



FIONA MCCALLUM

Bestselling Australian Author

*When your world goes dark,
where do you find hope?*

Trick of the Light

The old saying goes: 'A problem shared is a problem halved'. But what if your problem is secret?

Erica, newly widowed, is devastated to discover her venture capitalist husband left their finances in ruins. Determined to save her home while protecting her teenage daughters, she vows to get back on her feet without letting them, or anyone else, know the truth.

When her girls head off on a long-planned overseas adventure, Erica focuses on her much-loved job behind a makeup counter to keep her emotionally and financially afloat - although she is troubled by a peculiar encounter at work.

Then she loses her job, the darkness beckons and Erica's life spirals downwards, further disturbed by strange occurrences in her house. Missing objects. Stopped clocks. Noises in the night. Should she doubt her very sanity? Can she swallow her pride and make herself reach out to her friends in time? Does she have a choice?

A moving story of loss, change and self-discovery from Australia's master storyteller.

Trick of the Light by Fiona McCallum

Published: 7th April 2021

Imprint: HQ Fiction

Format: Trade paperback | RRP: \$32.99 | ISBN: 9781867207863 | eBook and audiobook available

Fiona McCallum was raised on a cereal and wool farm near Cleve on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula and remained in the area until her mid-twenties, during which time she married and separated. She's lived in Melbourne and Sydney and currently resides in suburban Adelaide.

An avid reader and writer, Fiona returned to full-time study as a mature-age student and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in professional writing and editing and a second major in history in 2000. She then began a consultancy providing writing and editing services to the corporate sector. While studying, and then working, Fiona found herself drawn to writing fiction where her keen observation of people and their everyday lives could be combined with her love of storytelling.

Now a full-time novelist, Fiona writes heart-warming stories that draw on her rich and contrasting life experiences, love of animals and fascination with human nature. Her first novel, *Psycheque*, was published in 2011 and became a best-seller. In the ten years since, Fiona has written another eleven bestselling novels: *Nowhere Else*, *Wattle Creek*, *Saving Grace*, *Time Will Tell*, *Meant To Be*, *Leap of Faith*, *Standing Strong*, *Finding Hannah*, *Making Peace*, *A Life of Her Own* and *The Long Road Home*. *Trick of the Light* is Fiona's thirteenth novel.

For more information about Fiona and her books, visit her website at fionamccallum.com. She can also be found on Facebook at facebook.com/fionamccallum.author.

Also by Fiona McCallum

Paycheque
Nowhere Else
Leap of Faith

The Wattle Creek series

Wattle Creek
Standing Strong

The Button Jar series

Saving Grace
Time Will Tell
Meant To Be

The Finding Hannah series

Finding Hannah
Making Peace

The Ballarat series

A Life of Her Own
The Long Road Home

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FICTION



First Published 2021
First Australian Paperback Edition 2021
ISBN 9781867207863

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Published by
HQ Fiction

An imprint of Harlequin Enterprises (Australia) Pty Limited (ABN 47 001 180 918),
a subsidiary of HarperCollins Publishers Australia Pty Limited (ABN 36 009 913 517)
Level 13, 201 Elizabeth St
SYDNEY NSW 2000
AUSTRALIA

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia
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Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

*In memory of my dad, to
whom I owe my courage,
resilience and tenacity.*

Prologue

Erica arranged slices of buttered date loaf on a plate and placed it on the coffee table. She'd got up early to bake despite there still being plenty of other offerings in the freezer from Stuart's wake ten days earlier.

Having something to focus on that wasn't her sadness and the great gaping hole in her life was important, even though baking, like so many other everyday tasks, was also a horrible reminder that life just carried on, regardless of the assault on normality she had just endured. When she let her mind go there ... Erica tried hard to not think too deeply about anything much because no one thought ever completely stood alone. Most things were connected, with one idle ponderance linking to or prompting another. Before grief, thoughts and memories tied together had been comfortable and comforting. She longed for the occasional isolated memory, a single grain of sand, but instead got pulled into quicksand, the darkness and drag of which took a lot of effort to resist. Today she hoped baking from scratch instead of taking out some cake and watching it defrost on the bench would distract

from the quicksand. (And she would have watched because all too often lately she was having to drag her attention away from something after losing chunks of time staring mindlessly.)

Erica wished there were only so many tears a person could shed. Her bouts left her wrecked – completely exhausted – as if they'd been wrung from her, like someone had put a hand around her top and her bottom sections and twisted in opposite directions to painfully extract every last drop.

She longed to laugh properly again with her girls and reminisce without eventually dissolving into tears. And actually *be* strong without pretending or working so hard to be. They'd get there. It would happen: she had to believe that.

She'd also thought grief would be easier this time around, having lost her mother six years before and her brother many more years before that – though that was different because she'd been a kid and didn't think she'd properly understood or processed it. Even now. With her mum, it had taken her a good – or bad, really – two years to not burst into tears whenever her father, a dear old soul battling dementia, uttered her mother's name. And it only twisted the knife that he still didn't realise she'd departed, and relayed memories and chatted to whoever happened to be beside him as if that person were his wife or as if she had just popped off to the loo or the kitchen to get another cuppa. She was thankful he wasn't as upset as she was, but, Christ, it hurt. Physically. It was a deep punch into her side on top of the all-over ache that was already there as another appendage. She'd thought, hoped, the practice she'd already had would help. But it didn't. If anything, it was harder, more painful. And she didn't think it had anything to do with the fact that Stuart hadn't had a long life, or that he'd had a lot more living and contributing to do. No, Erica found her grief compounded. Thoughts of her mother sometimes

set her off now as strongly as thoughts of Stuart, gone just days before.

Not even the fact she'd had time with Stuart to say goodbye, come to terms with it, helped. Those callous enough to suggest someone dying of cancer – slowly – was easier to deal with than sudden loss were wrong. Well, in her case, anyway. Regardless of the fact she truly hadn't believed he'd die – had thought he would get through this like the previous two episodes – she'd thought it a matter of staying positive. She hadn't sat beside him, acknowledging his prognosis and offering final words. Though, what did you say?

Some things you only could say to the dead, not the living. And they hadn't been a very gushy, emotionally or physically demonstrative couple, anyway. Yes, they were strong and supportive, said 'I love you', held hands occasionally – usually when crossing the road – but they'd had more of a quiet contentment about them. She hadn't sat there stroking his hair and cooing that she'd be fine if he left – *Just go, slip away, my love*. She had sat beside him thinking positively, reading a magazine. Being quiet and keeping him company. Mackenzie and Issy had done the same. Right near the end, though she hadn't realised that it was, Erica had figured what Stuart needed was rest for his body to concentrate on fighting the beast within, not endless chatter. And if he'd wanted otherwise, Stuart would have said. He was the leader of their family.

They'd had a week to deal with the shock of losing him before the funeral, though planning the event took plenty of energy and had been a welcome distraction and source of momentum. In the time since, they'd cried together, watched lots of action movies – Stuart's favourite genre – and gorged on leftover sweet and savoury offerings friends and acquaintances had brought. Yesterday was

the first day the three of them had been at home alone with no one dropping in.

Erica would have preferred to have the wake at the funeral home, but the three of them had reluctantly agreed that Stuart would have wanted to have everyone at the house – and this was their last chance to do anything for him. It wasn't about them. Stuart had been proud of their home, especially the massive renovation, the design of which he'd contributed to heavily. It wasn't entirely Erica's taste – a little too white and minimalist, especially the décor – but she did enjoy the features he'd incorporated to control the climate and keep the cost of running the home down, including double-glazing for all the glass in the windows and patio doors. It had probably cost a fortune, but Stuart had kept the details to himself, except to say it was paying dividends, along with the huge solar system on the roof.

While Erica had learnt with grieving over her mum that keeping busy was best, it was as much about keeping the mind active as about being physical. She was probably at risk of being considered a little hyperactive at times, but when she was still the memories came flooding back and the sadness began to pound sharply at her temples and under her ribs and bluntly inside her chest.

She was glad Stuart had been a stickler for having everything in order and had appointed his accountant and financial planner as executors of his estate, and of hers too. They were due here any second to tell her where things were at.

When she heard the doorbell, Erica habitually wiped her hands on the tea towel, pressed the button on the kettle to set it to boil and checked her watch as she went out into the long hall and made her way to the front door. They were right on time.

‘Hi, Paul. Hi, Toby,’ she said, giving the accountant and financial planner each a quick hug, made a little awkward by the briefcases they carried. She didn’t know them very well. They’d been Stuart’s advisers for probably a decade, or even much longer, but even so she’d only met them a handful of times. They hadn’t crossed over into socialising together; theirs was a cordial professional relationship and Erica had never met either of their wives or partners or been to their homes. In fact, they might both have husbands – or be married to each other – for all she knew about them personally.

They’d been at the funeral and here afterwards and at most other open-house style functions Stuart had put on for his business – Christmas, major achievements and the like. Stuart had liked to celebrate publicly – well, as publicly as it got in a private home with professional caterers. Not many of those parties had been thrown of late due to Stuart’s illness. He’d insisted on doing the usual Christmas shindig the previous year – though right at the beginning of December rather than the end – and had managed to be the epitome of an ebullient host. Not wanting to spark fear or a mass exodus of clients, he’d even had Erica use her professional makeup skills on his unhealthy pallor. No one had any idea he’d be dead in less than three months, including her.

‘Come through,’ she said, leading them down the hall into the large, white-tiled open space overlooking the back garden. Six panels of hinged glass doors when pushed open to one side literally brought the outside in. There was a slight chill to the early autumn air, otherwise she’d have opened them up and let the sunshine in. There was plenty of it casting shadows onto the lawn via the surrounding trees. A few of those had lost the first of their leaves overnight, though perhaps it was just the wind; it was a bit

early in the season. Nonetheless, she'd rake them up later. 'I've just put the kettle on. Can I get you a tea or coffee?'

'No thanks, I'm fine,' Paul said.

'I'm all good, too, thanks, I've already had my morning quota,' Toby said.

'Okay. Take a seat.' It didn't feel right to have a cup of anything when they weren't, and something about their demeanour made her join them at the modern timber laminate dining table with high-backed chairs in cream leather that matched the large L-shaped couch.

The men seemed more sombre than usual, though, of course, she'd only ever seen them when socialising and at the funeral and wake – not quite socialising in the traditional sense, but still ...

Erica watched as Paul, the accountant, unloaded a few files from his briefcase onto the table. But he didn't open the folders. Instead he sat with his hands on them as if they were simply props. Were they for reference later?

She ran her hands down her jeans-clad legs under the table, palms first and then the backs of her hands. Damn it, of all times to have a hot flush. Thankfully hers didn't make her red; they were just uncomfortable heat and sweat. Horrible. How fun was being forty-nine? Not at all! She really wished menopause and all its many and varied symptoms would bugger off.

Erica had experienced what others had described for six months but then the sweats and mood swings vanished for another six – she had thought they'd gone for good. Had hoped. Her best friend and cousin, Stephanie, had warned her they came back. She hadn't wanted to believe it, but now there was her upper lip sprinkled with beads of sweat along with the sides of her nose. Damn it. She pulled a tissue from her pocket and quickly and gently dabbed at

it and then her brow and down the sides of her nose and around her eyes. She hoped the men hadn't noticed.

Menopause, while slowly being more openly talked about, still probably wasn't a topic for discussion with men beyond your own intimate partner. Perhaps in board rooms and businesses where menopausal woman ruled it came up. Regardless, and Erica wasn't quite sure why, but she was a little embarrassed at the thought of them thinking of her as menopausal. They might think she'd been wiping away tears – understandable – and averted their eyes, not wanting to acknowledge the emotion or not knowing how to.

But Erica didn't have any tears, not now she had her war paint on, as Stuart had referred to it. Just as well, given she thought she wasn't exactly a pretty crier. And displays of raw emotion usually made people in the vicinity feel decidedly awkward and not know where to look or what to do, not to mention the domino effect ...

They looked up at her with pursed lips. She smiled back at them in an attempt to disarm them, ease their clear discomfort.

Paul nodded to Toby and he nodded back. 'We're sorry we don't have better news. We're really sorry to have to tell you this, but Stuart's left the finances, your finances, in a bit of a mess,' Paul said.

'Sorry? Complicated, you mean? He was always muttering about this deal or other, moving money from here to there.' She demonstrated with her hands across the top of the sleek table. Anything to ease the stifling crowding-in feeling coming over her.

'Well, yes, there was that, which is part of the problem,' Paul said.

'Has he done something wrong?' Erica's heart slowed. Suddenly she found it very unsettling that they were both seated right across the table from her, side by side. It was hard to not see them as a united front with her on the outer.

‘Not as such,’ Paul said.

‘Well, not in a fraudulent sense,’ Toby added.

‘Yes. More in a mismanagement sense,’ Paul said.

‘What are you talking about? Perhaps you’d better just tell me.’ After the shock of losing Stuart, there was little else remaining to startle her. Or so she thought.

Paul took a deep breath, let out an audible sigh and said, ‘You’re almost broke, Erica.’

She stared and then blinked. ‘What? Don’t be ridiculous. He had a quarter of a million dollars in life insurance – just like I have.’

Both men shook their heads. ‘He cancelled the policies several years ago,’ Toby said. ‘Without telling us.’

Um. Wow. ‘Really? That’s – But there’s his superannuation ...’

They shook their heads again. Erica’s pounding heart became slower and slower.

‘He stopped contributing years ago and withdrew it, which he was allowed to do due to financial hardship because of his illness.’

‘How much did he withdraw?’

‘There’s nothing left in his account,’ Toby said.

There was silence. Erica tried to think, to understand, but just couldn’t.

‘What?’

‘We’re so sorry. This must be a huge shock. It was for us, too,’ Paul said.

‘But hang on. You’re his accountant and financial adviser – where was your advice? How could you have let this happen? What the fuck were you doing?’ Erica cursed her language and emotion but fear was bubbling up and teetering on uncontrollable. Her eyes burnt with frustration and anger. ‘How could you have not known?’

‘It was our role to advise, yes. We advised against plenty of things Stuart suggested, of course – but his affairs were his own. We can’t, couldn’t, *make* him do anything he didn’t want to,’ Toby said.

Erica took several deep breaths and tried to still her whirling mind and the shaking of her entire being from her organs inside right out to her skin. As much as she wanted to rant and rave at these two – blame them – they were the messengers. And she’d known Stuart. He was self-assured, at times arrogant even. His confidence was what had drawn her to him – especially his assurances that he’d take care of them. And he had. Very well. Or so she’d thought. Now Erica could see it might have been a case of ‘I think he doth protest too much’.

‘Okay. So, that’s the bad news, what’s the good news?’ She was pleased she managed to sound a little upbeat.

‘Sorry?’ Toby said.

‘There is no good news,’ Paul said quietly.

Erica sat staring at them expectantly, her hands clasped in front of her on the table, the smile stuck on her face. And then her brain caught up. *They’re being serious. There is no good news; nothing positive at all.*

‘Sorry,’ Paul said.

‘Erica, we’re both really sorry. About everything,’ Toby added.

‘Right. Okay. I get that. And I appreciate it. But what do I do about it? Am I going to lose the house?’ Alarm gripped her. She watched as Paul averted his gaze to the files under his hands, and then began to fiddle with their edges.

Oh my god.

‘Well that depends on you, really. We can see from the accounts that Stuart took care of all the mortgage and utility and other main expenses from his account – supplemented by his super

since he hasn't been working. You need to start making all those payments now – from your own account: the one in your name that Stuart was signatory to. It'll be easier if you set up automatic direct deposits,' Paul said.

'But you'll have to make sure there's always enough to cover everything. Becoming overdrawn, even for just a few days, will incur hefty charges and could also do your credit rating serious damage,' Toby said.

'Yes. Look, people do owe Stuart money. We've submitted creditors' claims with several organisations that have gone into administration, and we're hoping for funds to come in there. But there are no guarantees we'll be successful, and even if we are, it's rare the full amount is achieved,' Paul explained. 'And there might even be claims to come in relating to Stuart's businesses,' he added quietly. 'But what it means right now is that wrapping up the estate is going to take a lot longer than usual.'

'Right,' Erica said, nodding slowly, despite most of this information not sinking into her spinning brain. Did she even *have* a credit rating if Stuart had taken care of all the finances? She had her account, where her salary was deposited and the board the girls paid, and which she used for groceries, eating out, and anything for herself or the girls before they'd become self-sufficient.

'You have a bit of a buffer on the home loan – you're a little ahead there – so you're keeping up with that, but it's tight. For your reference, here are the weekly, monthly and quarterly amounts I've calculated you need to come up with,' he said, sliding a page out of the file in front of him without opening it fully.

She blinked several times to try to stop her eyes from bugging as she attempted to calculate what she brought in as a full-time makeup artist running the counter of JPW Cosmetics at David Jones in town. It was a long way from minimum wage, but it

wasn't a salary to get excited about. But that hadn't mattered; she'd never seen job satisfaction as just about the money, and being the family's secondary earner meant she hadn't needed to. There was so much she'd always loved about her job. She tried to tell herself that's how it should be to push back the wave of disappointment gathering inside her.

'Yes, you might want to tighten your belt a bit,' Toby said. 'Tighten the budget.'

'Unfortunately, it's probably going to require a serious adjustment on your part,' Paul said.

Right then Erica hated the idea that these men might know about every cent she earned and spent and that they were as good as telling her – as if she were a child – to curb her spending. But that was the way Stuart had set everything up, including his appointment of them as executors. And she'd been grateful for not having to deal with the finances. Full stop. Ever. She'd asked to be included in their early days together – had assumed they were a joint venture in that sense, too, but clearly not. Stuart hadn't wanted a bar of her knowing and she'd been content to leave it at that.

She found her mind scrambling to where she could cut costs. Eating out was a biggie. Until the last few weeks, she'd socialised quite a bit – probably more than most. Stuart had encouraged her to keep it up, despite him being in hospital. She continued to have several café or restaurant meals out a week with friends. That was expensive, wasn't it? Probably. Especially when she always had at least one glass of decent wine. And she always bought her lunch in the city. She spent lots of small amounts on bits and pieces of makeup, expensive hair products, clothes, books, movie tickets, snacks, gifts with tap-and-go. But together they probably added up to quite a large sum each month ...

‘I guess you could say the good news is that you live in Adelaide and not Melbourne or Sydney, where the cost of property and living generally is so much higher,’ Toby offered with a slight shrug, breaking the looming silence. ‘And you have Mackenzie and Isabella at an age where they can pay their way or at least aren’t a major drain.’

Oh god, they might be the worst part of all of this. They’d adored their father – it would destroy them to know how much he’d let them down.

‘Toby,’ Paul warned.

‘Sorry. That’s not very helpful. But, honestly, things could be a lot worse, Erica. School fees, alone, if the kids hadn’t already finished. Financially worse, that is. Obviously,’ he said, blushing as he cleared his throat.

Erica knew they were trying, and in a very difficult position, but she was too caught up in her own head to either admonish or reassure.

A slow creep of realisation mixed with growing fear made her light-headed.

Oh fuck!

Mackenzie and Issy. Yesterday she’d transferred five thousand dollars to each of them for their overseas trip – their gap year. She hadn’t thought they’d still go – had secretly hoped they wouldn’t – or at least that they wouldn’t be already talking about it so excitedly. But they were. Life went on. And apparently, they could save a bundle on Qantas’s snap twenty-four-hour sale. They’d started saving a few years back, as soon as they secured their respective waitressing and retail jobs, both choosing to defer university. Of course, this was all before Stuart’s cancer diagnosis had turned from hopeful with options to nothing more anyone can do now ...

She'd come close to telling them it was too soon, or posing it as a question, but had reminded herself just in time that they had to do what was right for them. And, anyway, they might change their mind between now and when they left in a few months. The girls had saved nearly enough for their flights and didn't immediately need her contribution, but Erica had wanted to do the transfer right then and prevent any future awkwardness with them having to ask her. She'd also leapt at the chance to concentrate on the internet banking so she didn't dissolve into tears and beg them not to leave her. Her insides quivered. She began to sweat under her arms. Probably not a hot flush this time.

No, it'll be okay. She swallowed hard. *It has to be.* She tried to focus her attention on the solemn men in front of her, but couldn't. She thought she should ask if there was anything else she could or should do, but wouldn't they have said? She wanted them gone and to be left alone. She was probably even close to throwing up.

'There *is* the option of applying for hardship dispensation,' Paul said, as if reading her mind, 'but we think that's best to keep up your sleeve for now. See how you go for the next few weeks. Perhaps your employer might be open to increasing your salary?'

'I can only ask,' she said, trying to smile. The thought of doing that coated her insides with another layer of anxiety, but she conceded she didn't have many other choices.

'Unfortunately, that's about all you can do at this point,' Paul said. 'Cut out all non-essential spending, like eating out.'

'Yes,' Toby agreed, nodding. 'And takeaway coffee is another expense that really adds up over time.'

Erica was torn between accepting their wisdom and advice and telling them to piss off. How fucking embarrassing! She'd love to tell them she'd drink as many ginormous barista-made

lattes as she liked, but reminded herself they were not the ones to blame. How were they being paid for the work they were clearly still doing for Stuart, anyway? She pushed that thought aside. She already had too much to deal with.

‘Should I be, um ...’ gulp, swallow ‘... putting the house up for sale?’

‘You won’t be able to sell until probate is granted and Stuart’s estate wrapped up, which will be quite a few months in this case. And, anyway, the market isn’t in your favour at the moment,’ Paul said.

Erica held her tongue on telling them they’d proved themselves to be not very good advisers. At least she had them. She didn’t want to alienate them.

She looked around the room and her gaze locked on the two huge modern canvases adorning the far white wall; she became a little buoyant. ‘Could I sell them? They’re originals by Olive Jasper,’ she said, pointing towards the paintings. She loved them but could live without them if it meant keeping the house.

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed both Paul and Toby shift on their chairs. She turned back to face them. *Now what?*

‘Unfortunately, they’re not actually originals,’ Toby said quietly. ‘They’re prints Stuart had done – printed directly onto canvas. The originals were sold several years ago.’

‘What?’ Erica longed to get up and go and check, but stayed where she was.

‘You didn’t know?’ Paul said.

Erica shook her head. She was suddenly cold and shivering, as if her blood had left her. Beads of sweat prodded her forehead and heat rose up her throat.

Paul and Toby looked a little red-faced themselves. They ran their hands down their faces.

‘We’re so sorry, Erica, we thought you knew – at least about the art,’ Paul said.

Erica couldn’t take her eyes off the paintings and kept shifting her gaze from one to the other and back again. ‘When?’ she asked quietly.

‘I’m not sure,’ Paul said. ‘Maybe just after the first round of chemo. Around six years ago?’

About the time Mum died. Erica could understand if Stuart hadn’t wanted to put more onto her then. But the truth was it was bigger and had gone on for a lot longer than that. What possibly hurt her most about it was that he hadn’t confided in her – hadn’t trusted her enough. He hadn’t valued her intelligence enough to seek her suggestions for alternative courses of action.

Erica had the discombobulating sensation that she didn’t really, hadn’t really, known Stuart at all. Her next thought was that she could imagine a parallel situation where she was a widow learning about a husband’s whole other family. She loved film, had probably watched too many movies. It was a plot that popped up regularly. How often did it happen in real life? She shuddered and brought herself back to the here and now.

‘Where did the money go?’ she found herself asking, despite being unsure she wanted the answer.

‘Not really anywhere, as such, other than living, really,’ Toby said. ‘It seems he was robbing Peter to pay Paul. Not this Paul, obviously,’ he said and cleared his throat. ‘It all started when he first became sick.’

You fool, Stuart, you stupid, stupid fool. I thought we were best friends, that we had each other’s backs.

‘We’d better get going. I’ll leave these with you. They contain all the account login details and everything you need in order to see what’s gone on and where things stand – if you can be

bothered. That's up to you. And, of course, feel free to email or call us if you have any questions,' Paul said, sliding the small pile of folders towards Erica. 'And remember to keep the passwords secure, for obvious reasons,' he added, standing up. Toby followed suit. 'We'll also need to take Stuart's car.'

Erica nodded and got up to fetch both keys from the bench where she'd left them earlier and handed them to Paul. She'd known Stuart's BMW was leased. It's why she thought they were coming around today. So at least this part of things wasn't a shock.

'It's in the carport,' she said, pressing the remote on her own keys to activate the roller door as she walked them out. The groaning sound of the raising carport door outside was the only sound beyond their heavy footsteps on the plush red Persian hall runner over the floorboards.

'Again, we're really sorry,' Paul said when they were outside.

'Yes. Unfortunately, it really was out of our control,' Toby said.

'I'm sorry, too,' she said, forcing herself to give them each a quick, awkward hug.

'We'll be in touch with any progress,' Paul said.

And if you magically find some money stashed away, let me know.

These words were on the tip of her tongue, but when she opened her mouth it was only the lump in her throat that came forwards.

She waited on the verandah while Paul backed Stuart's car out, activated the roller door to close, and remained standing while both navy blue BMWs drove down the street and then turned onto the main road at the end. She went back inside and sat down.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, FUCK!

Her gaze rose to the paintings, which were not paintings but prints, and she shook her head at them.

A moment later her phone pinged with a message. She turned it over. It was a text from Mackenzie saying she was heading out

after work and wouldn't be home for dinner. And then a message came through from Issy saying she wouldn't be home either. She sent them both a thumbs-up emoji, two kisses and a love heart, as usual. As she put her phone back down, she thought, *Thank Christ they aren't here.* And then: *How will I tell them? Can I just not? Yes, they don't have to know.* Thankfully the girls came and went a lot as young people with hectic social lives and jobs tended to.

Chapter One

Three months later ...

‘Mum,’ Mackenzie called from the other end of the long hallway.

‘In here,’ Erica called back from behind Stuart’s desk in his study. She took her reading glasses off, laid them down with a clink on the enormous expanse of glass and rubbed her eyes. Spending time in here poring over online bank statements and spreadsheets and tweaking her budget had become a new hobby bordering on an obsession since the day Paul and Toby visited. She hadn’t heard from them much since, as not much had changed.

Despite finding plenty of unnecessary expenses to cut, she was still chased to bed each night by thoughts of what could be – especially if the economy suddenly turned and interest rates shot up. She tried not to think about that, but it crept in over her while she was vulnerable, lying in bed in the dark trying to get to sleep. She was making great headway, and so far she was still floating. But there were some things she couldn’t curb without the girls asking questions. And then not finding out the truth was another

preoccupation, and was as much about upholding herself in their eyes as Stuart. She knew she shouldn't be – they were her daughters, for goodness' sake! – but she was too embarrassed to fess up that she'd left the money in his hands and not taken responsibility, like it was the 1950s or something!

She often sat there cursing her recently departed husband. *Damn it, Stuart, how could you have done this to me? To us?* And then the inevitable guilt and sorrow rose within her. He was gone. Dead. He hadn't meant to leave her and his daughters in such a dire financial situation. She had to believe that. Thankfully the house was in good repair, she thought, looking around. Her life might be like a big old wobbling house of cards, but at least he hadn't left them with a leaking roof.

'There you are!' Mackenzie said, appearing in the doorway, Isabella just behind her. They were only fourteen months apart in age, but often Issy seemed years behind Mackenzie in maturity – or perhaps it was just that she idolised her sister and being the quieter one made her seem a little less sure of herself. Mackenzie was bold and had the gift of the gab, the conviction and ability to convince that her father had had, and his dark brooding looks. Issy was more like Erica: quiet, thoughtful. They tended to sit back and observe, and like her mum when she spoke it tended to be after careful contemplation. Words were sprinkled carefully by Issy and splattered liberally by Mackenzie.

'What's up?' Erica said, looking up. She forced a smile and pushed back her concern, imagined herself running her hand over her face to physically smooth the worry lines.

'Are you busy?' Mackenzie said, hesitatingly, still by the door, practically wrapped around the frame.

'Never too busy for you,' she said, and her breath caught as she realised it was always exactly what Stuart had said to her whenever

she'd knocked on his office door, which he'd always kept closed. Now she thought she knew why.

'Come in. Sit,' she said, indicating the two modern leather and steel chairs. She backed Stuart's luxurious leather chair away from the desk and swivelled around to face them, again struck by how similar, but also very different, this scenario was from the way it had always been previously. She could see why Stuart called this his power chair; he'd always laughed when he said it, but she saw the truth in it. She was a little higher than the girls, who were both fidgeting with their hands in their laps, just like Erica had tended to when in the same position. 'What is it?' she prompted and settled herself for a difficult conversation or request. She tensed in response to Mackenzie's taut demeanour and big eyes that were darting around the room. *Oh god. Please don't be here to ask me for more money – instead tell me you've changed your minds about going.* They were meant to be leaving in a bit over two weeks for their gap year – or their well-however-long-we-last-until-we-run-out-of-money year, as Issy had begun calling it.

Erica and Stuart had been very encouraging, agreeing the goal would keep them sane during their father's bouts of illness and treatment. Maps to pore over and countries to discuss whiled away the time with him in hospital and the long days and weeks when he was bed-ridden. Erica and Stuart had both done plenty of travel so had a lot to contribute, but Erica had recognised early the girls' need to have this one thing with their father, though plenty of times she'd cringed at the creep of jealousy and pain of being left out sneaking in. But she pushed it all aside, telling herself firmly that it wasn't about her.

Since Stuart's passing, when the girls spoke of where they would go and what they would see, she added an anecdote of her

own. But while they were polite and entered into the discussion, they always quickly returned to remembering something Stuart had said and took off on that tangent. Each time Erica was left feeling flat, but told herself of course they had to keep their father alive – it was vital for their healing. And, anyway, there was no competing with a dead man for their affection.

The #metoo movement and renewed popular interest in feminism had got her wondering, though, if this was her being silenced, and allowing herself to be, as a woman – well beyond her marriage. She'd been happy with Stuart. Of course, they'd had their share of moments of gentle conflict. But what had been her role in that? Perhaps being the peacekeeper, the nurturer, wasn't really the best strategy long term. But she was easy-going. Not much really bothered her. Perhaps if she'd stomped her feet occasionally, though, insisted on certain things, she'd be in a whole different financial situation now ...

'Sorry?' Erica said, forcing her attention back to the room. Mackenzie had spoken so quietly she'd almost missed what she'd said. And had she misheard anyway?

'Why don't you come with us?' Mackenzie said.

'Yeah. It'd be fun, Mum,' Issy added.

Erica's heart swelled. 'Oh, bless you, darling girls.' She wanted to gather them to her. Right then all the sacrifices she'd made were totally worth it to have raised two such thoughtful, gorgeous young women. 'But you don't want your old mum tagging along and spoiling your fun,' she finished breezily, desperate to hide the sudden wave of emotion that had gripped her insides.

'We're not going to be doing anything silly,' Mackenzie said.

'I know. But, still, it wouldn't be the same for you with your mother in tow.'

‘We really wouldn’t mind,’ Issy said. The plaintive gaze she bestowed upon Erica made her wonder if – hope – they were actually having second thoughts about leaving the nest after all.

‘Darlings, it’s so lovely of you to ask – it really is – but I need to stay here. I have to work. And I had so much time off when your dad was sick that I don’t have any leave left.’

‘Oh. Yeah.’ They both looked down at their hands lying in their laps.

Erica wasn’t sure what was now going through their minds. ‘Maybe I’ll be able to join you along the way sometime for a quick visit,’ she said.

‘Yeah. That’d be good,’ Issy said, brightening up.

‘Sounds like a plan,’ Mackenzie said.

‘Are you having second thoughts about going?’ Erica ventured. ‘Because you can change your minds, you know. No one will think any less of you if you put it off for a bit. Or not go at all,’ she added gently.

‘Oh no,’ Mackenzie said. ‘We’re going. In two weeks, as we planned, for sure. Well, I certainly am!’ she said, her usually self-confident demeanour back.

‘Me too,’ Issy said, with a little less certainty.

‘We just thought you deserved time away too,’ Mackenzie said. ‘You know,’ she added with a shrug.

‘I appreciate the thought, darling girls, but I’ll be fine. I am fine. You don’t need to worry about me,’ Erica said brightly.

‘Okay. I’m making a coffee if you want one,’ Mackenzie said.

‘Oh, yes, please.’

Alone again, Erica pulled her chair back up to the desk and rubbed her face with her hands in an effort to resist the building tears.

Erica cocked an ear and listened to the girls cheerfully fossicking in the kitchen. Everything was worth it to hear their grief being punctuated by a moment of happiness, of joy. Erica knew you had to grab those precious moments with both hands and hold on to them tightly for as long as you could. It was her main focus as a mother – to help navigate them through the grief of losing their dad with as little impact and scarring as possible. Not that she knew what she was doing. Did any parent ever? Really?

At eleven, she'd probably been too young to fully take in what losing her older brother had meant. Or perhaps it was the wonderful care her darling parents had bestowed upon her that meant she didn't know the true impact on her beyond sadness and the huge piece missing from her heart and life.

Mark was eighteen and they'd been close – well, as close as you could be as siblings with such an age gap. She'd been too young to hang out with him often and he wouldn't have wanted his younger sister tagging along anyway no matter how much he liked her. If they'd been together, would he have drowned in the murky water hole or would he not have been so keen to show off to his mates and dived in where it was too shallow? Might he have done a bomb instead of diving? Could she have saved him? She didn't like to think about it. Didn't tend to much. Tried very hard not to.

But losing Stuart had brought up all sorts of upsetting emotions and conflicting thoughts she'd successfully shut down after losing her mum. She now often found herself wondering if the care her parents had taken in protecting her and nurturing her, shepherding her away from the pain by wrapping her extra-tightly in their love, had come at the expense of their own mental and emotional health. While Erica remembered there being plenty of crying, neither parent had ceased functioning. Had they both

ended up with dementia because they'd bottled up too many of their own feelings and put the stopper in? She was so grateful to them for everything, but especially showing her that tears were okay and also that life went on but in an altered state. She couldn't explain it, given that Mark's name was never mentioned, but he did remain a presence in the house and their lives. Not in the way some families kept a lost loved one's room intact as if they might walk in the door one day and take up occupancy again. Though, now she thought about it, Erica couldn't put her finger on why or how she thought they'd kept his name or memory alive. Perhaps unconsciously they'd done the right thing.

Erica didn't have a choice about keeping Stuart's memory alive – he was everywhere around them. This room with its minimalism was so him, as was the house itself. If left to her own devices, Erica might have chosen something a little smaller, less ostentatious. But when they'd moved back from the US they'd had plenty of money and Stuart had wanted something he could impress his clients with.

He was in venture capital; while she didn't know the ins and outs of the field and didn't care to, she did know it was all about convincing people to invest large amounts of money in various projects and industries. Basically, he was a salesman, he'd told her on their first date. And he was a good one – or was back then – because she'd bought him hook, line and sinker, as the saying went. And he'd done well throughout their marriage, because they'd had a great life, she thought sadly. But she'd have lived in a tent with him and eaten nothing but baked beans on toast.

And the rate she was going, it might just come to that. Tears stung.

If Stuart'd had a fault, it was that he believed in himself a little too much. Too confident. And his slightly crooked grin, the glint

in his eye, could probably convince Eskimos to invest in a snow-making machine. And when he added a wink, people were putty in his hands. He'd made Erica literally go weak at the knees. Right to the end. Even still, really. In hospital, fighting for his life, he'd set those big brown eyes on her and she believed every word he said. She hadn't thought for a second he would die, despite seeing all the scans and talking to all the doctors and specialists. Stuart had her convinced he was going to beat it. She figured that was why she'd been in a complete state of shock for the entire first few months after his death. How could he have failed her like that? Physically and financially. She'd had moments of anger at him for leaving her. So many times she'd wanted to yell and scream at him. And then the guilt would cut in. And then the remorse. And the sadness.

Grief was one big ball of emotions swirling around inside of her. The physical pain was a layer on top of her overall exhaustion – a completely different type of tiredness from what she'd experienced with the girls as babies and getting up to them through the night and then the accompanying drag during the day. This sort went deeper and was all-encompassing: too big and too deep for coffee or a nap or glass of wine to have any effect on. It was not a gritty-eyed tiredness but a weight that tried to hold her down, and left her suffering regular bouts of inattention, even when she got plenty of sleep – though she hadn't slept well for more than the odd night here and there for years and couldn't imagine doing so again. It was deeper than that. Or that's what she thought. Maybe it was tiredness, but just too ingrained after going on for so long. She could function, and she did, but it was as if she was moving through thick mud surrounded by fog. And sometimes she didn't think you could really call it tiredness because she was quite perky and energetic. It was more like she just couldn't be

bothered with certain things she had before. And time did weird things. She wouldn't be surprised to learn one day in the future this had all been a dream – or nightmare – and she'd been out to it for a year or on another planet. Or for one day.

Sometimes she found herself staring and frowning at a glass or a spoon with vague curiosity or wondering what it was for. And when she realised – came out of her trance-like state enough to put the object to use – doing so seemed an insurmountable task. All too often she found herself snapping back to attention after realising she'd been staring at the object in question for ages. Or it took Mackenzie and Issy reminding her she'd zoned out or a quip from them telling her what the object in her hand was for. 'Mum, you look like you've never seen a glass before. It's simple. Look, you pick it up and take a sip. Like this.' And Erica laughed along with them while they demonstrated. More and more she was having to laugh off moments of vagueness, but the truth was plenty of days she just wanted to curl up and die too. Or not die, but just not have to do anything or face up to anything. Give in to the fog around her pulling her down, smothering her. But she owed it to the girls to keep going. She was raising two young women into a world that despite commentary to the contrary was still dominated by men and their views. And she couldn't exactly declare herself strong and independent given her cosseted life with Stuart and letting his career take precedence over hers. She had some regrets, but being mother to Mackenzie and Isabella was not one of them.

Now she had to face them leaving her too. Her cousin and best friend, Steph – when she'd accidentally let slip this concern – had said that Erica should be proud of herself for raising them to be ready and to want to leave, especially two siblings who had such a close relationship with each other and their mum. And especially after all they'd gone through in losing their father.

Erica hadn't been able to bring herself to admit that she desperately wanted to beg the girls to stay. Another friend, Michelle, had gently suggested that now she could have her time in the sun, get her own career back on track. She'd nodded in response, unable to tell them the truth about that either. She wondered how she'd go when the girls weren't there and she didn't have the impetus to keep herself together. That scared her too. And being alone. The girls weren't big on parties and going out at night – they'd been too busy working. One of them had always been home at some point. She couldn't remember ever having spent a whole night all alone in the house and the thought of it terrified her, but she didn't want to admit it to herself, let alone anyone else. *Stop it!* she told herself firmly. *Cross that bridge when we come to it. You've got this far.*

Her friend Renee told her to just focus on one day at a time, or one hour or even just five minute increments, when she was really struggling. Anything to keep from completely losing herself to the darkness constantly trying to swallow her.

At least when they went, she wouldn't have to hide how frugal she needed to be. If they'd realised she was cooking a lot more chicken and vegetarian meals and almost no beef and lamb, they hadn't commented. And they didn't seem to have noticed that Erica hadn't ordered in any takeaway or that they hadn't had a meal out together since Stuart's death. Nor that she hadn't raved about a movie she'd seen. Giving up going to see films was probably her greatest sacrifice. She loved escaping into a cinema and inside fictional characters and storylines and used to go at least several times a month. But doing so was expensive – and now a luxury, though not really in Erica's mind. She thought that had helped keep her sane – certainly while Stuart had been in hospital. Much better than pacing the house and feeling helpless when not with

him. But she'd reluctantly cut them from the budget and made do with the online streaming subscriptions. The girls would certainly notice the cancellation of those, so that had to wait until they left.

It was taking some getting used to, but Erica was determined to win this battle – to become strong and independent herself. Perhaps she should be sharing more about their situation with the girls, not protecting them so much from things, but that was her choice. And in so much of life you were damned if you did and damned if you didn't. Right now, she was having enough trouble trying to keep her mind clear and climb out of the quicksand Stuart had dumped her in without having to answer a million questions from the girls. And risking them turning against her. She couldn't bear them leaving angry or disappointed in her. That would destroy her. They were all she had.

Chapter Two

A week later, on one of her two days off a week from work, Erica detected movement in front of her and looked up from the desk to see Issy in the doorway. She was spending far too much time in the office and far too much time perusing budgets and spreadsheets, but it was necessary. And she thought she was winning, just a little.

‘Darling,’ she said. ‘What’s up?’

‘We’ve made a chocolate cake. Come and have some while it’s warm,’ Issy said.

She closed the laptop and put the paperwork into the second of the stack of three document trays, got up and followed Issy out into the hall and down to the kitchen. As she went, she cringed at not only hiding away back here and missing being part of the baking from the start, but at the fact they probably hadn’t felt comfortable interrupting her until now. They’d been pottering about together in the kitchen since they were little, but it had become a particularly good and important form of therapy after losing Erica’s mum. Gradually their interest had waned for a few

years, always picking up around stressful or intense times like during high school exams and now.

‘Sit,’ they commanded when they were in the enormous open-plan living–dining area. Mackenzie put a mug of milky tea on the lacquered coffee table in front of Erica with a napkin and Issy brought over three plates each holding a piece of chocolate cake and a fork and placed them down. Erica forced herself to relax. There wouldn’t be any more opportunities for this for ages – the girls left in just a few days.

‘Mum?’ Issy asked after they’d been eating for a few moments.

‘Yes, darling.’ Erica’s antennae went up. It was the tone which had the slightest edge to it that told her they were opening a tricky conversation. Before Stuart’s death she might have smiled to herself or shared a knowing look with him and a quiet ‘uh-oh’. The girls had probably done Paper Scissors Rock to decide who would approach Mum about whatever this was. She put down her fork and gave them her undivided attention. *Could they be bringing good news? Oh, yes, please.*

Issy snuggled a little closer on the long white leather couch on one side of her and Mackenzie on the other.

‘Um. Are you going to go through Dad’s things before or after we go?’ Issy asked.

Oh. ‘Oh. Well ...’ Erica blinked. She was enormously relieved they weren’t asking for more money and wasn’t sure what question or topic she’d expected, but it wasn’t this one. ‘Um. I haven’t really thought about it,’ she lied. ‘Why do you ask? Is there something of his you want?’

Both girls were suddenly a little fidgety.

‘What? What is it?’ Erica asked, gently putting a hand on each of their nearby legs and looking from one face to the other.

Issy shrugged and said quietly, 'I think I want to take something of his with me. You know ... to remember him. I know we have his memory and our memories but ...'

'You want to take a memento of him with you? That's completely understandable.'

'And of you,' Issy hastened to add.

'We'll be in touch texting, so that's different. I get it. You don't need to explain,' Erica said. 'Do you want to go through his things with me now – we could do it today or tomorrow or any day before you leave. Or is there something specific you want? His watch, maybe? Though you'd be devastated if you took it with you and something happened to it while you were away,' Erica said. Regardless of whether she wanted to avoid thinking about them being robbed, it was a possibility. 'So maybe something sentimental but that mightn't have value to anyone else? We could go through the albums and files and print off some photos.'

'Maybe. What about his wallet?' Issy asked quietly.

'That's the first thing someone will want to steal, Issy,' Mackenzie said. 'And then what would be the point of the new one you just bought?'

'Not necessarily to use. Just to have. Maybe.'

'Come on, let's go and have a look, though I'm not sure what there is,' Erica said. As she made her way up to her bedroom, she racked her brain for something Stuart might have had two of, to keep things equal. She understood what they were looking for and knew they wouldn't know what it was until they saw it and it might be something completely different for each of them. She'd done this soon after Mark had died. She'd gone into his room and stood gazing around until she spied the perfect item. She'd always thought it had chosen her, or rather Mark had somehow

had something to do with it. She didn't believe in ghosts and all that nonsense, but she'd had a really strange feeling she should take his favourite scruffy holey red woollen jumper. She'd worn it every night through high school while doing her homework and continued to sleep with it under her pillow for years afterwards and had never let it far from her sight. Even now it was in the top drawer of her bedside cupboard, barely hanging together in some spots, shrunk and stretched out of shape, but there nonetheless.

It had been her mum's idea to have something not valuable but which epitomised Mark and or what he meant to her. As she thought about the hotchpotch of treasured items with which Mark had cluttered his bedroom, she cursed Stuart's love of minimalism. She couldn't exactly split up a pair of cufflinks. Well, she could ... though none of them really leant themselves to being put on a chain as a pendant. Anyway, it was up to the girls to decide. She didn't want to influence them. There were no exciting or even unknown finds to unearth here. *If only he'd been so transparent with our finances* ... She frowned at the thought sneaking in.

'Do you want to go through all his things and pack them up or just look for something special?' Erica said, standing at the threshold of their large walk-in robe. She stood back as Issy and Mackenzie went in ahead of her and to the bank of drawers.

'What do you want to do, Mum?' Issy asked. Both girls seemed unwilling to open any of the drawers. 'Would it help you if we went through and sorted everything now, or would you rather do it when we're gone?'

'There's no need for you to bother with it, it'll give me something to do after you've gone.'

They all sat down on the padded bench seat in the middle of the space and stared at Stuart's side as if it was suddenly a process too daunting to contemplate.

‘His wallet and anything else personal is in the top drawer there,’ Erica said, nodding. ‘Perhaps we should start there.’ She’d already checked all the pockets and had gone through his wallet, so her reluctance wasn’t from fear or hope over what she might find. She just felt devoid of energy suddenly, of the will to face this. There was so much to do and think about when someone died, in addition to the grief and life carrying on. Sometimes it was all she could do to get out of bed, shower and get to work or come down into the kitchen and pretend to function as a human being rather than just roll over and pull the covers higher and hope, wait, for it all to go away or at least get easier or feel better.

Thankfully there was routine to a certain extent to fall back on – muscle memory to keep her going. Though, unlike the finances hanging over her head, they could knock this task on the head probably in one afternoon and not have to think about it again. Nonetheless, she sat staring ahead unable to get up and start pulling the rows of crisp, neatly pressed shirts in their colour-coordinated sections from the racks. It wasn’t hard and there was nothing to fear, but still she sat.

She watched, dazed, as the girls went to the drawer where Stuart had always emptied his pockets after finishing work for the day. It was a habit he had retained even after starting the business and working from home and not actually coming in from anywhere further than down the hall. It was a pretty empty drawer these days – ages ago Erica had used up the pile of loose change that had accumulated in the bowl – but she’d placed his wallet, watch, house keys and phone there after bringing them home in a bag from the hospital the night of his death.

Sometimes she used to sit on this bench, like now, and watch him get ready for work, and had loved his meticulous and steady routine – always the same, no matter what the day entailed – even

right up until his final stint in hospital. Whether it was business attire or golfing or anything else, he always worked his way down, beginning with his watch and finishing with his shoes, after putting his wallet in a pocket, the exact placement depending on his attire. Erica was wondering about selling his watch, which being a Tag Heuer might be worth something second-hand. She'd also deliberated over wearing it herself, but had found it so big and heavy it unbalanced her makeup application. She could get the bracelet adjusted and perhaps adapt to the weight when it didn't move on her arm, but didn't want to change anything about it. It was too personal to Stuart. She just really hoped one of the girls wouldn't want it; the thought that it might leave with one of them and get lost or stolen caused a sharp physical pain inside her – no doubt more about concern for her daughters' safety than for the actual item. She feared for them going off alone overseas – of course she did; what caring, loving mother wouldn't? She was just really careful to not let that show.

She now knew what her own mother must have felt when she'd left for the US all those years ago and was so grateful all over again that her parents had chosen to encourage her and hold their concern in. She'd never have gone if her mother, her darling mother, had asked her not to and thought her girls – sort of hoped – her girls would make the same choice. Of course, she hadn't just lost her dad when she was embarking on her trip like her daughters had. She'd had both parents being equally supportive and had known they at least had each other when she left.

'Mum? What's this mean? *On set?*' Issy asked.

Erica blinked herself back to the present and took the small card Issy was holding out. She looked up in surprise at the wallet Mackenzie was wiggling back and forth, frowning slightly. She'd

been through Stuart's wallet, taken out the money and cancelled cards, and put this back for dealing with later, or not.

'That's me,' she said.

Her heart began to ache as she stared at the image of her taken twenty-five years back on the day she and Stuart had met – instantly bonded by their shared South Australian accents and being so far from home. It was a fragment – her cut out – of a larger photo of the film set. The full image was in one of the albums in the cupboard. She was almost side-on – watching the action. He'd managed to capture her as she'd turned towards him – the awe of what she was seeing clear in her expression. He'd always joked the look was for him – his incredible brooding dark looks – and she'd agreed, never one to burst his bubble. That too. But it was really about her being in her happy place. Being thrilled to be on a film set and to have contributed to the exciting industry, even in a small way. She'd just done the makeup for the lead actors, having been called in at the last minute when someone had taken sick. She was out of her depth, but had somehow managed to step up, still her shaking hands and get the job done. And in time. Thankfully she had practically glued herself to the lead makeup artist's side to learn as much as she could. She sighed at the memories and the thought, *Ah, those were the days.*

'Mum?'

'Sorry, what?'

'What does *on set* mean? We know that's you,' Mackenzie prompted.

'Did you go on a tour of Movie World on the Gold Coast?'

'No. That was taken in LA.'

'Oh, that's right. I forgot. You met Dad over there, didn't you?' Mackenzie said.

'That's right.'

The girls were suddenly seated either side of her, gazing up like they were much younger than they were. ‘Tell us.’

‘That photo is of the day we met,’ she started, allowing herself another sigh before continuing. ‘That was my very first gig. I was watching the actors. Your dad had come along as a guest of the producer.’

‘What do you mean, *the producer*? Was Dad famous once?’

‘You mean more famous than to us?’ Erica said, tilting her head and smiling gently. ‘Yes and no. He was helping them raise the money for the movie. He did a good job, too. That was before we had to move back.’

‘Because his parents were in the car accident and needed looking after, right?’ Mackenzie said.

‘Yes, that’s right,’ Erica said.

‘The movies. Cool,’ Issy said in awe. ‘Did you go with him, then? To meet the movie producer?’

‘No, she was already there – it was the first time they met. Keep up, Issy,’ Mackenzie said. Erica didn’t need to be able to see Mackenzie’s eyes to know they were rolling. She idly wondered how long until Mackenzie’s bossy side annoyed Issy so much they parted ways on their trip. Mackenzie tended to get bossy when she didn’t know something – it was her defence mechanism.

‘Sorry, yes,’ Issy said, as was her fallback.

‘I was on the makeup team and there to see –’

‘Hang on. What? Did we know this?’ Mackenzie asked. ‘That *you* were *in* the movies? O-M-G, Mum!’

‘Not *in*, darling. *On* set. Watching. I did the makeup. In fact, it was my –’

‘So, what happened? Why aren’t you famous?’ Mackenzie said.

‘You don’t get famous for doing makeup – it’s behind the scenes. And they came back because of the car accident, remember? You just snapped at me for –’

‘Shut up, Issy. I know that. But ...’

‘Girls,’ Erica warned gently.

‘But you work in makeup in a department store.’

Erica flinched at the condescending tone. ‘I do.’ *And I’m not proud of it. Actually, no, that’s not true. I am. But it wasn’t my dream – far from it.*

‘And you’re really good at it,’ Issy said.

‘Thanks, sweetie.’ Erica almost laughed at hearing herself in her younger daughter – the way she always tackled disappointments by picking out a positive and highlighting it. ‘Mackenzie, dreams and aspirations, *priorities*, change. It was a long time ago.’

There had been a couple of times over the years when she’d wondered if now was the time for her to consider pursuing that industry again. But it seemed that every time, when she’d almost found the nerve to broach it with Stuart or to phone or email someone influential from the past, something would happen to derail her – Stuart getting sick, her parents having problems that were eventually diagnosed as dementia, having to find suitable accommodation and then moving them in. Losing her mum had been the biggest before Stuart’s death. Something more important had always come up. And she hadn’t minded all that much. There had only been a couple of times when she’d had anything close to a longing to pick up where she’d left off – mainly when she’d been up breastfeeding alone with the rest of the house in darkness, sometimes when Stuart was away travelling for work, and more recently when Mackenzie and Issy were talking about careers. But the prospect was always too daunting, and only got worse the

more time that passed. And gradually she'd come to realise it was quite possibly more about having a dream to dream about than actually pursuing it.

'Well, I'm not going to let anything change my life when I decide what I want to do,' Mackenzie declared a moment later, standing up.

Famous last words, Erica thought, but instead said, 'Good for you.'

'Issy, you're only going to be a mum, anyway – there's nothing else you seem to want to do,' Mackenzie said, causing Erica to cringe again.

'There's nothing wrong with "only" being a mum,' Issy said indignantly.

Erica wondered if Issy was responding to an expression she'd let slip onto her face.

'It's the twenty-first century, Issy, the world is your oyster; you need to make the most of it,' Mackenzie said.

'I don't *have* to do *anything*, Mackenzie!'

'All the work the feminists have done to get us equality and opportunities ...' Mackenzie said, standing over Issy with folded arms, looking down on her sister and shaking her head.

'What, I'd be letting the side down? Is that what you're saying?' Issy said with raised eyebrows and tilted head. She crossed her arms tightly across her chest.

Erica thought she should probably intervene but couldn't muster the energy. And anyway, soon she wouldn't be with them. They had to learn sometime.

'Weeelll ...' Mackenzie said with a lopsided shrug.

'*Weeelll*, I think my having the choice and freedom to make it *is* what it's all about, *actually*.'

‘Whatever,’ Mackenzie said with a dismissive wave of her hand. And right then Erica was hugely relieved she hadn’t let the girls in on the family’s teetering financial situation. She could imagine Mackenzie instead declaring, ‘And look where that’s left our mum.’

‘You should write your memoir,’ Issy said suddenly. ‘Or, I know, write down what you know about Dad.’

Erica knew it shouldn’t hurt, but it did. Even her daughters unconsciously shared this age-old view that women only really began to exist when they became mothers and that doing so wiped out anything, any individual achievement, that had come before. Just a mother. She couldn’t stand the term mumpreneur – it shat her off to high heaven every time she came across it. Men never had their status as father mentioned in the same word as what they did for a living. So many in the media liked to say it wasn’t true, but women were still often second on the ladder – if that high up at all.

‘That’s what you could do with all that time you’re going to be spending on planes and trains and waiting around,’ Erica managed.

‘That’s a good idea,’ Issy said.

‘Hmm. Maybe,’ Mackenzie said.

‘Come on, let’s deal with this,’ Erica said, with all the cheer she could muster, which was quite a bit, she thought.

‘Maybe I’ll keep a couple of Dad’s T-shirts to sleep in. And maybe some of his socks,’ Issy said. ‘Would that be okay, Mum? Sort of take him with me,’ she added sadly and quietly, sitting back down beside Erica.

‘That’s a good idea, Issy,’ Mackenzie said kindly, then pushed the drawer closed and sat down beside Erica. Their thighs were warm against hers and their shoulders moved against her upper

arms as they breathed. In a few breaths their breathing was in sync and they were fused. Erica concentrated on blinking back her welling tears.

The three of them sat in silence staring up at the racks of clothes in front of them. Plenty of men owned more clothes, but right then Erica couldn't imagine it. They might as well be embarking on climbing Mount Everest for the size of the task looming large in front of them.

'Mum?' Issy said, ungluing her arm and turning slightly towards Erica, and breaking the spell of silence and inactivity.

'Yes, darling?'

'You'll say if you're going to sell the house while we're away, or whatever, won't you?'

Erica tried not to look caught out – like the rabbit on the road staring into the headlights. Her heart hammered. 'What do you mean?' she said, buying time to calm herself. *Have I failed to protect you from the stress, the truth, after all? Have I failed as a mother? Oh shit.*

'Well, Mackenzie said ...' Issy added, hurrying to fill the stretching silence that Erica suspected was becoming noticeably tense to them too.

'What, Mackenzie?' Erica took great care to choose her words carefully and keep her tone even.

'Bloody blabbermouth,' Mackenzie said with clear exasperation. 'I just said that you might want to sell because the house is so big. That's all.'

'But you're planning on coming back, aren't you?' The words slipped out in a hurry, pushed out by the jolt of alarm behind them.

'Of course,' Mackenzie said.

'Definitely,' Issy said with great exaggeration. 'I miss my room already.'

‘What a ridiculous thing to say, Isabella!’ Mackenzie said, and blew her breath out loudly.

‘Issy, you don’t have to go. Or you can go later, even. It’s entirely up to you,’ Erica said.

‘But we’ve got our flights booked and paid for.’

‘We could try to claim on the travel insurance on compassionate grounds.’

‘She’s just being a wuss. It’ll be good for her,’ Mackenzie said. Erica noticed the slight twang to her voice that told her Mackenzie – the older, bolder of the two – was scared she might have to go alone. Erica wanted to point out that in that case, perhaps she should consider being kinder to her sister. But she didn’t want to start another row.

‘I am not. And, anyway, you changed the subject,’ Issy said.

‘Fine. Whatever,’ Mackenzie said. ‘The house. Mum, do you want us to pack up our things? In case you get lonely and want to take in a boarder or do Airbnb or whatever?’

‘I don’t want someone in my room,’ Issy said the words so quietly Erica almost didn’t hear them.

‘What was that?’ Mackenzie said.

‘I don’t want a stranger in my room,’ Issy said, defiantly.

‘Well, it’s not really up to you. It’s Mum’s house.’

Erica stared up at Stuart’s shirts, wishing with all her soul he was there.

‘Yes, but it’s my *home*.’

Out of the corner of her eye, Erica saw Issy’s bottom lip wobbling and then the glistening of a single tear, changing colour as it rolled down her cheek. Unable to speak past the lump lodged in her own throat, she summoned the energy and lifted her arms and put one around each of her daughters and pulled them to her. And as she did the lump shattered and her own eyes began to leak.

In a matter of seconds, the three of them were shuddering with racking sobs and in a huddled tangle of limbs, holding each other awkwardly.

It took several minutes for them to recompose themselves and to have dried their tears.

Again, they were sitting in a row on the bench facing the full racks ahead of them.

‘Dad would want us to still go, wouldn’t he?’ Issy said.

‘I think he absolutely would,’ Mackenzie said.

‘Yes, but only if you want to,’ Erica said.

‘Well, he wouldn’t want you sitting around pining for him and putting your life on hold, either, Mum,’ Mackenzie said.

Erica cringed inwardly; tried to tell herself Mackenzie was hurting and didn’t mean it the way it came out.

‘Your dad wouldn’t want any of us doing something we don’t want to do because of him. Sweetheart, he knew how much you loved him. But sadly, he’s gone now. You can’t live by what he would or wouldn’t want you to do. He, we, *I*, hope we’ve raised you to be true to yourselves. To be good, honest, brave and strong young women. That’s what he would want – and what I want. You’ve proven it already. We’ve had our little family shattered, but that doesn’t mean we can’t pick up the pieces and glue us back together a bit and carry on. We have to.’

‘With Dad as the glue – the clear bits in between that we can’t see?’ Issy suggested.

‘Exactly. He’s with us in our memories and in our hearts. We’ll never forget him, but we owe it to him and ourselves to go on as best we can.’

‘And, Mum?’

‘Yes, Mackenzie.’

‘Um, about carrying on?’

‘Yes?’

‘If you do get lonely, like *really* lonely, it would be okay with me if you started dating. I mean, obviously not yet, but later ... I mean, we might not be back for a year.’

Erica’s shoulders slumped a little lower.

‘Yes. A lot can happen in a year,’ Issy said. ‘But you wouldn’t get married without us, would you?’

‘God, Issy, really? Oh, you are too much!’ Mackenzie said.

‘Well, she might want to.’

‘Thank you, Issy. I appreciate what you’re saying,’ Erica said. ‘And I assure you I will not contemplate getting married any time soon or without you here.’ She wasn’t sure if she wanted to laugh or cry. It was probably her own fault for exposing them to too many romantic movies.

‘Okay, but I still don’t want you to sell the house,’ Issy said quietly.

‘Duly noted,’ Erica said, smiling in an effort to lighten the mood. *I just bloody well hope I have a choice.* No one knew what the next six or twelve months had in store.

‘Yeah, it’ll be nice to come home to, well, *home*,’ Mackenzie said.

No pressure, then. ‘Well, I’m not planning on going anywhere,’ Erica said.

‘Good,’ they both said with obvious relief.

‘Come on, sitting around being all sad isn’t helping anyone,’ Mackenzie said, slapping her thighs and getting up again.

Erica’s insides contracted at noticing how much she sounded like Stuart. *God, what am I going to do here alone without you to keep me sane?*

‘At least there’ll be some well-dressed homeless people out there once we’re done,’ Mackenzie said.

‘It’s not just homeless people who go to op shops, Mackenzie,’ Issy said.

‘I know, I was just saying ...’

‘Maybe Dad’s success will rub off on whoever wears his stuff. I hope so,’ Issy said, getting up and going over and starting to take a shirt off one of the many wooden hangers. Erica cringed again as she got up slowly and joined them in folding up the shirts and putting them in a pile on the vacated bench.

Trick of the Light
by Fiona McCallum
will be available in-stores and
online from 07/04/21

Trick of the Light by Fiona McCallum

Published: 7th April 2021

Imprint: HQ Fiction

Format: Trade paperback | RRP: \$32.99 | ISBN: 9781867207863 | eBook and audiobook available