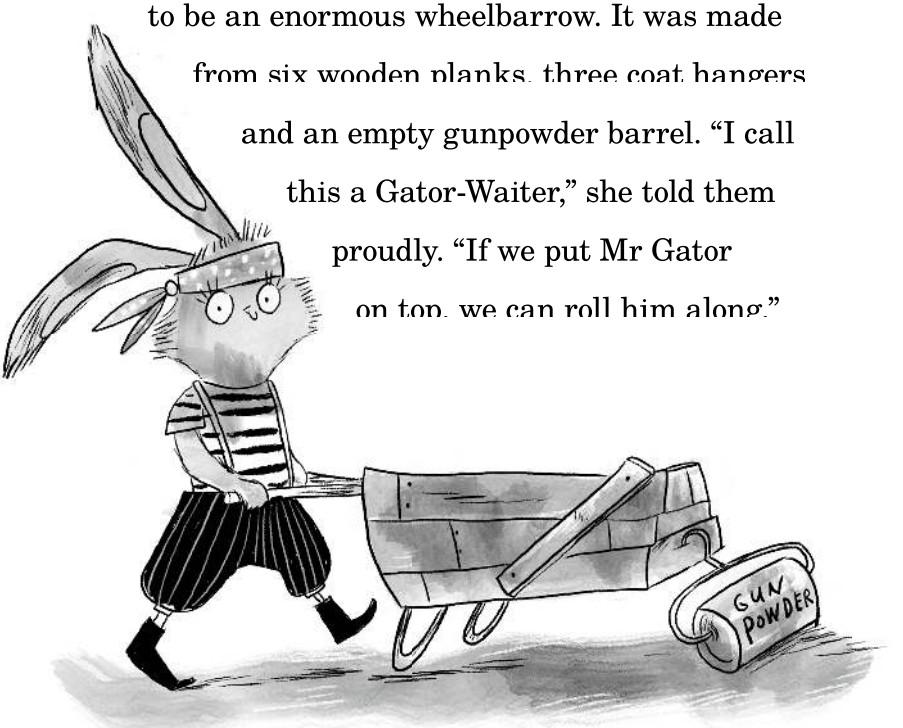
"You and Darwin use this to restock our supplies. The rest of us will take Mr Gator to see Priscilla's Aunt Flossy."

Ears considered Mr Gator's fine suit. "You never know, Mr Gator might pay us some gold if we cure him of The Fright."

"That would be very generous of him," Buck agreed with a flicker of hope, "but I doubt it would be enough to make our treasure chest overflow. I still want everyone to be on the lookout for mysteries people might need solving."

Huggable Pete stuffed the doubloon into the pocket of his sailor's uniform. "Aye, Captain."

As he and Darwin disembarked, Priscilla frowned at Mr Gator, still propped up against the mainmast. "How are we going to carry him through the streets? He's so heavy!"

Ears scanned the deck, her whiskers twitching in the way they did whenever she was formulating a plan. Ears had always been good at problem-solving. Once, when she was just a bunny, she'd invented a device for scrubbing the deck using a fork, a stolen toupée and a slice of Cheddar cheese. "Wait here," she ordered, before disappearing below deck.

After a few minutes and lots of banging, she emerged from a hatch, pushing what appeared to be an enormous wheelbarrow. It was made from six wooden planks, three coat hangers and an empty gunpowder barrel. "I call this a Gator-Waiter," she told them proudly. "If we put Mr Gator on top, we can roll him along."