

THE GHOST OF HOWLERS BEACH

THE BUTTER O'BRYAN
MYSTERIES



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CHAPTER 1

Sunlight danced across the water the day the dog dug up the skull. But even a golden beach couldn't cheer Butter up, as he sat on top of the sand dunes below the Very Small Castle and stared at the curling waves, endlessly washing in and out.

If only something would happen. Something INTERESTING. Something so big it would fix the boredom of holidays.

And fill the emptiness since Mum's death, said a whisper in his mind.

But all he could see were marshmallow clouds, the crinkling froth on the sand, three kids playing cricket at the water's edge, and a dog

digging enthusiastically in the dirt a few yards away from him.

It wasn't much of a dog. It was dirty, thin and scruffy, with a crooked tail and only three legs. But it was still burrowing eagerly, using its two front legs to dig as it lay with its remaining hind leg curled under it.

The huge pile of earth and grass had tumbled down there from the headland after a storm just two months ago. A landslide was rare excitement at Howlers Beach.

Butter's attention returned to the cricket match. The kids were skinny and barefoot. Two were about Butter's age: a boy in ragged shorts and tanned skin, and a barefoot girl in a long, loose dress. The smaller girl was so young that the bowler had to come close to toss her the ball.

The stumps were just driftwood, shoved in the sand. The bat was a fence paling. The players only had one ball, so every time it sailed into the water someone had to wade in to fetch it. The tide was

coming in too. Soon the waves would wash right up to the stumps.

But they were having fun, Butter thought.

School holidays were long when your best mates had gone back to their families' properties. Taggert Minor had even taken another two months off to visit his uncle in Scotland in a REAL castle, not a Very Small one. Taggert's castle was probably haunted too, maybe by a headless knight. Or Taggert's ship might be hit by an iceberg. He'd have to cling to the iceberg till he was saved ...

Some people had all the luck.

Something bobbed round the rocks at the other end of the beach. A boat! Butter shaded his eyes against the morning glare to get a better look as it drew closer. Maybe they'd be gangsters, smuggling stolen jewels to a mysterious cave.

Butter squinted into the sunlight. Two men held pistols, just like in the talking picture show *Guns of Chicago* he'd seen with the Aunts the previous week!

They really HAD to be gangsters — why else would a boat come so close to Howlers Beach? Other ships sailed further out, like passenger liners or the big barges that had carried stone from the Moruya quarries for the pylons of the giant bridge that now almost stretched from one side of Sydney Harbour to the other.

No one came to Howlers Beach, and not just because of the moans from the cliff that made people say it was haunted, but that Dad said was just the wind. Howlers Beach was small: a sandy curve between the big headland on one side and rocks on the other. There was nothing nearby for miles, except the susso camp that had gradually grown in the last few years on the other side of the headland and his family's Very Small Castle — his family's big stone home — that had been built close enough to the beach so Grandpa O'Bryan, the Jam King of Australia, could watch the sea through his telescope when he decided the Russians might invade Australia back in 1903. The Very Small Castle even had battlements

where you could pour boiling oil down on invaders, as well as four small towers, because Grandpa had decided that a Jam King with eighteen jam factories around the new nation needed a proper castle too. That had been nearly thirty years back and there'd been no invasion, and no boiling oil either, so instead Grandpa hung big banners down the battlements, with *Wallaby Jam: bounce your way to goodness* written on a picture of a grinning wallaby eating a slice of bread and plum jam.

Luckily the Very Small Castle was at the end of the road, so hardly anyone had seen the banners, which were put away after Grandpa died. Nowadays the battlements just made the roof a good place to hang the washing, so the male servants couldn't see the Aunts' underpants as they dried.

The boat came nearer. Maybe the cricket players were gangsters too. Very young gangsters ...

Suddenly the gangsters jerked their pistols up. All at once the pistols became bottles with fishing lines attached to them. Even the boat looked

homemade now it was closer, its planks not quite matching. As Butter watched, one of the men hauled in a glinting fish.

The boat was probably from the susso camp. It wasn't an easy life over there, but at least at the camp everyone had neighbours. The fishermen had each other, and so did the kids playing cricket below.

Suddenly Butter was so deeply lonely he felt like crying. But it was a poor show to cry, especially if you were a boy. And he still had Dad, even if Dad rarely talked to him these days. He had the Aunts too. And it was over a year since Mum had died. He should have been over it. 'Take it on the chin, lad. You'll get over it,' the Headmaster had said.

'Another sixer,' yelled the girl below, as the boy hit the cricket ball soaring across the sand and into the green curl of waves.

The boy grinned. He had tousled brown hair like muddy tussocks. His arms and legs were thin, but their muscles gleamed with sweat.

He plunged into the water, ducking under the froth to grab the ball before the undertow sucked it out to sea. The beach was small, but the rips could be bad.

The boy scrambled up, all wet tanned skin and dripping shorts, still grinning.

'Aim the ball toward the sandhills next time, drongo,' yelled the girl, as he waded out of the surf. 'We'll lose it if you keep whacking it at the waves.'

The boy shifted his grin to her. 'Then bowl properly!'

'I can bowl as well as you!'

The boy snorted. 'Bowling underarm ain't proper bowling.'

'It is if it bowls you out!' The girl's grin was as wide as the boy's. Her dark plaits bobbed as the boy tossed her the ball. She caught the ball expertly, then backed up to bowl again; the boy took his place at the stumps.

Butter stood up impulsively. 'Can I have a go?' he called. 'At least I can bowl overarm.'

Actually he was a pretty good bowler. He reckoned he could bowl that boy out with just one left-hand spin bowl. He began to slip and slide down the dune toward them. They might just be susso kids but a game of cricket would at least shake away the memory of the last picnic there with Mum before the polio. Aunt Elephant had hauled over a giant driftwood log for the campfire and Dad had grilled chops ...

The kids turned and stared at him, even the smallest girl, with her big eyes and arms and legs almost as thin as a seagull's. They mustn't have noticed him sitting up above.

The boy scowled as Butter reached the bottom of the sand dune. 'Get lost,' he said flatly.

'Why?' demanded Butter.

'This is our beach.'

'But you can't own a beach!'

'Yes, you can,' said the boy confidently. 'Captain Cook stood on a beach near here and claimed it for Britain. Governor Phillip stood on a beach and claimed it too. The people in the susso

camp,' the boy nodded to where the camp sat on the other side of the headland, 'claimed the land there. So, we can claim this beach.'

If anyone owns Howlers Beach it's Dad, thought Butter. Or maybe the ghosts who were supposed to haunt it. Dad had inherited all the land around there from Grandpa, including the land the susso families had built their shacks on. But still, no one could own a beach. 'You live in the susso camp? But that's not on a beach. It's next to it!'

The boy shrugged. 'Same thing. The squatters claimed their farms just by saying the land was theirs, and got rich.'

'But that was a hundred years ago!' insisted Butter.

'You don't want to play on this beach,' said the bigger girl. 'The ghosts will get you!'

'The moaning sounds are just the wind. Anyhow, why are you here if it's haunted?'

'Maybe we're ghosts too,' said the girl softly. 'Maybe we'll vanish as soon as you turn away.'

'But that's nonsense,' said Butter.

The three kids just stared at him.

No point arguing, thought Butter, even if Aunt Peculiar called him the Arguing King of Australia. Aunt Peculiar said that every castle needed a king, even a Very Small Castle. But it had been Mum who'd called him 'Butter' when he was three years old because she said he began every sentence with 'but'.

But no law said a mob of kids had to play cricket with him. Anyway, it was nearly lunchtime. Auntie Cake said it wasn't fair on the servants to be late for meals.

'I hope you enjoy your game,' said Butter stiffly. Aunt Elephant said you should be polite to everyone, which meant even susso camp kids like these. He just felt — empty again. A hollowness that couldn't be filled since Mum had vanished from their lives, since Dad retreated into politeness. An emptiness that at least DOING something might make him forget for a little while.

He started to climb back up the sandhill, just as the small grey dog triumphantly pulled

something big and dirty out of the hole it had dug in the landslide.

The dog balanced carefully on its three legs for a few seconds, then limped over to Butter. It dropped the object at Butter's feet, grinning up to him as if to say, 'Look what I found! Aren't I a good dog?'

The skull seemed to grin too, its bare teeth almost as white as the sand.

Butter felt the breath sucked out of his body. He glanced back at the beach. Kids like that little girl shouldn't see something like this.

But the beach was empty. The cricket players had gone. Even their footprints had been wiped away by the waves.