

Bestselling Australian Author

Fiona McCallum

Help comes at just
the right time, but from the
unlikeliest of sources ...

Leap of Faith

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Fiona
McCallum

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Chapter One

Jessica warmed Prince up just behind the starting line. She'd studied the plan well and walked the cross-country course twice today and three times the day before. She had all the twists and turns and best places to steer Prince into the fences memorised. He wasn't as light and quick on his feet as most eventers, so if she had any chance of capitalising on her good dressage score, she'd have to keep him to a tight line. Thankfully the course was dry – a damp, slippery track made for a treacherous, slower round.

Her first Adelaide International Horse Trials. *God, I'm nervous*, she thought, *a lot more than usual*. Her stomach was churning, trying to find food she hadn't eaten. Nothing new: she never ate until after the cross-country round. Her husband, Steve, often wondered why she put herself through all this. How much fun was it if she almost made herself sick with nerves every time? Fair comment, she reckoned. It wasn't really about having fun, but about the drive to be the best you and your horse could be. For Jessica, there was no better feeling than winning. Well, that and making her father proud. She didn't like to admit it, but she

was fully aware that much of what she'd done in her life and what continued to push her was all about gaining her hard-taskmaster father's approval.

And today her nervousness was exacerbated by Jeff Collins' absence. He'd been her coach as well as her father and she hadn't realised it would be this hard to go on without him. This was a huge event, so much bigger and more important than any of the others she did throughout the year – had ever done, actually. In the past few weeks since her father had passed, she'd begun to question if she was losing her edge, her guts and her determination to tackle the fences, and the will to keep up with the high standards necessary to succeed. For the first time, she hadn't had him beside her walking the course, discussing the options and choosing the best one, pointing out overhanging tree limbs, where she could cut corners, where it wasn't safe to, etc. Two knowledgeable heads were always better than one.

Yesterday, on her first walk around, she'd been sad to be doing it alone. She'd nodded to other competitors she knew, but they all tended to walk the rounds in concentrated silence. And then her feelings had turned to guilt as she'd contemplated how much she actually quite liked the silence and being able to carefully consider the many aspects to the round without her father muttering and imposing his views on her or demanding to know her every move, over and over.

Training for this event had been different, and so many times she'd doubted what she was doing. Realising just how much of a crutch her father had been had come as a shock. Now, almost daily, she had moments where she didn't believe she could do this on her own, before she reminded herself that she had always done all the riding – her father had just stood on the ground or sat on

a rail – and, towards the end, in a deckchair – issuing orders and criticism.

The problem was she'd always had the comfort of knowing that if something went wrong, her dad was usually there to sort it out, to issue instructions or phone someone for help. Now she was all alone. But she had to suck it up; she was a big girl. She felt kind of liberated. She had to keep believing in herself – and Prince. He was ready, they were ready. Anyway, her father would be furious if he could see her being so insecure. He'd probably say something like, 'We didn't spend all this money and all this time, all these years, just to have you be so pathetic.' Yep, her dad had been pretty hard on her. But he'd also been fair. She wouldn't be where she was if it hadn't been for him. And her mother, before she'd died a couple of years ago.

Jessica thought about the advice her dad used to give her on competition days, and how he'd always question her instincts and decisions – sometimes over and over. It used to drive her mad. She so didn't miss that. The really annoying thing was that he hadn't actually been on a horse in twenty-odd years, so he couldn't begin to know her mount's fears, how long his stride really was, when he preferred to take off well out from a jump or go in deep. But that didn't stop her father thinking he knew best and forcing his opinion on her. And she'd learnt early on that you didn't contradict or argue with Jeff Collins. It was easier to just pretend you agreed and then do your own thing. Nonetheless, over the years she'd done pretty well. And today she would too.

Saddling up, she'd felt very sad and alone, and had wished she hadn't been so quick to urge Steve to go and play tennis.

Her husband didn't share her love of horses and competition, but he was supportive. Yet Jessica didn't like to take advantage of

his kind nature and have him traipsing all over the place with her when it really wasn't his thing. In addition to his tennis and golf, he had his Country Fire Service; the CFS regularly took up a lot of time. And there was only so much someone could do.

Jessica watched as the horse before her went through the start gates and approached the first fence. Her heart was pounding and felt high up in her chest, as usual, but she also had a lump lodged in her throat that was threatening to upset her breathing. Normally her dad would be there just off to the side. While she never saw him scurrying across the course to keep watch on her, it was always a comfort to know he was out there somewhere. She was starting to feel quite melancholy and found herself gasping. God, she really had to pull herself together.

Jessica took a few deep breaths and patted the neck of the large bay thoroughbred-warmblood cross beneath her. He was still calm and didn't seem too affected by how tense she was. But she had to get herself together; she was the one in charge. Prince had to follow her direction; if her messages were mixed or indecisive over jumps this size, it could end in disaster and serious injury – for one or both of them. It was a warm day with little breeze, so she'd also really have to keep on him to up the pace, stop him slacking off.

'Righto, mate, that's us. Let's do this,' she said, gritting her teeth and turning him towards the starting area as her number was called. Her heart flipped, but she gathered up her reins and stared down the course at the first jump – a nice solid log – twenty metres away.

'And ten seconds to go,' the starter called.

Jessica tightened her reins and applied more leg to wind Prince up like a spring ready to go. He responded perfectly: head up, ears pricked, his powerful hinds well underneath him.

‘... four, three, two, and go!’ the starter said.

Jessica gave Prince his head as they leapt across the start line and bounded towards the log. She stared hard ahead, feeling the length of Prince’s stride below her. She tightened him up around eight strides out from the jump so she could carefully count her last four strides and shorten or lengthen him so he’d be placed to take off perfectly. The type of jump determined where she placed him, except with the first, where she always tightened him up a lot more so as to leave nothing to chance. Prince’s approach and leap over the first obstacle usually gave a good indication of how the whole round would pan out. If he was unsettled and a bit spooked by spectators or the shadows, and hesitated at all approaching the first fence, she knew she’d have a battle on her hands to keep him focussed. She always held her breath until they were safely on the other side and on their way to the next fence.

Today she let out her breath and relaxed a little as they landed beautifully and headed on to the hay bales.

‘Good boy,’ she whispered.

They bounded along, Jessica picking her track just as she’d walked it. She continued to count her last four strides into each obstacle in her head, adjusting Prince as she went. He was responding perfectly. A third of the way around and she was still clear and travelling well.

But Prince’s breathing was more laboured than she would have liked, and he was sweating more heavily than usual. It was a tough course, and her first at this higher standard. She had to do her best to keep him up and energetic. No matter how hard she pushed him, though, he didn’t seem to have any more pace to give. He was moving along okay, not so tired that she’d pull him up and retire, but she certainly wouldn’t be anywhere near the top of the leader board at this rate unless everyone else bombed out. All she

could do was her best to keep them safe and go for a clear, slow round with time penalties.

The water jump was next. Around the jump was a sea of colour. *Jesus, look at all the people. Crikey. Concentrate, Jess!*

Did Prince have the legs to go straight through or should she go the safer, longer route? It was coming up fast. She was through the trees and on the approach and had to make a split-second decision. She hesitated, her mind clouded. Prince was on track to go right through. She gathered him up, but it was too late – she'd missed the first of her four strides. Three, two ... Shit, she wasn't going to make it. He was half a stride out and badly placed – too far for one stride on such a fence and too close for him to get an extra one in. All she could do now was just hope to hell he'd get her through this. She gave the horse his head, grabbed onto the martingale strap with both hands, sat back in the saddle and held on tight with her legs. She'd let them down.

He leapt. But not high enough. Among the sound of flapping leather and the heave and grunt of the big horse beneath her, she heard a collective intake of breath from the crowd. *Oh shit. Shit!*

There was an almighty thud as the tops of Prince's legs hit the solid timber of the jump.

Everything became a slow-motion whirl as the horse struggled over, Jessica still in the saddle and clinging on. Then she could feel them tipping sideways, falling. It was deathly quiet around them.

A loud splash shattered the eerie silence. Jessica felt herself hit the water, and then the heavy weight of Prince was on her. *Ow! Oh Christ.* She wanted to scream, release some of the agony in her leg. But if she opened her mouth she'd probably drown. Her helmet was full of water. She was too heavy. It was all too hard. If Prince was dead on top of her, she'd rather be dead too.

She closed her eyes.

Chapter Two

Jessica felt the weight leave her. She lifted her water-filled helmet, coughed and spluttered, spat out a mouthful of mud. She wiped a filthy hand across her face to try to clear her vision and her fuzzy mind. She thought she could see that Prince was upright, standing nearby, but the angle she was at and with her brain playing tricks on her, she wasn't certain of anything, except that she was in a shitload of pain. *I've got to get out of here. I'm holding everything up.*

'Ow! My leg!' she screamed as a bolt of pain seared through her when she tried to sit up. *Holy fucking shit, that fucking hurts! Shit, I didn't swear out loud, did I? Oh fuck, who cares? This fucking hurts! Jesus Christ.* She felt sick.

People were calling to her to stay where she was. She knew now she couldn't move if she wanted to. There was the pain, but she also didn't seem able to thread enough thoughts together to put her limbs in the right place. She stared around the crowd, dazed. Everyone looked really worried. She examined herself from her awkward, half-curved position. At least her leg seemed to be at a normal angle.

And then panic gripped her. Where was Prince? He wasn't still in the water with her. That was a good sign. Was it? She tried to cast her eyes around her. She'd seen him on his feet, hadn't she? She couldn't remember, couldn't focus on anything but the pain.

She could feel the cold water in her boots, so she couldn't have broken her neck or back. She wriggled her fingers. Fine, too. She would sit up. But when she tried to prop herself onto her right elbow, an excruciating pain shot down her right side.

'Ow!'

At least she could now see Prince. He was standing, his head hung, being held by one of the officials in a hi-vis vest, over by a tree. When she concentrated, she could see he was resting a back leg. Shit, how badly hurt was he? She put her hands to her head and began to cry – loud, racking sobs. She needed her dad.

'It's okay, love,' the man holding Prince called. 'I've had a good look. He seems fine, just a couple of scrapes. And he'll be a bit stiff and sore tomorrow ...'

Had a good look? How could he have, it'd only been two seconds, hadn't it? Though she'd also swear, if asked, she'd been lying there for half an hour. Time was doing weird things.

Jessica tried to focus on the two people in green overalls who appeared beside her – a male and a female paramedic. She felt bad about them having to get in the muddy water to tend to her. And she felt bad for the organisers now she'd stuffed up their timing for the day. God, she had to get out of this and let them reopen the course.

'It's okay, I can get up,' she said. At exactly the same time she wondered, *Can I?* Feeling very shaky, she put both hands down to hoist herself up. And then realised she couldn't feel her feet.

'No, you don't.'

'But I'm holding them up.'

‘Too bad, young lady, you’re hurt,’ the male paramedic said gruffly, then added in a more gentle tone, ‘If you move you’ll just make things worse. Please let us do our jobs and take care of you.’

Jessica nodded.

They asked her question after question. They peered into her eyes with a light, poked and prodded her. She had trouble following what they were doing and saying. Her leg was now throbbing.

‘Here, suck on this. It’ll help with the pain,’ the female paramedic said, and pushed a hard, green, whistle-shaped plastic object between her lips. It was a little like what she’d seen in the movies. Jessica took a deep suck. Bloody hell, it tasted awful! Sweet, sickly, slightly fruity – they didn’t mention that in the movies! But the instant warm feeling that flooded her body was worth enduring the dreadful taste. *Actually, it’s growing on me.* It was starting to remind her of the Juicy Fruit chewing gum she’d loved as a kid. *Man, that’s good shit!* She felt all woolly and cosy, and the pain became a dull, barely there, ache. She’d found her new best friend. She felt herself relax. They could do whatever they liked to her now.

A stiff collar was put around her neck – just as a precaution, she was assured – and then, on the count of three, she was lifted out of the water and onto a hard board.

‘Please don’t cut my boots off,’ she said as they carried her to the ambulance. But the words that came out were so slurred it was no wonder they looked at her and frowned with confusion. Oh well, what’s a grand for another pair? She was alive and Prince didn’t look too bad. Well, he was upright. She held on tight to her new green best friend. She was beginning to feel quite okay. Perhaps she wasn’t too seriously hurt after all.

‘Just lie back and relax.’

Jessica felt she had no option but to comply.

‘But I need you to stay awake,’ the woman added, as Jessica closed her eyes and let out a deep breath.

Damn. They didn’t half want much. She felt so sleepy. She opened her eyes and looked around to try to distract herself from the sleepiness trying to claim her. She saw that the man holding Prince had brought him up as close as he could get without being in the way. Jessica could see the course vet was having a good look at her horse. The man holding Prince gave her the thumbs-up signal.

She tried to lift her hand to wave back and offer some sort of gesture of thanks, but it was too heavy. And her brain was struggling with basic thought and battling exhaustion. God, she was tired. And sore; the pain was masked, but there was enough of a feeling to tell her she’d done some damage. At least she hadn’t broken her neck – if she could feel pain down her right side all the way to her foot, she couldn’t have broken her leg or have serious spinal damage, right?

She noticed a few familiar faces gathered around Prince – fellow competitors who had been before her in the draw and their strap-pers; someone would make sure Prince was looked after. That was the great thing about the horse community: they were all fiercely competitive, but they all banded together when necessary. And was that Zoe and Lucy, two of her young pupils, standing over there too? Poor kids, having to see this.

Jess was loaded into the ambulance and the doors banged shut behind her.



The trip in the ambulance seemed to take just moments – or maybe it was an hour? Jessica was in no state to know, or care. But with the event being in the city’s parklands and less than a kilometre

from the Royal Adelaide Hospital, it was more likely just a few minutes. She was wheeled into an open area with cubicles divided by curtains, and hoisted onto another gurney. The paramedics wished her all the best, and said goodbye. She thanked them in a mumble. She tried to apologise for their wet, muddy attire, but they were gone. She hoped they had a change of clothes in a locker somewhere.

Left alone, Jessica returned to worrying about Prince. When she tried to picture the accident, her mind went blank. She was able to relive their take-off, with Prince failing to fit in the extra-small stride, but was unable to recall the actual fall and the horse being on top of her in the water. She really hoped they hadn't lied to her about his injuries so she wouldn't worry. What if he had to be put down? Jessica began to sob. Oh, God, he'd looked so forlorn.

She chided herself into getting a grip. He'd been upright and on all four legs. He was probably just a bit bruised and feeling sorry for himself. And exhausted – he'd managed to get around half of his first international two-star cross-country round.

Jessica wondered who might have sorted out her gear and taken Prince home. She wished she knew what was going on. She felt naked without her mobile. And her wallet – wouldn't they need her Medicare card? Oh well, perhaps her full name and date of birth would do. But of course they had all her details – they were on the medical armband each competitor was required to wear. She relaxed slightly. Someone would call Steve, her listed emergency contact, and he would be by her side as soon as he could. Though, he was at least an hour's drive away. Had someone phoned him already? Was he still at tennis? Tears began to sting.

Her best friend, Tiffany, was her second emergency contact. But today she was off competing at Burra – miles away – and would have her phone off or not with her for most of the time.

Jessica blinked back the tears. She needed someone beside her to tell her everything would be okay. She had to keep it together. But she was frightened, and so lonely. More tears prickled, and a few slipped out and down her cheeks.

Jessica felt a wave of pain roar down her right side and promptly burst into sobs. She'd never felt so utterly alone and helpless. She realised she'd lost track of her pain whistle – hadn't sucked on it for ages. She looked around and down. Suddenly the thought of the pain returning was quite terrifying.

She found the whistle clutched in her hand, lying on her chest. Thank God she still had her little friend. But how long would it help her? She took a suck and firmly told herself to pull it together. There was no blood or protruding bones that she could see; she was probably only bruised and suffering from shock. All of this was most likely just precautionary and part of event procedures to comply with their insurance cover.

'Hi, I'm Anna,' said the nurse who had materialised beside the bed, dragging the curtain closed behind her with a long whoosh and metallic zing.

Jessica tried to say hi, but her chin was too wobbly and her voice came out as a croak. She thought she probably should be embarrassed to be blubbering like this, but then decided the nurse would have seen a hell of a lot worse in her time.

'Are you in pain?'

'Just feeling sorry for myself,' Jessica finally managed with a grimace of a smile.

'You're allowed. I hear you've had half a tonne of horse on top of you, you poor thing,' she said. 'You're damned lucky to still be here, let alone conscious. Now, first up, I'm going to get these wet clothes off and get you warm. If you're not already, you'll be cold soon. And I'm afraid we're going to have to cut your boots

off. And they look so expensive. I need some heavy-duty scissors, back in a sec.'

Jessica nodded, feeling a new wave of tears threatening.

'The ambulance guys said your horse got up okay. Thank goodness for that,' the nurse continued when she reappeared with a large pair of what looked like dressmaker's shears. Jessica nodded. Tears poured down her cheeks again. She didn't know what had set her off this time; she'd known her boots would have to be sacrificed and had thought she'd already come to terms with it. She looked down at them, wondering what damage they were hiding. Now she was thinking about it, her boot felt really tight, like, *excruciatingly* tight. The sooner it was off, the better. She hoped it wouldn't hurt.

'Such lovely boots – what a waste. I feel terrible doing this. Hopefully they're covered by your insurance,' the nurse said as she began to cut.

Jessica mumbled and tried to make a mental note to remember to look into their contents insurance, but she was suddenly feeling very queasy. She felt the bile rise.

'I think I'm going to be ...' Too late. She only just managed to turn her head to stop the vomit from going down her front. It went onto the floor instead. Her throat burned from the acid and the absence of anything else in her stomach.

'Oh God, I'm so sorry,' she groaned.

'It's okay. Someone will clean it up later. It's my fault; I should have made sure you had a bowl first up. You might have concussion. Do you think you lost consciousness?'

'I don't think so, but it is all a bit of a blur.'

'You might need a CT scan. We'll see what the doctor says when one turns up. Not sure when that will be.'

The nurse went back to work on her boot. Jessica could feel the movement of every snip. It didn't really hurt, but did feel

uncomfortable. She hoped the nurse wasn't doing any more damage to her leg. She looked away; she didn't want to see anything gory when the boot came off.

As she studied the geometric pattern on the curtain, Jessica felt time starting to do weird things again. One moment she felt like she'd been in the hospital for hours, but the next it was as if only seconds ago she and Prince had been making their way around the course. And she'd been doing so well. A touch slow, but clear. *Damn it!*

Jessica heard the words, 'Just over here,' and then the ashen, worried face of Steve appeared.

'Steve,' she whimpered.

'Oh, God, you poor thing,' he said, coming up alongside her and putting his hand to her face. Tears welled again. 'How are you? Are you okay? What happened?' He was babbling; a clear sign he was way out of his depth.

'I'm okay,' Jessica reassured him. 'Anna, this is my husband, Steve,' she said to the nurse who had finished removing her clothes – Jessica thought she'd never been so embarrassed in her life, if she could remember it happening – and had draped a hospital gown over her. Jessica hoped when they moved her for X-rays someone would remember to do up the back of her gown if she didn't. Anna was now covering her with a blanket, being careful to leave her injured leg free. Jessica couldn't bring herself to look down at her leg; the cool breeze on it compared to the gentle warmth over the rest of her told her it was uncovered.

'Hi there,' Anna said, accepting the hand Steve offered. 'We won't know the extent of her injuries until she's had X-rays, and possibly a CT scan, and seen a doctor.'

'CT? Shit – that sounds serious!'

‘It’s too soon to know anything much yet,’ Anna said, ‘but Jessica being so coherent is a great sign.’

‘Where’s Prince? Who rang you?’

‘Prince is with Tash and Donald Roach. It was Tash who called me. Can I get you anything?’ he asked, looking around helplessly.

‘She’s nil by mouth until we can make absolutely sure she doesn’t need surgery,’ the nurse warned without looking up. *Surgery? Jesus.* Jessica felt sick to the stomach at the thought. There probably wasn’t anything left to vomit up, but that hadn’t stopped the pure bile from burning its way up her throat and out her mouth the first time.

‘I think the boots probably saved you from a lot more serious injury,’ Anna continued.

‘Steve, how bad does it look?’

‘It’s fine. Seriously. There’s no blood or anything. Not even any swelling.’

Jessica loved that Steve was there holding her hand, providing assurances, but at the same time she suddenly wanted to be left alone to go to sleep. And she wished the nurse was one of those surly, silent types, not Little Miss Chirpy. God, there was so much going on around her; beds being wheeled in and out, people bustling about. It was like Rundle bloody Mall. A slightly overweight man pushing a yellow bucket with the handle of a mop appeared, mopped her sick up, didn’t acknowledge her apology to him, and disappeared, all in the space of less than thirty seconds. Did he just wander around looking for sick his whole shift? How did he know he was needed right there, right then?

It was all quite exhausting.

A young doctor appeared in a white coat with a stethoscope draped around his neck. Jessica almost giggled at how clichéd he

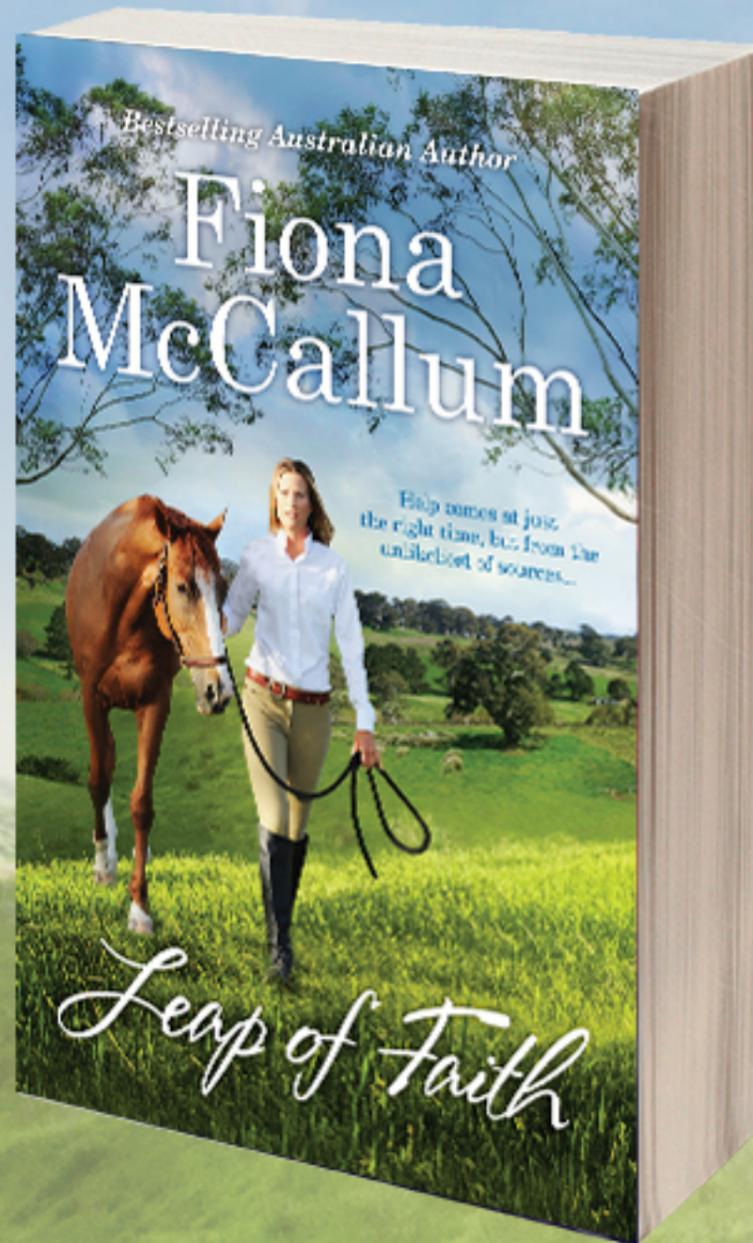
looked. *Great, they sent the intern*, she thought, taking in his young, boyish looks.

‘Hi, I’m Doctor Grant,’ he said, picking up the chart Anna had just put down. While Doctor Grant was reading, mumbling to himself and nodding, Jessica was trying to work out if Grant was his first or last name. Oh, what did it matter? She relaxed back into the mattress, too tired to care. She could hear Nurse Anna and Doctor Grant talking around her, but it was as if she was underwater; she couldn’t make out precisely what they were saying.

And then he was right beside her, touching her leg, poking and prodding her stomach, and asking questions. She answered them all as best she could.

‘I don’t think there’s too much damage done, but we’ll know for sure after your X-rays. I’ll see you a bit later,’ Doctor Grant said, with a friendly hand on her shoulder. He was smiling warmly down at her. He nodded and offered a smile to Steve, and was then gone.

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