

COPYWRITE Fleur McDonald May 2014

Emerald Bluff ~ Prologue

The calico bag felt heavy as Amelia twisted it around her fingers.

She took a deep breath, eyes scanning the darkened rodeo grounds. Not seeing anyone, she pulled open the door to the treasurer's office and stood on the threshold, listening intently.

A round of loud, drunken shouts and laughter rang out. But though it sounded close, Amelia knew the camping grounds were at least a half a kilometre from the ring. Noise travelled a long way on dark, still nights like this.

She wished the powerful towered spotlights, which had shone down an hour ago, hadn't been switched off. The ground was plunged into complete blackness, and it was making her feel even more nervous.

Her breathing shallow, a tremor ran through her. Was it fear, exhilaration or anxiety? She wasn't sure. Maybe all three.

Walking quickly, she left the atco hut and crossed the gravel to where her ute was parked in readiness. Pausing as another lot of raucous yelling reached her, she glanced around once more, acutely conscious of the huge amount of money in the two bank bags.

'Come on, Mark, where are you?' she muttered, before lowering the bags onto the floor of the ute's cabin. Locking the ute, she spun around and ran back to the building, unlocking the door with her key and grabbing another two bags. These ones were heavy – full of coins she'd painstakingly counted no less than three times during the last few hours in the office.

She hurried back to the building door to get another two bags. Thankfully these were lighter because they were full of notes, from one hundred dollars down to fives.

When she'd been given the job of treasurer of the Jervois Rodeo, she'd never thought about having to transport the whole of the organisation's takings. In the middle of the night. Without a police escort.

She thought of her father, who'd be shaking his head if he was here now. He wouldn't have been surprised she hadn't thought this far ahead. Maybe her mother wouldn't have been that surprised either. She wished they were here with her. Why hadn't she asked? To prove something?

Boots on gravel crunched behind her and she jumped, her heart thumping. 'How you going tonight, Milla?'

'Mark!' she said, with a mixture of relief and surprise.

'Who else would it be?' he said.

'Sorry, just a bit nervous with all the loot. Can't say I've seen two hundred k in one place before, let alone in my own ute.'

Mark whistled softly. 'Two hundred k? Really? That must be a record for this little rodeo.'

'Up thirty percent on last year,' said Amelia proudly.

'Committee should be happy.'

'I reckon,' she said, taking the keys from her waist band before heading back to the office, checking yet again that she'd put everything away and the desk was neat and tidy, before turning

off the lights and locking the door.

Swooping down to pick up the final bags of cash on the way out of the building, Amelia checked around her. As she locked the door to the hut, she was overcome by a terrible feeling of foreboding, though she told herself it was just having responsibility for so much money. Still, she wished Rob had showed.

Feeling panicked, she ran towards her ute, calling, 'Right-o, let's get going.'

'Do you want me to drive in front or behind you?' Mark asked.

'Um, oh, I'm not sure,' said Amelia, glancing around, still unable to shake her sense that something was about to happen. 'I wish Rob had showed. He was my other escort. Not sure where's he got to, but I haven't seen him all night, have you?'

'Nope. Ann's here though,' he said referring to Rob's mother.

'Yeah, I've seen her. She's been helping me.' Amelia inhaled deeply. 'Okay, all we've got to do is get over Emerald Bluff and down into town. Surely nothing can go wrong in ten kilometres.'

Mark kicked at the dirt, clearly anxious to get going.

'Sorry, am I holding you up?' asked Amelia.

'Nah, but we should head off, hey? Nothing can go wrong,' he reassured her.

Amelia nodded momentarily comforted by his positiveness, and slipped into the driver's seat of her car when what sounded like a lone chain clanking against a steel gate rang out and she

froze, her heart really thudding now.

'Bloody hell, I wish I'd organised another escort to take Rob's place,' she whispered. 'Nothing can go wrong, nothing can go wrong, nothing can go wrong.' Chanting the half prayer, half mantra she tightened her fingers around her keys.

It was time to go.

'Are you coming back here or heading home for the night, once we've finished?'

'Reckon I'll head back here. Got a few mates over from the East,' he drawled slowly before smiling. 'One of 'em is a bit sore after a fall tonight.'

Amelia smiled up at him, her heart rate slowing. There was something so reliable and steading about Mark, even though he was younger than her. His stocky build, strength and height was why she'd asked him to act as her escort. Mark was just imposing without trying.

'Anyway,' he continued, 'you're right. Nothing can go wrong. Unless old 'Pushme' here decides to break down,' Mark teased, tapping the bonnet of her car.

'She'd better bloody not,' Amelia answered and her heart gave another huge thud.

'Okay, let's cruise.'

By the time she'd jumped into old faithful and implored the hatchback Mazda to start, Mark had sped out of the gate in his ute. Amelia drove out of the showground gates and onto the road only to see Mark's tail lights were just pin pricks.

‘Slow down, Mark,’ she implored, her voice was pitched higher than normal as she pushed her foot down hard on the accelerator. Pushme responded, but not with the speed she’d been hoping for. Once again, she cursed herself. Why hadn’t she thought to hire two way radios? What about mobiles? She didn’t have Mark’s number programed into hers.

‘Bloody hell, bloody hell,’ she cursed. No tail lights.

The tension in her neck as she leaned forward, peering into the darkness, made her ache. She had a headache and she was bone weary. All she had to do was get this money there safely and she could knock off.

Rounding a bend, she saw Mark’s lights. Quickly she flashed hers, hoping he’d see. But once again Pushme might let her down – she didn’t have spotties, only dim head lights.

She was rewarded with his break lights, as he slowed.

‘Oh thank God,’ Amelia whooshed. Breathing slightly easier, she rolled her shoulders and neck trying to ease the tension. Her gaze strayed to the passengers seat where a cold can of Bundy and Cola sat, waiting for the delivery to be over and her to relax.

‘I can’t wait to crack you,’ she told the can, then gripping the steering wheel tightly, she stared at the back of Mark’s ute as they drove toward Jervios.

Five minutes later, all was quiet and Amelia began to relax. ‘Five more minutes and it will all be over,’ she murmured quietly. ‘Over.’ Pause. Even more quietly: ‘Over.’

She sighed and checking on the money with her hand, again, she reached over and grabbed the drink. ‘It won’t matter now,

we're just about there.' She felt Pushme start to slow as the car started up the incline of Emerald Bluff. The familiar hill terrain slipped past as she popped the can open.

Her first sip went down smooth as silk, another and then another. She glanced in the rear vision mirror, she noticed a set of bright lights. Amelia put the can in between her knees and looked forward again.

Moments later, head lights on high beam, flashed into mirror and she looked again.

It was clear the car had gained on her.

Amelia frowned.

She didn't like the way that car was racing up.

'What?' Muttering, to herself, she pushed the accelerator down, hoping to catch up with Mark, but she couldn't gain on him. The car behind her flipped their spotlights. Amelia tipped up her up mirror to take the glare away and all at once the sense of foreboding she had felt earlier, returned. Something wasn't right.

Ignoring her fear, hands gripping the wheel, knuckles white and posture rigid, staring at the road ahead, she focused on nothing but driving.