

A woman is shown from the back, her hair styled in a large, intricate braided bun. She is wearing a black top with a wide, decorative shawl or capelet made of many colorful feathers in shades of blue, green, and purple. The background is a light, textured grey with several individual feathers floating around her. The overall style is artistic and evocative.

THE GIFT OF  
**CHARITY**

*Wrapped in a Korowai of Love*

*Kerry Owen with Lisa Knowlton*

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## Chapter 1

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# Korowai

The soft weight of the Korowai, a traditional Māori cloak made of iridescent feathers, settled upon me like an embrace as Marion placed it around my shoulders. As I looked at the beautiful blue and green feathers cascading down the length of this ceremonial cloak, an unexpected and powerful feeling of love and support came over me.

Marion, the grandmother of my adopted daughter, smiled at me. “This cloak represents the arms of love, comfort, and support of family—past, present, and future.” I hadn’t expected to feel the embrace of those arms in the form of this cloak but it was ever present in the light caress of feathers all around me. *After all, I am not Māori*, I thought. *This is not my biological family, and these are not my ancestors*. Yet, despite these facts, this feeling of love was undeniable. I stood still, soaking it all in, and I could not keep myself from crying.

As Marion continued to tie the Korowai in place with black tassels about my neck, I saw that she too had tears welling up in her green eyes as they locked on mine. Despite our differences, she considered me family, and I was humbled that she thought me worthy of such an honour on this day of honours.

Along with other Royal Honour recipients, I was led to two large, walnut-coloured wooden doors. As we stood in line, a wave of familiarity washed over me. *I have been here before*, I thought—*not physically, but . . .*

Almost a decade earlier, I had seen myself here in a dream, in this very same building, standing at these very same wooden doors. A Māori man, holding a ring of keys, motioned for me to go through the doors. As I did so, I walked into a brilliant bright light. That is where my dream ended. Ever since, I had always questioned what was beyond those doors? Where was the light coming from? Why did it shine so brightly? To be physically now where that dream had put me years before was surreal. I was eager to finally discover the source of that light. On this day, however, I discovered there was no brilliant, bright light—only silence. From the silence came a powerful female voice

that rang out with a soul-stirring Māori call, welcoming us into the ceremony. “Haere mai . . . haere mai ra,” she projected, causing a reverent hush to fall over the crowd. This was our cue to start walking down the red carpet.

My heart thumped in my chest as I entered the great hall. The space was majestic, with sparkling chandeliers, brocade drapery, and a rich wooden floor divided by a red carpet. Members of the audience, sitting on both sides of the carpet, watched our procession enter with an air of esteem.

My gaze was immediately drawn to an imposing portrait of a young monarch sitting at the end of the carpet, her brown hair crowned with a radiant tiara, her gaze unflinching, her white gown adorned with medals, and a cerulean sash that slashed across her chest like a banner of solemn authority. Goosebumps rose on my arms at the mere thought that Queen Elizabeth the Second had approved this honour. On the stage in front of the portrait stood the governor general of New Zealand. Although small in stature, she had a commanding presence, wearing a grey trouser suit adorned with multiple honorary insignia. She possessed a wide welcoming smile and seemed eager to recognise us for our “outstanding service to the Crown and to the people of New Zealand”.

As I took my first step, I caught sight of my husband, Matt, my parents, my brother, my son, and other family members smiling proudly at me. Rawiri, the Māori man from my dream, was there, holding his ceremonial carved walking stick. Laurie, his daughter, was steps ahead of me on the red carpet, dressed in her family’s Korowai, ready to receive her own honour.

I continued along, thinking about the brilliant bright light that I had seen in my dream years earlier, wondering what that light had represented. I thought back on all my experiences over the last decade which had led me here, and I realised that this question had been answered over and over again.



## Chapter 2

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# Awareness of Suffering and Injustice

As a little girl in England, I loved exploring the countryside, with its patchwork of lush, green fields and its neat hedgerows and ancient woodlands begging for a game of hide and seek. Being the only girl amongst five brothers, the only way I could keep up was to roughen up my soft edges by traipsing through the mud and building dens.

My parents were loving, devoted, and hardworking. They filled our weekends with bike rides, walks, picnics, and games. We spent our summer vacations camping all over Europe, where we met and played with children of different nationalities. We celebrated our birthdays with homemade cakes, gifts, and party games. We spent Christmases with extended family, singing carols, reading the Nativity, and exchanging gifts. At Easter, we enjoyed egg hunts, special Sunday services, and hot cross buns with their delightful cinnamon, nutmeg, and an ever-so-subtle citrus taste.

Each Monday evening, my parents took us to the local sweet shop, where they gave each of us a small paper bag to fill with penny sweets. Once back home, we excitedly covered the living room floor with pillows and began jumping over our dad's back for as long as he could take it! On Sundays, we attended church, where we learned good moral values.

My parents opened our home to many children from troubled and dysfunctional backgrounds. Being a young girl, I sometimes resented having to share my bedroom and toys with these children who smelled poorly and behaved differently. One girl was particularly difficult. Standing at the kitchen window with my father, I watched this girl kicking a tree in our garden and screaming at the top of her lungs. I turned to my dad and asked, "What is wrong with that girl?" "Kerry, there is nothing wrong with her," he replied. "It's just that she's hurting a lot inside." My dad's answer led me to pause and

taught me the importance of seeking to understand.

Mum and Dad brought history alive for my siblings and me by taking us to historic properties such as castles, cotton mills, large estates, and workhouses. Exciting stories of royalty, knights, princesses, and battles of bravery and triumph fascinated me. Other stories—about dungeons, poverty, and injustice—troubled me. I remember feeling disappointed and shocked when I learned of the disparity between those working in cotton mills and workhouses and those living in castles and large estates. I was especially saddened when I heard about little children who had been forced to work long hours in dangerous and harsh conditions, rarely seeing sunlight, while the landed gentry lived in ease and abundance.

My siblings and I loved it when our parents read books to us. The books included fairy tales, adventure, fiction, novels, poetry, and history. I remember my mum reading a book titled *My Lady of the Chimney Corner*, which described the aftermath of the Irish potato famine and the British people's harsh treatment of the Irish. My mother, being Irish, struggled to contain her emotions as she read each page out loud. I can still picture her sitting on a pink chair in the living room, with a box of tissues beside her. After she finished one chapter, she took us into our small garage and asked us to imagine our family living in that dark, cold, and damp place. My siblings and I stood there soaking in the reality that those Irish people lived in terrible conditions whilst also facing starvation.

When our family watched the television series *Roots*, which was set during and after the era of slavery in the United States, I often covered my eyes. I did not want to see people being chained, assaulted, and degraded. I grappled with the fact that slavery was once legal. How could this be? But it also inspired me to learn about the early reformers who made it their mission to end slavery.

As I grew older, my awareness of suffering and injustice increased when, while setting the table for dinner, I was shocked to see a televised news report showing images of Romanian orphans subjected to institutionalised neglect and severe physical abuse. I struggled to reconcile my life with the pictures of those children. Was I even living on the same planet as them?

Anxious to *do something*, and with my parent's help, I contacted a charity that was delivering essential supplies to those Romanian orphans. I hand-wrote letters and delivered them to every house on my street, asking for donations of canned food. Hardly anyone on my street donated. I was shocked. Why wouldn't people of privilege give more freely to improve the plight of suffering children? One can of tomatoes or beans wasn't too much to ask, was it?

In my adulthood, I would face this challenge time and time again. The hand-written letters had been ineffective, clearly, so I would need to find other ways to advocate for those in need, by using my voice, time, resources and even becoming an author! Looking back, I can see that I was being prepared for things to come.

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