

# CAMELEER

XAVIER PAUL

# Chapter 1

To catch a tadpole, patience was required, calmness was critical and a still hand essential. Charly knew all of these requirements. She would lay on this sandstone slab, not moving a muscle, waiting till a taddie, as she called them, slowly swam into the cusp of her half-closed hand. Then with no hesitation, snap, the hand was closed, and on most occasions, a tadpole was inside.

The sandstone slab sat on the water's edge of the middle of three linked waterholes, or billabongs as the local people called them. In the winter rainy season, they were simply a widened part of the river, in summer, as the river flow slowly dropped, they were the deeper sections of river that became one of the many still waters to quench the thirst of the animals, both native and domestic. But as this year, the second year of a drought, when the rain in winter had not come, when the river stopped, they were the only water for miles around.

But even in a drought, the water in the billabongs stayed, providing the life for the large trees that stood nearly down to the water's edge, up over the old tops of the riverbank, back for a hundred feet or so to where the grasslands started. The trees provided two other wonders in this harsh land, where no rain became too much rain and a normal season was one that did not cause too much devastation. These trees became a home for the local animals and, the best for Charly, lots and

lots of shade that allowed the soft flow of air to cool the skin for an imaginary moment in the heat of scorching summers day.

The first billabong was back up the flood plain, providing a supply of drinking water for the cattle, the reason for the existence of Charly and her family on the edge of the dry sands to the west and north. The third billabong sat down between the sandstone low cliffs and buttresses where the river ran through a gap in the rocky spur that ran off a ridge of pinkish sandstone. These low cliffs held places sacred to the local people, caves and ledges marked over the last thousand or more years.

Charly stayed away from the lower billabong, it was a place for the men, where they gathered and did their business, while the middle waterhole was for the women, where they gave their thanks and spoke their beliefs to the younger ones. The middle billabong was also the one closest to her home, the one where she felt the happiest.

Charly lay still, enjoying the short time away from her mundane daily life on an outlying cattle station, well, more than outlying, it was the last before the start of the wild barren stones and sand of the deserts to the north and west. The faint smell of eucalyptus oil from the leaves over her head wafted past her nose as it was released in the hot sun.

Charly tensed as a tadpole swam close. This one had poorly formed legs, a special target, a prized gift she provided to the local lizards, birds or really anything else that breathed and ate tadpoles. She has this strange connection with anything that lived in the land, other than humans and tadpoles. The only thing she feared in the living world around her were the large brown snakes that also shared the edges of the billabong, she knew they were around, but while she like to feed their legged relatives, the king browns were off limits.

The tadpole was getting closer to her fingers, picking a line of travel that would place it in the grasp of her quick fingers. The soft waft of moving air caused a slight ripple on the middle of billabong, but close to the edge it was mirror calm, the shade of the big leaves providing perfect vision of what was under the surface of the water.

Suddenly, the water just in front of Charly's outstretched hand exploded, large droplets spraying in all directions. Water from the billabong landed on Charly's arms, on her head, running down her face. She reached up with her dry hand and wiped the water from her eyes with annoyance. There was no point in being still and silent now. She slowly let her breath out to calm the small fright she had experienced, knowing a quick reaction was just what the young person who'd thrown the rock wanted.

'Piss off, Harry, let me be in peace. You're nothing but a heap of cow shit when you do this to me.'

Charly pulled her legs towards her as she heard the soft rustle in the grass just past her feet up the bank a little, the sound of the big old king brown snake moving off from where he'd been sunning himself on the nice warm slab of sandstone.

'I tell Mum you are cussing again. You know she hates you doing that, saying them words,' shouted the teenage boy standing at the top edge of the embankment.

Charly looked up at him with barely hidden disgust; nice clean shirt and britches, a broad brimmed hat, which was a few sizes too big on his head and worst of all, leather boots laced tight up to wrap around his ankles. Compared to her untucked dirty plaid shirt, worn old canvas britches and very dusty bare feet, he just did not belong in her world.

'She's not my mum, I told you that a thousand times. Stop calling her my mum,' snapped Charly. 'And you are not my brother; just some dumb city kid belonging to the woman my father married, so piss off.'

Charly's stepbrother ignored her, all he really wanted was to be like his slightly older stepsister, be able to play in the edge of the lagoon, or billabong as she called it much to his mother's disgust. 'A black's name, dear, you must use proper English even living out here,' she would say.

Wanting to see what she was doing, he descended through the long dry grass that grew on the sloping bank to the stone slabs that Charly was standing on. Walking without care of what dangers were lurking in the grass, ignorant of its dangers.

Charly saw him start down from the corner of her eye as she was watching the slow movement in the grass of the big brown snake.

‘Stop, stop, stand still Harry, just don’t move!’ she shouted, an edge of terror in her voice. ‘You got the brains of a dumb poddy calf, you mutt, you are about to walk right on to a big brown snake.’

Harry stopped dead still. He recalled the first warning he’d been given just a year or so back when he’d arrived at the station with his mother: ‘There is only one thing that will kill you quicker than almost anything else out here and that is a big brown snake by the water.’

Harry slowly backed up the embankment as Charly picked up a long stick and gave the king brown a little encouragement to move a bit quicker with a couple of sharp taps on the sandstone at her feet. As the brown snake slowly disappeared up towards one of the big gum trees, one with a big hollow at the base a man could crawl into, Charly gave her hand a quick wash and slowly hopped from rock to rock up the slope to the top of the bank of the billabong avoiding most of the longer grass. There was no point in staying, the splash of the stone had scared all the animals in the water, and worse it had disturbed her calmness, her moment in her own world, her sanctuary from the life she had to live every day.

She reached her stepbrother, her annoyance written on her face in a grimace. ‘So what do ya want?’

‘Mum wants you to finish the chores in the house she told you to do this morning, she is not happy you took off down here again.’

Charly grunted a non-committal response, knowing that the few moments of precious inner clam were about to end. She stopped at the top of the bank, picking up her old felt hat, placing it on her head, the brim pulled down to shade over her eyes. She then sat in the shorter grass and pulled on her old worn leather boots, ignoring the young man standing next to her.

‘I could tell Mum I found you working out in the barn if you let me play down here with you. Please, I do not know why you keep ignoring me,’ Harry pleaded.

‘No!’ snapped Charly as she stood. ‘Just leave me alone down here, and don’t tell fibs for my sake, last thing I want is that on my head.’

Charly walked through the knee length grass back to the main house some 500 yards away, positioned on a slight rise that avoided any overflow of the river when it covered the floodplains that ran away to the west and east of the river. The positioning was well-chosen, having a small cluster of gum and mulga trees to provide some protection from the winds and burning sun. The elevated ground also provided sufficient room for the main farm buildings, two storage sheds, a stable and the large timber sided barn.

The house had substantially changed since the day that Harry had arrived with his mother about two years before. The builders only left a few months back, leaving the once humble earthen floor cottage now with polished timber floors, a corrugated metal roof, real glass windows and fancy furniture. The combined proceeds of three very good years of green grass and fat cattle, all spent to satisfy a new wife rather than kept to protect against the next season of drought, thought Charly.

And now, the second year where the rains where late, just enough for some grass growth near the river, but the flooding water to satisfy the plains had not arrived. As she trudged back towards the house, Charly’s thoughts did not improve, it had been three years since her mother disappeared, why, why, why, that moment had resulted in a life that turned from an almost endless happiness to a life in a black cave, with no light, no help and no love.

She looked across the plain; her father and older brothers Jessie and Bryan would be out there somewhere, herding stock closer to the homestead where there was better grass. In years past she would have helped, riding as hard as her brothers, one with her horse but at the arrival of her new mother it had all ended. Mustering was deemed an unacceptable activity for a girl, not to mention that she rode astride a horse as a man, something that appalled the new arrival. The morals of it, a woman spreading her legs over an animal. Her stepmother’s mind raced, thinking what her friends would think; it would be an

abomination against the Lord. But not now Charly was practically banned from riding, other than occasionally sneaking out before sunrise for an hour or so.

Harry had to run to keep up, he was a year or so younger, but a little short for his age, or was it that Charly was quite tall for hers? Regardless of which it was, a determined stride from Charly was hard to keep up with.

‘Hey, Charly, why don’t you worry about the snakes out here?’ he asked, slightly breathless. The grass they strode through was about the same length and density as down by the billabong.

‘Cause they aren’t here, they live by the rocks, the trees and water, and the adders are out in the sandy areas. Nuffing here but me and you, and right now I wish you weren’t here, get it,’ Charly responded. She instantly regretted her snappy tone but if she was going to be miserable today, well, why be alone.

Harry had become used to Charly’s irritated outbursts, he did not care, she was the only person who spoke to him as an equal, and he loved her as the sibling he had missed for all his years.

As they got closer to the house, Charly slowed to allow Harry to walk alongside her.

‘Look, Harry, your mother is going to rip me a new earhole and the old man will likely give me a right flogging, so best for you to not be there. Misty needs a bit of a brush and a handful of oats, how about you just bugger off over to the stable for a while?’

Harry was excited, he rarely was allowed near Charly’s favourite stock horse, one especially chosen and trained by an old stockman just for her, now gone with the rest of his people. At least she’d not been banned from riding her horse, but she felt it was coming. What did Harry’s mother say? ‘Not fitting for a young girl to ride like a man.’ So what? That’s what her real mum had done, even when she was carrying Charly’s baby sister.

The thought of them cut like a knife through her heart. Both of them, one day here, the next gone, her mum and baby sister had just disappeared. No-one could find them.

She killed the thoughts of them, it hurt far too much, and she would need a thick skin and dull mind for the next few hours. She looked at the back of the running Harry, smiling that he still was left with some innocence; this place will get rid of that nonsense soon enough.

She opened the back door as she kicked off her boots, the hinges squeaked, the last oiling failing soon after the next dust blow. It was time to face the music.

‘Charlotte, is that you?’ called a cold voice from the front parlour room. ‘Please come here this moment, I wish to speak with you before your father arrives home this evening.’

Charly let out a sigh. This place was now just a house, not a home like in the days before her mother had disappeared. Now, after the arrival of her stepmother, the old gum tree was more a home than this place, the old king brown more welcoming.

She closed the door with a thud and strode slowly up the passage to the front room, the domain of her stepmother. Charly was sure she was preparing to deliver the next tirade, a sermon of scripture to explain, rather justify, Charly’s place in this world as the live-in slave. A slave to remain silent and do the housework to far below her stepmother’s assumed status but be grateful for the privilege. She cautiously pushed the timber door to the parlour open and stood just inside the lavishly appointed room. Her stepmother’s place of power.

‘In the eyes of the generous God above, what in the world are you wearing, girl? Where is your dress?’ Grace Hendricks thundered with a sneer on her lips. ‘The good Reverend Griswold always considered that any woman, of any age, that wore man’s clothing was little more than a harlot; is that what you are, Charlotte, a good for nothing harlot?’

Charly said nothing, this was the usual opening into the next deluge of vindictiveness. She slowed her breathing. This part was always words, expressions to reinforce her understanding of where she now stood in the greater family gathered together in God’s name under this roof.



‘The holy scriptures clearly show that a person with your mind is little more than a drawer of water, a gatherer of wood, in servitude of those favoured by God –’ Grace took a breath to steady her godly anger, not wishing to bring celestial condemnation of her own head – however, this time I will show forgiveness and leniency for which you are simply not deserving. However, you must complete the tasks I listed this morning. Then, only then, will you be acceptable to eat a meal at the Lord’s table.’

Charly’s head dropped. The punitive actions had again increased, every time just a little more to break her spirit.

‘And to ensure you understand your roles, you are not to leave the house for the remaining week, except for your ablutions. We must teach you some qualities,’ mocked Grace. ‘And I have instructed your father that Harry is to care for your horse. It is time he learnt the things needed to manage this fine property.’

Charly’s head snapped up. Looking at the condescending smile her stepmother wore, she knew that she had struck home, found a way past the walls her stepdaughter had built the day that she arrived.

A look of horror crossed Charly’s face as the implications became evident. ‘Misty is my horse, it is my job to care for her. You can’t do this.’

‘Silence, girl; do not speak unless asked. Misty is your father’s horse, and so she is also mine. I make the rules, Charlotte. It is time you realised this, your days of careless freedom have ended,’ said Grace softly but with poison in her voice. ‘So, little girl, now get changed and start those chores or you will get nothing.’

Charly did not move, a moment of defiance.

Grace Hendricks used her final weapon. ‘Your mother is gone, Charlotte, no-one will protect you now.’

Charlotte stepped back like a burst of fire hit her face; she knew that she was nearly beaten. She turned and ran to her room at the back of the house, just a small room, but it was hers, secure and private. She picked up the dress from where she had thrown it earlier in the day, knowing that putting it on would almost be the final capitulation.

It was too much. To be humiliated was one thing but to be cut off from the creatures she loved, which were her life, without so much as a moment to say goodbye, Charly reacted as only she could. Flinging the dress against the wall, she rushed out of the room, slamming the door shut so it reverberated throughout the house, and ran across the yard into the stable.

Harry looked up from stroking Misty's nose, as the horse contentedly munched on a small bucket of oats. 'What are you doing here? Mum will kill you,' he warned. He'd sensed his mother's bitterness when she'd told him to find Charly. 'Get back into the house, Charly, I'll cover for you.'

'Leave me alone, Harry, I want to be with my horse,' murmured Charly. Misty lifted her head when she heard Charly's voice, turning her head to press against her shoulder. 'Please, Harry, I need peace and quiet. Time with Misty, please, Harry,' she pleaded, tears rolling down her cheeks. Charly turned her head and rubbed her forehead against Misty's neck.

Harry walked away, turning back to watch as his stepsister held her head against the forehead of her horse, slowly speaking her thoughts. Misty's ears were up and twitching, listening, almost looking like she knew what her human friend was saying. The connection between the two was obvious, Harry hoped that he would not be used by his mother to destroy what Charly felt for the lovely horse. As he opened the door to leave, he looked once more, seeing that Misty had laid down and Charly was snuggled into her side, eyes closed, at peace.

Misty stirred as she heard the stable door open, a soft shaft of light falling onto the dirt floor, showing a scattering of hay and the odd lump of manure. A hand pulled the door back, allowing enough space to walk through before softly closing it. The man, Charly's father, knew where his daughter would be, but the knowledge she was safe did not provide any solitude to his angry mind.

He slowly walked over to stand at the stall, seeing his daughter asleep next to her horse. Misty gave a welcoming snort, enough for

Charly's eyes to flick open, looking up at a glow of light, not seeing who was standing behind. Not that she was unsure of the person who held the lantern, it would be her father, she knew her peace was at an end.

'On ya feet, girl. You have caused enough commotion for one day, past time to get all this sorted so I can get to bed.'

Charly slowly got to her feet, one foot a little unstable from being slept on. Knowing what was likely to come she had no intentions to try and plead her case. She had been tried and found guilty, even before her father got off his horse this afternoon.

'Nothing to say?' he asked, not interested in a long flow of words and tears, knowing his daughter enough to know she would simply take what was given and make no sound. 'Righto, let's leave the horse alone, you and I need to discuss a few things. I've had a long day, and when I come home all I get is cold food, a long lecture of my failings, due to you, a deluge of words why I have failed God, again due to you, and why, if nothing changes, we all will perish due to his displeasure, again due to you.'

Charly walked down the stable towards the only room enclosed from the horses.

'Yep, we will go to the tack room, at least you have got that bit figured out,' her father growled in frustration.

Jedidiah Hendricks walked close behind his daughter, holding the lantern high enough to allow sufficient light for both of them to see the odd item that had been left on the floor. The lantern also cast enough light to show that the stables, as was every other farm building, was in a state of disorder. Charly reached up and pulled the solid timber door open, walking to the middle of the room before stopping, standing perfectly still, looking down at her feet.

Her father hung the lantern on a hook hanging from the roof beam, a hard look on his face; the face of the man he had become in the last few years, without love. He grabbed a chair from beside the work bench and sat it in front of his daughter. He unbuckled his belt and

quickly pulled it out, the hiss of leather against denim of his trousers filled the room.

As he sat down, he looked at Charly, the anger that was building from the moment he slowly dismounted his horse this evening, reaching its peak.

‘Get them off, you know what the drill is, get them off and bend over my leg, girl.’

As Charly undid the buttons on her britches and draws, letting them drop to the ground, her father released the first part of his fury in words.

‘I have had it with you. Get over the issues you have; Grace is your mother now and has every right to give you work and ask you to help her. Your insolence must end, I am over having my ears flogged by her tongue every time you resist her.’

He looked at Charly, running his eyes over her body, the lower bare part topped in tight curls that affected his thoughts. He grabbed the hair on top of her head and pulled her down till she was bent over his knee and all that was up was her bare buttocks, as she was bent over his knee. Charly braced her hands on the dirt floor and waited for the first crack of leather on her skin.

The first was followed by another then another as her father swung the leather belt folded in two. Her soft skin reddened, then split, a slow trickle of blood running down her legs. After a dozen or so strikes of the belt, Jedidiah Hendricks descended into a madness, the madness that Charly feared would happen tonight, a madness that caused her father to lose all sense of reason. The madness that left her sick in stomach, in mind and in her heart. The madness that she had told her mother about just a few weeks before she walked into the desert with Charly’s baby sister, never to be seen again.

Just because she could hardly walk did not mean she was excused for her chores. The demands from her stepmother started before dawn the following morning. It was now a bit over a four weeks since the episode in the tack room; she had survived the humiliation and pain

once again and found ways to protect herself. Charly had submitted, her spirit broken but for a small flicker of fire, a hate she had for two people that had never existed before. A hate due to differing reasons but sufficiently entwined to keep something smouldering in her mind to force herself to keep going.

Her split skin healed soon enough, an ample coating of the liniment she kept in her room for riding sores caused by the chaffing of the saddle dealt with that issue. The hurt to her soul had not improved, it was a darkness she had found a way to endure, placing it in a small box in her heart, leaving it for a later time. The morning after the assault on her body and mind by her father, Charly picked up the dress from where she had thrown it and pulled it on. She rolled her britches and shirts, tucking them into a back corner of the cupboard in her room. Placing her riding boots over them, she knew they might come in handy one day but not for a while.

Charly hardly spoke the next day, doing what she was told, and enduring an endless tirade of verbal hectoring whenever her stepmother decided to check on her activities, which was very frequently. She quickly equated her tormentor to the ugly rock spiders that sat and watched in the crevasses of the sandstone caves, watching from their web with cold hard eyes. The next shock was when Charly placed the setting for the evening meal, one for her father, one for her oldest brother, one for Bryan, one for Harry, one for the rock spider and one for herself, on the large timber table in the dining room.

‘No, girl, take yours to the scullery, you will eat there until I am satisfied you are fit to mix with people that follow the Good Lord’s instructions,’ ordered Grace, looking down her nose.

Later, when the men arrived and sat down at the table, Jessie looked around the table, wanting to tell his sister about the twin calves he had found today, but she was not in her usual place.

‘Hey, Dad, where’s Charly at, she not at the table—’

Before he could continue, his father placed his hand on his son’s arm to silence him. Grace took her Harry’s hand in hers and proceeded to give thanks for the meal before them, the usual staple of beef and

long-lasting vegetable such as potatoes, onions and carrots they grew in a fenced-off area.

‘Well? I’m not stupid, Dad, what’s happening with Charly?’ Jessie asked once his stepmother had finished, annoyed at the change in the table’s arrangements. His father again went to place his hand on Jessie’s arm to stop the discussion, but reconsidered at the last moment.

‘Look, Jessie, Grace runs the house, and well, Charly has not been respectful of her authority and till she accepts it, she does not eat at the table.’

Jessie dropped his head, muttering under his breath.

‘What did you say?’ demanded his father.

‘I need to be mucking out the ditch in the morning,’ answered Jessie, starting to stand. ‘I think I’ll eat on the verandah; there’s a smell of something unhealthy in here.’

Before Jedidiah could respond to the insult, Jessie, then his younger brother, picked up their plates and walked from the room. Jessie slowed as he past the scullery, giving his little sister a wink before exiting the back door onto the verandah.

Grace had not lifted her head through the entire episode between Jedidiah and his son, but while her head might have been down, her mind was working rapidly. Another crack had started in the original family group, a crack she could exploit.

From the scullery, Charly had a good view of her detested rock spider. She could see the evil, knowing smile creeping into the corners of Grace Hendrick’s mouth.

The food was slowly consumed in silence by those remaining at the table. Charly ate in the quiet peace of the scullery, enjoying not being hectorred, hoping that this would last for a little time more.

As Charly thought back to that evening, it was as if it was the first day of the new family arrangement. Grace had control; her father ran the station, but the house was not his. Jessie had lost all respect for Grace, and little more for his father; Bryan was confused, unsure what to believe; Harry was the pawn, used to hurt Charly; and as for

herself, she was reliving each day, same activities, same hectoring, same humiliation.

After the first week, Grace had instituted Bible readings for one hour for Charly, replacing the previous school time where she would learn to read and write. Grace stated that a greater education was required, and Charly could learn all she needed by reading the scriptures. Other subjects were ignored; arithmetic, history, and science had no meaning, only reading passages carefully chosen to enforce Graces authority and Charly's subservience.

When Charly did not fight back, the inferences and pressures were increased. In the third week following the incident in the barn, Grace determined that Misty was to be Harry's horse. Charly was not allowed to ride, so there was no point in wasting a very good and well-trained horse. At first Jedidiah protested, saying that the horse was given to Charly by her mother, but to no effect. The next day Harry was directed to get into the saddle and he joined Jessie and Bryan working the cattle in the homestead paddocks, moving them into the enclosures with a water bore, pumped by a squeaking windmill.

But Charly did not respond, did not fight; she made no comment. In fact, had her father been around during the day he would have noticed that Charly rarely spoke, only if asked directly or when forced to read passages used to humiliate. Had he stopped thinking about his cows for one moment, he also would have noticed that his daughter never spoke to him anymore, ever; it was as if he did not exist.

A little over six weeks later, the family had reached an uneasy balance. Jessie and Bryan had returned to eat at the table but refused to speak, Jedidiah had given up trying to have Charly return to the table, mainly when she sharply told her father she preferred to eat in solitude. On this night, Jedidiah pushed his plate towards the centre of the table, after eating the thin stew, not providing the pleasure that he usually had from a meal after a day in the saddle.

'Looks like the drought will hold. I cannot see any rains this year, the floodwaters will not cover the plains again till maybe next year, maybe longer,' he said to the room, but no-one in general. 'I think that

while the beasts are still in good condition and we have a little feed left in the land, we're going to sell as many as we can, all except the few good breeders.'

No-one replied. Jessie had been thinking this would happen for some time, it was the only smart option. While his father had issues running the household, without a doubt he was a good cattleman. Grace said nothing, unsure what it meant for her. Likely nothing, she had her son and that wench of a girl to help her around the house.

'We start final muster in the morning. Harry comes with us,' Jedidiah said, his tone clear that he expected no objection.

'My son? No, Jedidiah, he is far too young,' snarled Grace, missing the tone of her husband's voice. 'He can't go, he needs his mother, he is too young.'

Jedidiah looked at his wife. She had destroyed him in the few years they had been together as husband and wife. She was so different to the woman he knew for many years before, the years when a secret meeting made his heart race. He slowly pushed back his chair, standing, blotting his mouth with the fine linen napkin, before throwing it onto the middle of the table.

'Woman, the day you drove off the stockmen, you removed my support, so in return you must give one of yours. I expect he will be in the saddle before dawn tomorrow.' With that said, he knew he would never share the marital bed again. So he picked up his hat from the sideboard and walked from the room. The old bunk bed in the stables awaited, his new home.