

ELIZABETH HARAN

*Love beneath
an Endless Sky*



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ABOUT THE BOOK

A spellbinding story about love and family ties that takes the reader on a journey from the Australian outback to England and back again.

England, 1957: Kate is a young woman of exotic beauty and a rising film star. But when her career and marriage come crashing down together, she escapes to outback Australia for a surprise visit to her father, a man she hasn't seen since she was a small child. But he is shocked by her arrival, and Kate realizes that her existence has been a secret. No one seems to know that he has an adult daughter living in England. She is deeply hurt and wants to leave the dusty small town in the middle of nowhere. But then she meets the town's handsome teacher and her world turns upside down yet again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Haran was born in Bulawayo, Rhodes ia and migrated to Australia as a child. She lives with her family in Adelaide and has written fourteen novels set in Australia. Her heart-warming and carefully crafted books have been published in ten countries and are bestsellers in Germany.

ELIZABETH HARAN

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AN ENDLESS SKY

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DEDICATION

*This book is for my sister, Kate Mezera.
Having a sister is a sibling and best friend rolled into one, a
special gift from God that you have for your entire life.
My special gift was pure gold.*

CHAPTER ONE

New South Wales, 1936

Willie McGregor dropped the shovel in his hand, and it clanged to the ground, fracturing the suffocating silence. He was standing beside a mound of red earth that he'd just covered in gibber. Because of the searing heat, dingoes, unrelenting flies, and the distance from civilization, he'd been forced to bury Harry Winston McLean quickly. There had been no time to absorb the fact that less than two hours ago his best mate had died right in front of him.

Willie picked up Harry's dusty, battered hat from beside the grave. The hat was just a year old, but it looked a decade old after a tough year of prospecting in the outback. For a moment Willie rubbed the worn felt between his thumb and forefinger as memories flashed through his mind. Prospecting came with plenty of frustrations and let-downs, but Harry had always been able to make Willie see the silver lining in any situation. He'd been the perfect partner to accompany Willie into the middle of outback Australia with a pipe dream, a few mining tools, a map, and a couple of tents. They'd had to contend with dust-storms, almost no rain, billions of flies, freezing winter nights, and scorching summer days in the northwest of New South Wales, the area known as Corner Country.

Drawing a ragged breath, and holding Harry's hat to his face, Willie breathed in the familiar scent of tobacco, sweat, and dust, before gently placing the hat on top of his grave. "Yer can't go to heaven without yer hat, Harry," he mumbled. His throat suddenly constricted with emotion as he remembered Harry telling him a story about his brief

time as an altar boy at his local parish church. The priest had caught Harry drinking holy wine from the chalice after Mass, and had told him there was no place in heaven for a boy who would commit sacrilege. Harry, who was prone to speak without thinking, told the priest that he wouldn't be going to heaven, either, since he had done the same thing as Harry. His family was never seen at Ferryhill Parish Church again.

Harry hailed from a tough neighbourhood in Aberdeen, but soon after being made to feel unwelcome in the Ferryhill Parish, his family had moved to Redbridge, an outer suburb of London. There Harry had met Willie at school, and they had become great chums. As far as Willie was concerned, Harry had a heart of gold and deserved a place in heaven. Willie didn't know how he'd go on without him.

Sighing heavily, Willie now looked up through swimming tears. He gazed at the infinite landscape before him, shimmering under a February haze. Overhead, the sun blazed in an endless blue sky. The vastness was too much, too exposing, when all he wanted to do was find a dark corner and hide from the world.

Just a couple of hours ago he'd been having a lively discussion with Harry about what they'd do when they found the elusive nugget of gold that would change their lives. They'd knocked off digging and dry panning for the day, and had been collecting wood for their campfire, laughing and joking about returning to England, triumphant. This banter had taken place almost every day. It had been what had kept their dream alive and had kept them chasing the gold.

In a split second everything had changed when Willie heard Harry's alarmed cussing before he dropped the bundle of wood cradled in his arms. Willie had whirled around to see a snake slithering behind a rock. Harry had mumbled that he'd been bitten on the arm. For a few

seconds they'd looked at each other in terror. Willie wanted to reassure Harry that he'd be fine, but they'd learned to recognize a venomous snake from a harmless one, and the snake making his escape had looked like an Eastern Brown, one of the most deadly in the world.

"Are you sure it got you, mate?" Willie asked, as Harry slumped onto a log.

Harry showed him the two puncture marks on his forearm. "I can't die yet, Willie," he mumbled. Under the harsh duress he was perspiring like a leaky bucket. "Only the good die young, right?"

"That's right, mate," Willie said with a raspy voice. "You'll live to be a hundred."

The smile left Harry's face. "Would you believe it? For the first time in bloody months, I feel cold," he mumbled, his mouth suddenly as dry as the red dust they lived in.

Soon afterwards Harry was showing signs of paralysis and was turning blue. Willie yelled for help, but his voice was swallowed by the vacuum of empty space around them. He knew it was a useless exercise, but he was panicking. Nobody could help Harry. Only doctors in big towns kept supplies of antivenom. Snake-bite was the risk you had to take in outback Australia.

Within minutes, Willie had watched helplessly as Harry had suffered a fatal heart attack. And now Willie was standing by his grave under a shady acacia tree, feeling like he'd failed his mate. He stood there for what seemed like hours, unable to leave Harry, unable to believe he'd never hear Harry's voice again or share a joke. Willie had never felt more alone.

As dusk fell over the land, dotted with mulga scrub and sparse trees, Willie wandered back to his campsite nearby and stoked up the fire. He then sat down and sobbed.

Willie didn't notice when darkness descended. He'd been staring into his campfire for a very long time, numb with

grief.

“What’s up with ya, Willie?”

Startled, Willie looked up to see a familiar face appear in the circle of firelight. He had never been happier to have company.

Nellie stood on the far side of the campfire and glanced at the two open tents. “Harry gone walkabout with another mob, Willie?”

Willie unconsciously glanced towards Harry’s gravesite.

Nellie glanced in the same direction. In the moonlight she spotted a white-fella grave, a mound of soil under a tree with a hat sitting atop. She moved closer to Willie. “What happen to Harry?”

“Snake-bite,” Willie mumbled hoarsely.

Nellie shook her head and sat down beside Willie on a tree stump. “That bad luck, Willie. Ya shoulda killed that snake and cooked ‘im up,” she added.

Willie didn’t respond. His heart was too heavy. He wanted to ask if Nellie had been walkabout with her tribe, the Wadigali, because he hadn’t seen her in more than a month, but he couldn’t make small talk as if nothing significant had happened.

“Hey, Willie. I got a baby comin’,” Nellie suddenly announced.

It took a few moments for her statement to sink in.

Willie straightened up and regarded her closely. “What are you talking about?”

Nellie patted her tummy and then took Willie’s hand and placed it on a small, firm mound.

Willie stared at her. After living in the bush for months, his thinking about romantic company had altered drastically. He and Harry had welcomed visits from the Aboriginal people. They’d shared food and beer bought from Tibooburra, fifty miles away as the crow flies. He’d found Nellie an uncomplicated woman, content with his company. Small talk between them hadn’t been necessary.

On half a dozen occasions she'd joined him in his tent in the darkness, and he had taken what was offered. It had felt natural. There had been no discussion about feelings or a relationship. Often, between visits, he didn't see her for weeks when she went walkabout with the clan, without as much as a goodbye. She'd then reappear as if no time had passed. The arrangement had suited Willie because he was single minded about what he and Harry were doing in the outback. He'd certainly never given the consequences of spending a night with Nellie any thought.

"A baby?" he said in disbelief.

Nellie nodded and smiled, her eyes sparkling with happiness in the firelight. He'd never asked, but Willie guessed Nellie was somewhere in her twenties. He'd assumed she'd one day tell him she was marrying a Wadigali clan member and having babies with him.

"Is it. . .my baby, Nellie?"

Nellie slapped his leg good-naturedly and nodded again, still smiling. She then stood up and walked off into the darkness, again with no goodbye. That was so like Nellie. She'd come to tell him the news, nothing more, and then left him to digest the fact that he was going to be a father.

Willie looked into the flames of the fire again. *A baby!* His lips moved in the merest of a smile, but at the same time tears rolled down his cheeks again. He was overwhelmed with the deepest sadness because without his best mate, he had no one to share the news with. He couldn't even tell the locals when he next visited town that he was having a baby with an Aboriginal woman. That kind of thing went on all the time, but it was frowned upon and certainly never publicized. A perfect example was Nellie's father, a white opal miner from the White Cliffs area northeast of Broken Hill. He'd never claimed Nellie, so her mother had raised her with the clan.

Willie and Harry had been driving the fifty miles into Tibooburra once a month, selling small pieces of gold to buy staples and fuel. If they had enough money left over, they'd spend a few hours in the pub, socializing with the locals, other miners, and station workers.

When they first came to the area, they frequented The Family Hotel, a single-storey building constructed of sandstone in 1881. One night they had gotten into an almighty drunken brawl with other miners. Windows were broken, and chairs and tables smashed. They had been barred from the pub for six months by the publican, Barney Finnegan, an obstinate Irishman. Dirty on Barney for not accepting an apology and an offer of recompense for the damages in lieu of being barred, he and Harry had taken their business to the Tibooburra Hotel, the second hotel in town, vowing never to spend a penny in The Family Hotel again.

The Tibooburra Hotel was an elegant, two-storey building, also constructed of sandstone, on the corner of Briscoe and Wills Street. The publican, Mick Barlow, was a decent fellow. Since his wife had passed away, he'd been struggling to run the pub alone. Beryl had been the driving force behind the business. She'd done the bookwork and organized functions. Mick ran the bar, but he wasn't up to much else. He'd put the pub up for sale six months earlier, intent on moving back to Sydney. He had claimed to be fielding offers from all over, but so far nothing had come of it.

After Harry's death, Willie had thought about abandoning the dream of finding a decent nugget of gold several times. He had even packed up the campsite before driving into Tibooburra to report Harry's passing. There weren't any police stationed in Tibooburra, but the postmistress, Florence Kingsley, had sent a telegram to the police station in Broken Hill. She had told Willie he'd later have to file a

report about what happened and where exactly Harry was buried. Willie posted a letter he'd written to Harry's sister. It had taken him hours to write because he kept breaking down as he tried to explain to Teresa the circumstances of Harry's passing, knowing full well that she'd be devastated to lose her only brother.

Later, he had spent hours in the Tibooburra Hotel being shouted beer after beer by Mick Barlow and a few locals who had known Harry. He had considered staying in town and never going back to the mine site, but he couldn't do it. He couldn't abandon Harry, and he wasn't a quitter. Instead, he had returned to the mine site and worked harder than he'd ever worked to ward off loneliness and despair. He would find himself talking out loud to Harry, promising his mate that he'd find the gold for him or die trying. Sometimes, when Willie was dehydrated and every muscle in his body screamed in pain, he thought he heard Harry reply, encouraging him to keep going.

At night he hoped to see Nellie or the clan members, but beyond the circle of firelight, the empty darkness mocked him. He had never felt lonelier, and he soon discovered that loneliness did strange things to a man's mind, frightening things. He had finally arrived at the conclusion that he couldn't stay in the bush alone for much longer and keep his sanity.

CHAPTER TWO

Nellie approached Willie's campsite in the darkness and saw his form lying beside the fire in a strange position. For a few moments she wondered if a snake had bitten him, too. "Willie!" she called. "Ya dead?"

"Huh?" he mumbled drowsily. "Harry, is that you?"

"Nah, it me, Nellie," she replied with a frown.

Groaning, Willie sat up with dust smeared on one side of his face. He'd been dozing by his campfire, too exhausted to drag himself into his tent after dark. He must have fallen to the ground and stayed there. Digging and dry panning all day was slow going on his own, but he'd made a solemn vow beside Harry's grave that he wouldn't stop searching for that elusive nugget that they'd been sure was in the area. They'd found a lot of iron ore and creamy clay, and they were sure that meant there was gold. Willie had found a few grams, enough to be encouraged. He just had to find the big one.

In the early 1880s, the area had been known as the Albert Goldfield, five hundred square miles in northern New South Wales. Back then there had been hundreds of miners in the area, but they hadn't searched every square inch because it was impossible. When bigger gold fields opened up in Western Australia, around Kalgoorlie, most of the miners had moved on. Almost fifty years later, there were a few prospectors in the area, and some had been lucky. This encouraged Willie to keep searching.

He hadn't seen Nellie in a while, but had been thinking about her a lot lately because he suspected the baby was due soon, and by the look of her large abdomen, he was right.

"Hello, Nellie," he said, embarrassed about the state he was in.

"How ya doin'?" Nellie asked. "Ya bin hitting the grog hard?"

"No, no, I'm okay, just been working hard. How about you?"

"I doin' good. We makin' camp," she pointed over yonder, where he could see two female elders. "Baby comin' soon."

Willie felt a twinge of excitement. He was pleased Nellie had chosen to have the baby nearby. "Shouldn't you see a doctor, Nellie?"

Nellie smiled. "Nah, what for?"

"To help with the birth," Willie said. What he knew about birthing could be written on a postage stamp, but he was sure a doctor should be involved. "I want you to have the best care, Nellie. I'll pay for it."

Nellie smiled again. "I be good," she said. "They know about babies comin'."

True to her word, Nellie and the women made camp nearby.

Willie checked on her every evening, usually around sunset, when it started to cool down. Despite her discomfort, Nellie never complained. At the hottest part of the day, she rested in a humpy the women had built. The elder women also rested at that time, when the sun was fiercest. At other times they scouted for locally grown bush tucker. They were shy when Willie was around and kept their distance. If he came to the camp to see Nellie, they discreetly wandered away or sat on the far side of the fire.

One evening Willie called at their camp, and many of their group were there, including children. He would have retreated, but Nellie insisted he stay, and she had the endorsement of the men.

The men had speared an emu, which they'd buried in a pit of hot coals. When the meat was cooked, it was broken into pieces and distributed. It was the first time Willie had eaten meat that hadn't come out of a tin in weeks, so it was a real treat. After discarding the bones and scraps that the dingoes would later find, the men told stories. Willie didn't understand the Wadigali language, but he listened with fascination, as the story tellers were very animated. He likened it to watching a play. He noticed that Nellie enjoyed the company of her clan, and he was grateful that they accepted him. It saddened him that the white community weren't so tolerant of the indigenous people. They were scorned if they came into town, often chased away. He knew the farmers fired guns at them if they thought they were stealing a sheep or steer.

The following day when Willie called, the clan members had moved on, leaving Nellie and the women alone.

Piercing cries in the dead of night awoke Willie. He'd worked particularly hard that day, so he'd been in a sound sleep. He crawled out of his tent and listened, wondering if he'd been having a nightmare. Then he heard it again, an agonizing shriek that split the silence of the sleeping bush. "Nellie!" he shouted.

Tugging on his boots, Willie dashed to her campsite. Nellie was perspiring profusely and in excruciating pain each time her small body was gripped by contractions. Never having seen anything like it, Willie looked to the midwives in alarm, but they appeared to be calm, completely unconcerned. One was fanning Nellie with the branch of a tree and chanting, while the other was brewing something that probably was going to help Nellie with her pain. Willie was sceptical that a bush remedy would be helpful, but when he voiced his concerns, one of the angry elders shooed him away. He went back to his campsite, but he couldn't relax. He knew there was nothing he could do

but trust the women, yet it was torture listening to Nellie's cries, and they went on and on.

Willie paced, fretting. Before first light, when he didn't think he could take it anymore and had decided he was going to take Nellie to town against the elders' wishes, her cries suddenly stopped. He didn't know what to think.

Through the darkness, one of the women appeared and beckoned him to follow her. She gave no indication of what had happened, so he trailed after her with a racing heart. His thoughts went to the worst. Had Nellie died? And what of the baby? He was angry with himself for not taking Nellie to a doctor sooner. Logically, he knew a doctor only visited Tibooburra once a month, so it would have been a miracle to have caught him, but he could have tried. He would never forgive himself for not trying.

Nellie was sitting by the fire with her head hanging. She looked utterly exhausted. Willie couldn't see the baby, and his heart sank. He was overcome with guilt.

"Oh, Nellie," he cried, going to her side. "I should've taken you to a doctor."

Nellie looked up. "What for?"

"The baby. . . Maybe he could've saved the baby," Willie cried.

Nellie frowned. "What ya talkin', Willie?"

One of the elder women approached Nellie and placed a tiny wrapped bundle in her arms. Nellie looked down and tenderly uncovered the face of her tiny baby. She managed a weary smile that Willie interpreted as sadness.

Willie looked at the beautiful baby, so still. His heart broke for Nellie. She'd gone through all that suffering only to have her heart broken. He was still very angry with himself for not doing something to help, but he bit it down. Now wasn't the time, not while Nellie was mourning.

He reached out and touched the baby's tiny face, and then jumped with fright when her head turned.

"We got a girl, Willie," Nellie said as one of the elders added more wood to the crackling fire.

"She's. . .all right?" Willie gasped in disbelief.

"Yeah, she good," Nellie said, breaking into another exhausted smile.

For a few moments Willie couldn't move.. He looked at the baby again, this time in awe of new life.

"We have a baby girl," he whispered emotionally. Her delicate features were aglow in the campfire light, and his heart strings tugged. There wasn't a shred of doubt in his mind or heart that she was his little girl. The bond he felt was immediate and so overwhelming that a lump formed in his throat. Her skin was much lighter than Nellie's, as Nellie herself had one white parent and one Aboriginal parent, but her hair was as dark as the night, and she had plenty of it.

"What ya think our girl?" Nellie asked, looking down at the baby with an expression of pure love.

Willie could barely find his voice. "She's beautiful," he whispered huskily. "So beautiful." His eyes filled with tears. "Are you all right?" he sniffed.

"Yeah, I be right."

"You did well, Nellie. You deserve a good rest."

Hearing voices, the baby opened her eyes just for a moment.

Willie thought his heart would melt with joy. He touched the perfect skin on her cheek again with one finger, overcome with the wonder of his firstborn child. "What shall we call her?" he asked tenderly.

Nellie shrugged, thinking about it.

"I like Kate," Willie said. "It was my mother's name. Kate McGregor sounds noble. Don't you agree?"

Nellie frowned. "What noble?"

Willie thought about how to explain noble to Nellie. "Someone special," he said, thinking that was the simplest

way. "Like your kadaicha man, someone special in the clan."

Nellie looked at her baby with a frown, so he didn't think she understood. She spoke in Wadigali to the women, and Willie heard the word Kadee. He guessed that was her interpretation of the name he'd chosen, but to him, their baby girl was Kate. Kate McGregor. He was sure she'd one day do amazing things. And he felt his whole life's purpose suddenly shift. Nothing else mattered but this tiny little girl.

The sun had come up by the time Willie headed back to his camp. One of the women had taken the baby from Nellie so that she could sleep because she could barely keep her eyes open.

Excited to share the news, Willie stopped by Harry's grave.

"I have a baby girl, Harry," he said excitedly. "You should see her. She's the most beautiful baby I've ever seen." He felt a stab of pain in his heart because he'd always imagined Harry as the naughty uncle to his children. "Can you believe I'm a father, Harry? We came out here to find gold. That hasn't worked out so well, but I have found something far more precious in my daughter. I named her Kate, after my mother." Willie's smile faded. His mother and father had passed away, but he was thinking of his sister. "You know I can't tell Madge that I have a baby with a native girl. She'd never forgive me. You remember the last thing she said to me when we left England, don't you, Harry? *Whatever you do, don't go native, Willie.* I know exactly what she meant. And what did I do?" Willie knew that Harry would have been the only person to have understood. "I wish we could have a drink together, mate, to wet Kate's head." His conflicting emotions got the better of him again, and he broke down.

A few days later, Willie went to Nellie's campsite after work as he usually did, eager to see his new daughter, but Nellie and Kate had gone. He was stunned. Devastated! He stood looking at the barely discernible remnants of their campfire in a daze. The humpy where Kate had been born had been dismantled and discarded. There was virtually no trace of his family.

Willie turned in a circle, tempted to call out, but he suspected they'd been gone for hours. Every day since Kate's birth, he'd eagerly anticipated seeing her in the evenings. He loved holding her, talking to her, walking with her. It had been something to look forward to as he toiled with the dry pan all day. Now he had no idea when he'd see her again. It could be days, weeks, or even months, because her people had no schedule. He felt heartbroken and couldn't help worrying, especially after what had happened to Harry.

With a heavy heart, Willie wandered back to Harry's grave and sat down.

"She's gone, mate. My daughter has gone. I know it's the Aboriginal way to go walkabout without a word, and it's never bothered me before, but this time I wish Nellie had said something. I didn't get to say goodbye to my baby girl."

Willie slept badly that night. He kept imagining all sorts of scenarios, from dust-storms to ant bites, or, worse, snake-bites. And then there were the unrelenting flies. The thought of flies crawling over Kate sent a shudder down his spine. He knew Nellie and the women wouldn't let Kate come to harm, but that didn't make him feel any better. Their way of life was so different than his, and for the first time, he doubted it would be the right one for his daughter. Of course, he knew there wasn't an alternative, as he wasn't able to raise Kate himself, but he couldn't help worrying.

The days passed with Willie working harder than he'd ever worked before. Being thoroughly exhausted was all that stopped his pining for Kate. As time passed, he got used to being alone again, and he didn't even go to town. Life became a routine of hard work, little food, and fitful sleep. The days ran into weeks. All the while, Willie hoped Nellie and Kate would return.

Willie chipped away beside a big rock where water ran off after rain. He filled buckets with dirt and then sifted it, shaking off stones and dirt. With any luck, pieces of gold in the dirt would sink to the bottom. It wasn't happening this time, but he had a feeling in his gut about this area. He dug some more, breaking away a chunk of rock under the ground. He glanced at the chunk and kept looking at it, wondering if his eyes were deceiving him. He picked it up and turned it over and over again in his hands. Then he brushed dirt away with his fingers, revealing a beautiful golden colour. The weight in his hand caught his attention, but surely it wasn't all gold? He gently chipped away at outer bits of rock, but there wasn't much on the outer edges. In his trembling hand was a sizeable chunk of gold. The big one! The piece he'd been hungrily, relentlessly searching for! He examined the treasure closely again, and his head went light. He staggered in the direction of Harry's grave carrying the gold.

"I've found it, Harry," he shouted, falling to his knees beside the grave. "I've found the big one," he declared loudly. He threw his head back and let out a piercing scream in celebration, leaping to his feet. Then he jumped in the air like someone standing on hot coals, kicking his legs high. He cried and laughed at the same time, until eventually he was thoroughly exhausted. Then he collapsed. He kept looking at the nugget in his hands, unable to believe it was real, even as it shimmered in the afternoon sunlight. Willie couldn't believe how beautiful it

was. He'd imagined this moment, over and over, but nothing had compared to this reality. He certainly wouldn't be a millionaire when he sold it - there were few of those - but he'd have enough money to start a new life. He imagined going back to England, triumphant. He imagined the look on the faces of those who had doubted he and Harry would ever find any gold. He and Harry had laughed and joked and imagined that moment so many times.

"It won't be the same without you, Harry," he declared aloud. He dreaded facing Harry's family, but he knew his own family would be jubilant to see him, particularly Madge and his brother-in-law, Trevor Thompson. Then his thoughts went to Kate. "Maybe I'll never see my wee girl again," he whispered. His happiness evaporated like rain in the desert, and he found himself facing a dilemma.

That night, Willie barely slept a wink. His thoughts kept him awake, but so did the hunk of gold he had under his pillow. As long as it lay there, he'd know he hadn't dreamt he'd found it.

CHAPTER THREE

The trip from Willie's campsite to Tibooburra was slow going over a barely discernible track, but eventually he rolled into town amid a cloud of dust around four o'clock in the afternoon. He drove past the Tibooburra Hotel and headed for the Corner Country Store, just up the road, where he parked his battered Ford Utility Coupe. The motorcar had served him well since he had bought it in Broken Hill, especially considering the terrain it covered and the state of the roads. It needed a new headlight, courtesy of a roo on the road in the dark, new springs in the driver's seat to replace the rusty ones poking through the parched leather, and new tyres and brakes. But if he treated the car well, he hoped it would last for years to come.

Not for the first time, Willie thought Tibooburra had to be one of the ugliest towns in Australia. It couldn't be more of a contrast to England's Lake District, especially the beautiful county of Cumbria, where his sister lived. Willie thought of Cumbria's rolling green countryside and quaint villages with thatched cottages, their walls covered in flowering creepers. He'd never seen a green shrub in Tibooburra, let alone a flower growing in a garden. Even the toughest weeds struggled in the unrelenting heat. In fact, he was always under the impression that one day he'd arrive to find the town had been completely swallowed by the ever-present red dust. The summers were as hot as a furnace, but somehow the hardiest wildlife called the area home: emus, kangaroos, lizards, snakes, and birds of prey, along with billions of flies.

It was Saturday, so there were half a dozen vehicles parked outside each of the pubs in town. On most Saturdays the station owners and their families drove the long haul to town to stock up on food stores and to socialize after a tough week of farming in some of the harshest conditions in Australia. Willie recognized Jerry Baldock's and Tony Wilson's vehicles. He longed to settle the dust in his throat and join them in the Tibooburra Hotel for an ice-cold beer. He could practically taste it, but first he had important business to conduct.

Collecting the sack on the seat beside him, he went into the store, nodding a greeting to three Aboriginal men who were sitting by the outside wall in the shade.

"I hope you've got lots of cash in your safe, Leo," Willie shouted excitedly.

Leo and Florence Kingsley had owned the only store in town for nearly ten years, selling everything imaginable, including fuel, but like many people in a town with a small population, they wore other hats. Leo was also a gold dealer, while Flo was postmistress.

Leo took Willie's question with a grain of salt. Willie made the same comment every time he came into the store, and he always got the same patient response. "Have you found the big one, Willie?"

Willie approached his Leo's counter with the flour sack over his shoulder. "You'd better believe it. Get your biggest scales out, Leo. You're gonna need them," he said, hoisting his bag onto the counter with a thud.

Leo heard the thud, but he still wasn't taking Willie seriously. He'd lost count of the times miners had brought in chunks of rock, pretending them to be gold. He remembered a particular miner who'd gone as far as disguising a piece of rock with gold paint. He had thought he was hilarious until Leo had turned the tables and told him he'd broken his scales and owed him five quid.

"Really, Willie," he said with a long-suffering sigh. "Let's see what you've got, but keep it in mind that the going rate for rock today is the same as yesterday, last month, and last year. Nothing!"

"You're a barrel of laughs, Leo," Willie said, glancing behind him to make sure no one else had come into the store. He then opened the bag and dragged out the gold.

"For the love of sweet Jesus," Leo gasped, staring at Willie in disbelief. "This is real!"

"Of course it's real," Willie said indignantly.

"Will ya look at the size of it?" Leo replied. "It's got to be thirteen pounds at least, and the colour. . .this is high-grade gold, Willie."

Flo had just entered the tidy store, but upon hearing the excitement in her husband's voice, she rushed to his side. "Is that all gold?" she asked, wide-eyed. She'd never seen anything like it, either.

Leo examined it closely. "It sure is, Flo. You've hit the big time, Willie," he added. "Congratulations, mate. I'm really happy for you." He shook Willie's hand vigorously and then ducked under the counter and brought out his biggest scales. They were covered with dust from lack of use. "Let's check the weight, shall we?"

Using both hands to lift it, Leo placed the hunk of gold onto the scales. "Stone the crows," he said, wide-eyed again. "I was short-changing you, Willie. It weighs fourteen pounds and six ounces. I can hardly believe it. In ten years I've never weighed a gold nugget this big." He looked at Willie and recognized the conflicting emotions Willie was feeling, as the young man regretted not being able to share this moment with Harry.

"Harry would be proud of you, Willie," he reassured the boy, witnessing his eyes moisten.

"But he's not here to share our good fortune," Willie replied in a croaky voice.

"And that's not your fault, is it?"

"Maybe not, but it was supposed to be the two of us sharing this find. We came out here together, sharing a dream. We worked damned hard, always side by side. We talked about this moment every day, too. And here I am, by myself. It just doesn't feel right, Leo."

"I know, but that's life, isn't it? It's not always fair."

Willie nodded. He knew nothing would bring Harry back, and he had to learn to live without him. But it was going to be hard.

"You'll get over it, love, just give it time," Flo said, placing a comforting hand on Willie's shoulder. Flo and Leo were special people in Tibooburra. Flo was a grandmotherly figure to everyone, while Leo was the wise counsel who people asked for advice, whether it was legal, personal, or just friendly.

Leo began calculating what he owed Willie for the gold. "Well, for once, you are right, Willie. I don't have enough money in my safe to buy this much gold. Not until the gold merchant from Broken Hill gets here on Monday afternoon. I can pay you a quarter, though, unless you want to wait to collect the full amount. Gold is trading at 19 pounds, 74-pence per ounce today, and by my calculation you've got 230 ounces. That much weight times 19 pounds, 74 pence is. . ." He worked out the sum on a piece of paper. "That's 4,540 pounds and 20 pence, Willie. You won't have to work for years!"

"Four thousand quid!"

"And some change," Leo added.

"I've never had that much money," Willie said in amazement. He and Harry had come out to Australia with two hundred quid between them and it had taken them a very long time to save that much.

"No doubt you want to celebrate, and you have every right, Willie, but I advise you not to take too much money with you to the pub. Leave what I've got here in my safe, or most of it, until you go back to your camp."

"You're right, Leo, that would be the smart thing to do," Willie agreed. "But I want to shout my mates a few beers, so I'll take a hundred quid. You will come with me to the pub to celebrate, won't you?"

"Of course, as soon as I close up for the evening."

"I can manage here, Leo. You go with Willie," Flo suggested. She knew Willie needed the company of a mate with a level head, and that was her husband.

"If you're sure, love," Leo said, opening the safe to put the gold in there and get out a hundred quid for Willie.

"I'm sure, off you go, and congratulations again, Willie. I know I'm wasting my breath, but try not to get too drunk."

Willie grinned sheepishly. "I can't make any promises, Flo. It's a dream come true to find a nugget big enough to change my life. Something like that only happens once in a lifetime."

"I know," Flo said. "But you'll have a sore head for days if you overdo it."

"That I will, but I'll have a great time tonight."

Leo made out a receipt for the gold and gave Willie a hundred pounds in cash, and then they set off for the pub.

As soon as Willie entered the pub he yelled, "I'm shouting the beer, lads."

Mick Barlow looked at him wide-eyed. "Don't tell me you found a big nugget, Willie?" He glanced at Leo for confirmation, and Leo nodded enthusiastically.

"I sure did," Willie boasted.

"How big was it?" one of the locals called.

"Was it anywhere near six pounds?" another man asked.

"Much bigger!" Willie declared.

"Bigger?"

"Ten pounds?" Mick asked, noting the look on Leo's face.

"Fourteen pounds, six ounces!" Willie announced proudly.

A loud applause and cheers erupted in the bar, and two men hoisted Willie on their shoulders.

By seven that evening, Willie was the drunkest man in the pub. Leo had gone home for dinner and promised to return later to check on him. He'd asked Willie to come with him, but there was no dislodging jubilant Willie from his barstool. Mick made sandwiches, but Willie was too drunk to eat much.

Some of the other patrons had also had too much to drink and wandered home or out to their vehicles to sleep it off, but Willie wasn't yet ready to stop drinking, and he had two companions who were keeping up with him, Tony Wilson and Jerry Baldock. Jerry was a former miner and a real sceptic about whether there was any significant gold left in the Albert Goldfield area. He'd suggested many times that Willie show them the gold nugget he'd found before it went to Broken Hill.

"Do you need proof I'm not lying, Jerry?" Willie slurred, becoming incensed.

"I'm not calling you and Leo liars, Willie. But I spent nearly twenty years looking for gold and never saw anything like a nugget that weighed fourteen pounds, six ounces. I thought the Albert Goldfield was cleared out years ago."

"Then I guess I got real lucky," Willie said. "I think Harry's spirit may have led me to the gold."

Jerry looked at him like he thought he was talking nonsense.

"I know I sound mad, but I even thought I heard Harry's voice sometimes."

"Harry was a great bloke," Tony Wilson said nostalgically. He was a former jockey who'd taken up breeding horses on a small farm for a few years after retiring from the race track. When he had found the going too hard in droughts, he had moved into town and began a