

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF SOMETHING LIKE THIS

KARLY LANE

Take Me Home

Sometimes you need to get a little lost
to find your way home



Take Me Home

Karly Lane lives on the mid north coast of New South Wales. Proud mum to four children and wife of one very patient mechanic, she is lucky enough to spend her day doing the two things she loves most—being a mum and writing stories set in beautiful rural Australia.

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*In memory of my ancestors—
long gone but not forgotten*

One

Elspeth Kinnaird sighed in irritation as she stared at the computer screen and the picturesque image of rolling green Highlands hills that had interrupted her Facebook newsfeed. Normally Elle wouldn't give the ad a second glance, but that was before she'd started to notice the unsettlingly repetitive signs. No, not signs, she told herself firmly. Coincidences. That's all they were.

Ever since her gran's funeral two weeks ago, everywhere she turned, Scotland kept appearing before her eyes.

Elle knew it wasn't really a sign. She'd just been thinking about Scotland so much lately. A similar thing happened when she updated to the new iPhone—she hadn't seen anyone with one, and then suddenly every second person in town seemed to be carrying her model. This was the same kind of thing. She was just noticing the Scottish references more now because of Gran.

Her heart sank a little at the thought.

Gran.

‘I miss you so much,’ she said quietly.

She had only been gone a few weeks, and already it felt longer. Elle closed the laptop and stood up, grabbing her keys and handbag before heading out the door to work.

Jessup’s Creek had been her home her entire life. Population three thousand two hundred and fifty-three. Tucked away in the New South Wales hinterland, their sleepy little town had been bypassed by the tourist trade and highways for most of its life, which had never been a problem for a tightknit farming community. Not until the past few generations, when working farms began to dwindle as kids moved away to start their careers, and parents running properties got too old and tired to continue working them.

Then, a miracle of sorts happened. Over the past two years, the grey-nomad trade had come to the rescue, saving Jessup’s Creek from becoming another dying country town with more closed shops than residents. The retirees and their caravans, motorhomes and campervans were an almost constant stream driving through. More shops had opened, filling the main street with all kinds of quirky businesses, drawing not only the travellers but weekend tourists from the coast and inland as well.

There was a chocolatier, two antique stores and a pottery-and-craft barn, which sold local handmade items and ran workshops, where Elle had taken a few art classes. Cafes were springing up left, right and centre, and only a month ago a boutique brewery had opened its doors, bringing quite a few

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beard-sporting, man-bun-wearing men to town on weekend beer-tasting sessions.

As a result, property prices had begun to climb, and new people were moving to town. The downside to this was that the once-quiet village was changing. It looked the same, with verandah-lined shops running along both sides of the wide main street, but there was a very different vibe about the place. Where Elle once knew every face in town, nowadays, more often than not she could walk into a shop and not recognise a single person. It wasn't like newcomers were overrunning the place, but it was still strange, and a lot of the older residents were finding it a tad confronting.

Elle turned her old VW Beetle into the carpark at the back of the independent supermarket and headed inside to work.

'Morning, Elle,' Pat called as Elle walked past with a smile.

Pat was in her late fifties and had been working in Brown's Grocer ever since she left school. She was about as permanent a fixture as the business itself. She was also the example Elle's parents liked to use whenever they tried to discuss their daughter's future . . . or lack of one.

'Do you want to end up like Patricia Adams?'

Elle didn't think ending up like Pat was the worst thing that could happen to a person. Pat was single, she had a steady job and a cat she adored, and everyone loved her. But to Caroline and Alister Kinnaird, it was a fate worse than death; to them, Pat was a lonely old spinster who had never left Jessup's Creek and was doomed to die alone alongside her cat.

Caroline and Alister were a Jessup's Creek success story. They were high-school sweethearts who left town to go to

university. Alister became a doctor and Caroline an accountant. They married and returned to their hometown to set up businesses and raise a family.

They'd had three perfect children who followed in their footsteps: first Lauren, who went into law; then Lachlan, an engineer; and Malcolm, who was studying biomedical science . . . and then there was Elspeth. She had never really fitted into the family mould. For starters, she was the only redhead. It was some kind of throwback, apparently. Gran had always said Elle was lucky—that inheriting her Scottish genes was a blessing—but as a kid Elle considered her red hair and freckles a curse. She was so different to her siblings that growing up she often wondered when her parents would sit her down and break the news that she was adopted. They never did, and now that she was twenty-four she assumed they would have done it by now if they were ever going to.

It wasn't as if Elle hadn't tried to fit in. She'd done her best; she'd even gone to university, partly to keep the peace but mostly because, more than anything, she wanted to make her parents proud. Unlike her siblings, though, she had no career in mind, and it only took two semesters for her to realise that being an accountant was *not* for her. Her lecturer suggested changing some subjects, which she did, picking up an art elective, which went a long way to making life bearable. Elle had always loved to draw and paint—it was the one thing she could do to escape everything going on around her.

She had toyed with the idea of switching to art school—she researched it and went as far as presenting the idea to her

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parents—but in the end she had been talked out of it. ‘You need security, Elspeth,’ her mother had said. ‘A reliable career.’

Gran had been the only one who encouraged her. ‘If art is where your heart is, then you should follow it,’ she’d argued when a tearful Elle had come home between semesters.

‘I can’t. Mum and Dad won’t let me,’ she’d sniffed, wiping her eyes.

‘This is *your* life. *Your* decision.’

‘They’ve already said they won’t pay for art school.’

‘So? Get a job and pay your own way. I can lend you some money if you need it,’ Gran had suggested.

The idea had been tempting, but the more she’d pictured herself at art school, the more easily she could hear the arguments and imagine the frosty silences she would have to endure throughout her studies, and probably for a long time afterwards. Elle didn’t do confrontation. She liked to keep the peace and not rock any boats. So, she’d kept her head down and did her best to stick with the university course. She’d managed two years before giving up.

Mostly, she’d missed the peace and quiet of Jessup’s Creek. She wasn’t cut out to be a city girl, and studying was not for her, so she’d come home and listened to her parents’ concerned lectures before getting a job at Brown’s to think over her options. That had been three years ago.

Elle liked the work, for the most part. The oldies who shopped there had been loyal customers all their lives and there was a tightknit community feel about Brown’s. It was more than just a grocery store—more than the soulless big-chain supermarkets she’d visited in the city. This was a place where

locals gathered for a catch-up and a yarn. People smiled as they passed each other in the aisles, and waited patiently in line at the checkout—even the carpark was civilised, no horns blaring or arguments over who got a spot first. Elle got to talk to people all day; sometimes she suspected she was the only person some of the elderly people saw. She loved to make them smile and listen to them chat about their grandkids. She shared their excitement when they came in to buy up big in preparation for a long overdue family visit or a party, and she commiserated with them when they went through sad times. It sometimes sounded silly or unimportant when she tried to explain to her parents why she loved her job. They just didn't seem to get it.

'How are you today, Pat?' Elle said now as she set up her cash register.

'Good, love, good.' Pat returned her smile.

Elle braced herself as the first of her regular customers came through her checkout.

'Morning, Mrs Henderson.'

'Hello, dear. How are you?' the older woman asked, eyeing her keenly. As president of the gardening club, Margaret Henderson had known Elle's gran well. Gran had been a member and an avid gardener for much of her life until arthritis took hold and made it too painful and dangerous for her to continue doing what she loved. That was when Elle had moved in to help her.

'I'm fine, thanks, Mrs Henderson.'

'How are your parents doing?'

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‘They’re okay. It’s been busy with all the family coming and going.’ Elle shrugged.

‘I can imagine,’ Mrs Henderson said, nodding in sympathy. ‘Iona will be missed.’

Elle forced her smile to remain in place as she scanned and bagged the items. She had taken three days off work after the funeral, glad not to be fending off well-meant sympathy from locals when everything was still so fresh, but she’d been back at work for more than a week now and it wasn’t getting any easier. She was sure everyone who’d known Gran must have come in to buy their groceries by now, but each day brought a few more customers who would wait and come through her checkout just so they could offer their condolences. It was touching that so many people had loved her gran and wanted the chance to say how sorry they were at her passing, but it was also draining.

Gran had been her rock, always. The two had been inseparable. They shared a love of reading and history, and Elle had sat for countless hours listening to her grandmother tell stories about her childhood in Scotland. Gran had always had a deep love for her ancestral homeland, which Elle found infectious. Her Scottish brogue—which she’d managed to hold onto despite having emigrated to Australia with her father when she was fifteen—added a colourful tone to the stories she passed down, and Elspeth, who was named after Iona’s mother, loved everything about the world Gran brought so vividly to life.

Elle’s favourites were the tales of Stormeil, the once-magnificent castle of Iona’s forebears. As a child, Elle had

imagined living within its magical walls, as would any kid who ever dreamed of becoming a princess, only to discover when she was much older that the castle no longer existed—it was left to fall into disrepair sometime in the sixteenth century. Her dreams of becoming a princess had been destroyed like the ruins of her ancestors' castle. This, however, never dulled Gran's enthusiasm. To her, the castle was still an important part of her heritage.

It had always made Gran sad that her only son, Elle's father, had never felt the same connection to Scotland. *'He's too much like his father,'* Gran had once said. She had loved her husband dearly, but he was a fourth-generation Australian and a man whose heart and life were firmly rooted in New South Wales.

For years Elle and her gran discussed taking a trip to Scotland, returning to Iona's homeland and visiting the places they had always talked about. But time had run out.

Pa hadn't liked to fly, and even though Elle's parents had offered to take Gran, she had refused to go without him. Years later, after her husband's death, Iona had a series of small strokes that had her doctors cautioning her against flying, and as a result, Gran stopped talking about it. She still had family there, but Elle knew they weren't close. Gran had lost two brothers over the years and had only a sister remaining, but the two had never done more than exchange the odd letter and a Christmas card each year. It was strange for Elle to think that Gran had lived here longer than in her home country—seventy-three years. And yet Australia had never really seemed to be her home. Towards the end, Elle had heard a sad note in her gran's voice when she spoke of

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Scotland. Her family may have been here, but her heart was across the ocean.

When Elle had returned from university and moved in with Gran, they'd talked about going again. 'Don't you want to visit your sister?' Elle remembered asking one Christmas as she placed a card from Scotland, with the spidery old-lady writing inside, on the mantel.

'Well, sure, it would be grand to see the family again, but I don't know.' Gran had been a little flustered as she whisked the feather duster over the coffee table, turning away. 'They're like strangers now. It's been so long.'

It had never been easy to bring up her family in conversation, and Elle knew, deep down, that the trip was never going to eventuate. Gran had known it too, she thought. She just couldn't admit it out loud.

Elle frowned, thinking once again about the peculiar things that had happened lately. At first it was subtle—she would absentmindedly pick up a book and it would be set in Scotland, or she would see something on the news. She would spot strange shapes that looked like the shape of the country, or Scottish music would come on the radio. Then it had been other odd occurrences. Things she was trying hard to explain rationally.

Yesterday she had walked past her bedside table and discovered one of her gran's crocheted handkerchiefs that hadn't been there before. She often swore she could smell her gran's perfume throughout the day, only she could never find anything that would explain why. It was clearly some kind of grief-related issue, but it seemed to be getting worse.

Elle had been quietly saving money in a special account that she refused to label *My Scotland Fund*. She wasn't game to tell anyone about it; her parents would disapprove immediately. An overseas holiday would be a frivolous thing to do.

They still hoped she would find her way back into study and a career. As much as it frustrated her, she understood their feelings. They wanted each of their children to be independent, strong people. A career guaranteed security. They were so alike, her parents—both strong-minded and capable—and there was no question they loved each of their children, but they just didn't *get* Elspeth.

Elle knew she lacked her siblings' ambition, and she was okay with that. She didn't feel a need to *want* anything. Sure, she liked to splurge on a new phone now and again, she was always in the craft barn in town on payday buying art supplies, and she couldn't resist a new pair of boots once in a while, but she didn't spend more than she made. Elle paid her bills on time and she had a superannuation account and some savings . . . She was doing all the adult things she needed to do. Her parents just couldn't understand that she simply didn't *need* a house or an expensive car or a fancy job. She was happy doing her own thing—hanging out with her friends, taking her art classes and working at Brown's.

It wasn't as if she were lying around doing nothing and wasting her time. She had a full life—sometimes almost too full. Between work shifts and taking care of Gran, the past few months had been busy. A sadness welled up once more at the thought. She missed the afternoons sketching in Gran's garden after a morning of weeding. Last night, as she flipped

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through her sketchpad, she came across a few drawings of Gran sitting in her wheelchair, watering her garden. While Elle took care of the more physical tasks, Gran still insisted on doing the watering and Elle had loved sitting out there, capturing those quiet, precious moments. Gran hadn't thought she was wasting her life. Whenever Elle had an argument with her parents about her future, Gran would always comfort her. 'Darling, don't you worry,' she would say. 'Everything blooms in its own time.'