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The Woman Who Walked into the Sea

Written by Mark Douglas-Home

Published by Michael Joseph

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The WOMAN who WALKED into the SEA

'An always entertaining and gripping mystery' HERALD

MARK DOUGLAS-HOME

The Woman Who Walked into the Sea

MARK DOUGLAS-HOME

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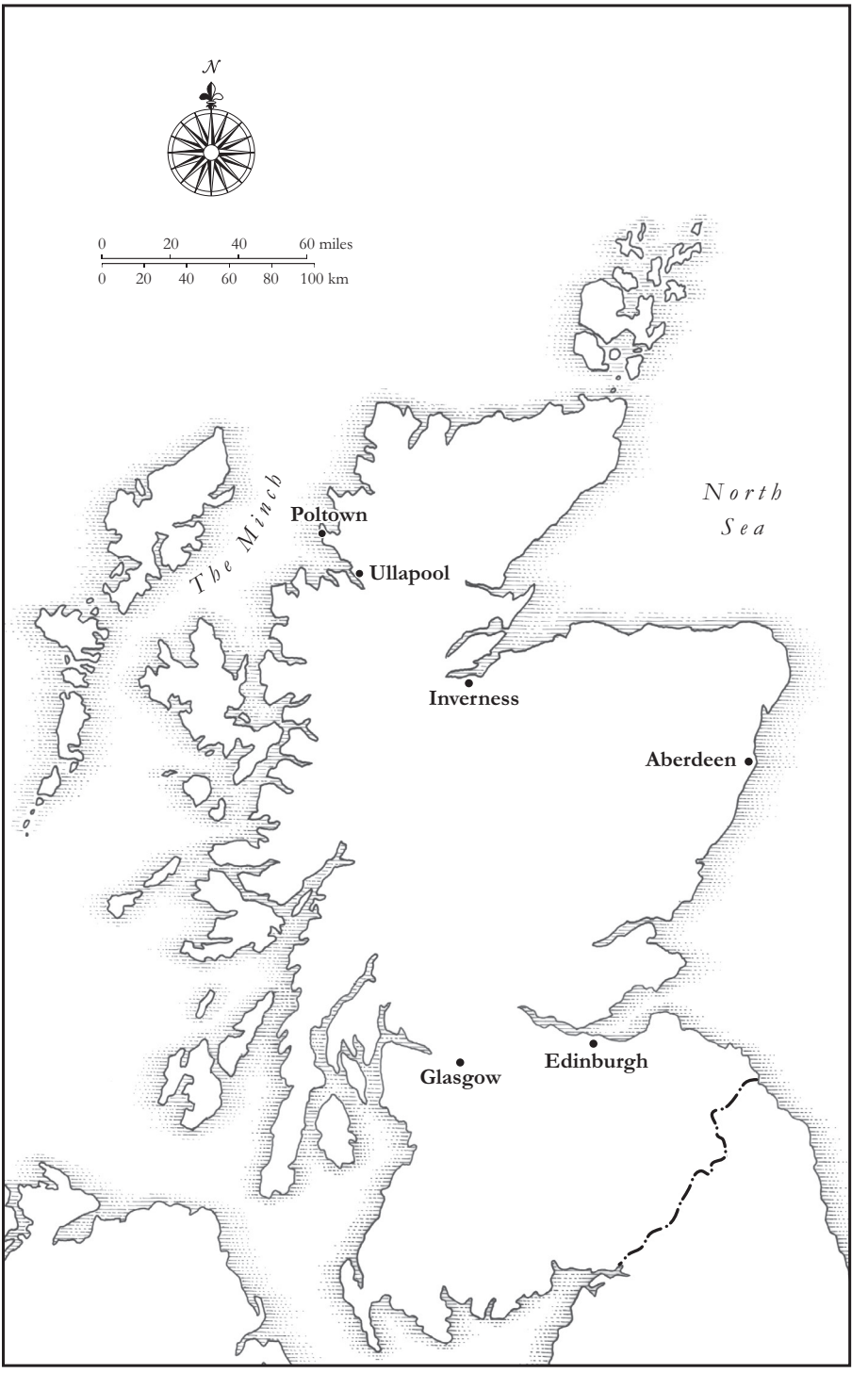
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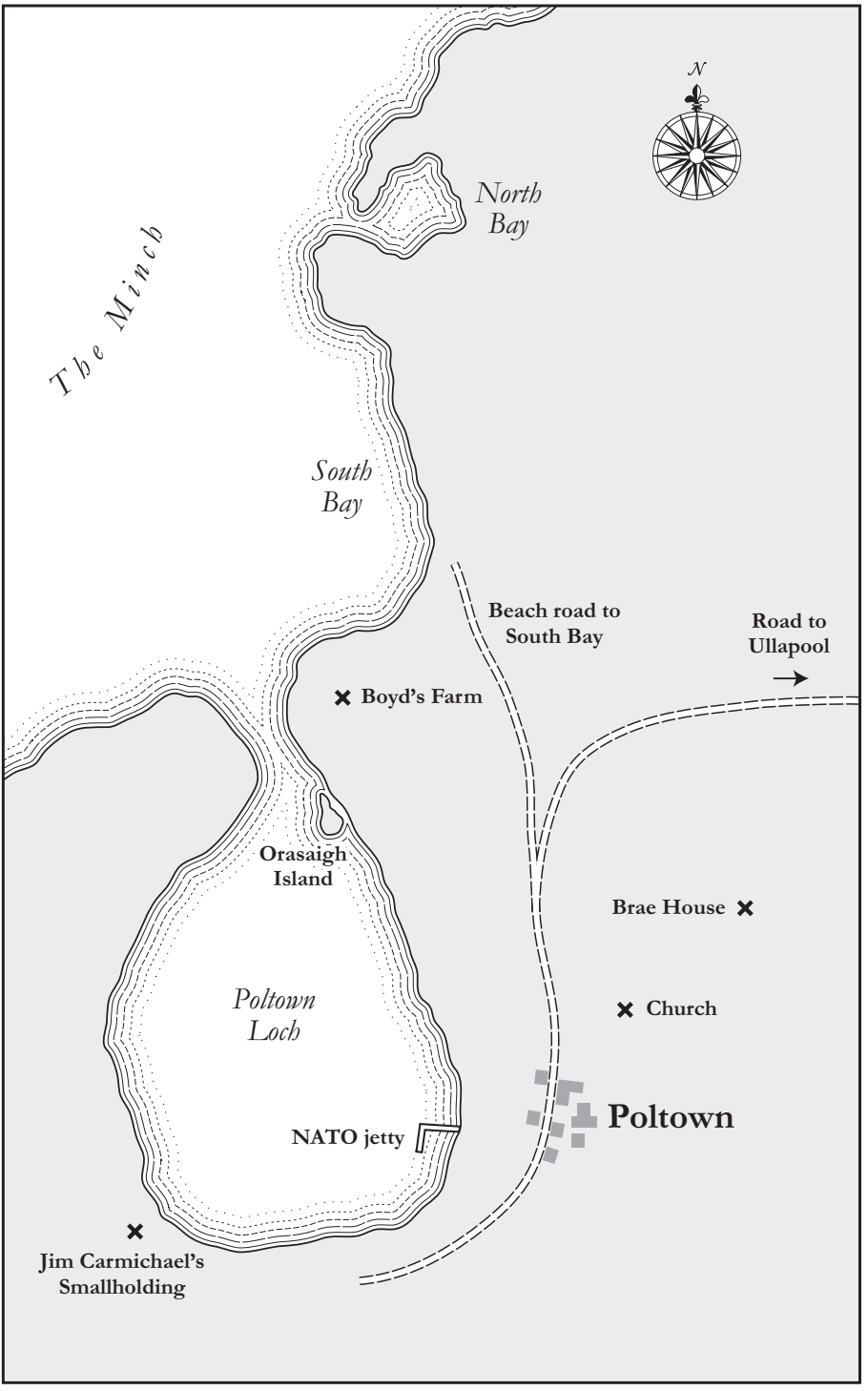
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Poltown Loch
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NATO jetty
Jim Carmichael's Smallholding

I

A vase of blue African lilies, Diana's favourite, filled the church alcove. Mary Anderson stopped in appreciation before selecting a prayer book from an oak table at the back of the nave. She glanced about her expecting to find other early arrivals already seated, but the church was empty. How fitting, she thought. It would allow her a few moments of reflection to remember Diana and to take her place without having to encounter anyone from Poltown and the unpleasantness that always brought.

As she progressed along the aisle she admired the other displays of flowers: a cascade of reds and burnt orange beside the pulpit and another arrangement of similarly rich colours to the left of the altar. Late summer blooms were Diana's favourites. If Diana had to pass away, Mrs Anderson reflected with a tremble at her own encroaching mortality, then wasn't this the best season for the church to be dressed as she would have liked? She consoled herself with this thought before turning her attention to her choice of pew. The third, or even second, row would be appropriate, considering how close she had been to Diana and to the family. But each of the front four rows, on both sides of the aisle, was cordoned off by blue silk rope. An attached 'Reserved' notice disconcerted her, causing a gloved hand to lift uncertainly to her mouth. Mrs Anderson turned to see whether anyone had

followed her in – an usher, perhaps, someone of whom she could ask guidance – but she was still alone.

Inspecting each of the pews in turn, she chose the aisle end of the fourth row on the left. She lifted the rope off its brass hooks and, once seated, felt satisfaction at her decision. From this position, the family would be able to move her forward, as she was sure they would. And if that were to happen when the church was full, everyone would witness her elevation. Mrs Anderson experienced a brief but enjoyable frisson of pleasure at the prospect of such a public display of favouritism. She settled herself, placed the prayer book with its stiff maroon cover on the wooden ledge by her knees and bowed her head.

After reciting the Lord's Prayer in a whisper, she stared sightlessly at the stained-glass window above the altar and remembered Diana; how she was that first weekend at Brae House; already Mr William Ritchie's fiancée, the romance (if that was the word for it) having taken place the preceding months in Edinburgh. How Diana had sought out Mrs Anderson in the kitchen on the pretext of helping with lunch but really to inquire about her husband-to-be. 'He'll bully you,' Mrs Anderson had said in her forthright manner, 'because you're a pleaser.' That much had been obvious after five minutes in her company. Diana was one of those women who, having been abandoned by one husband (Mr William had forewarned Mrs Anderson of that fact), settled on smiling compliance to prevent another occurrence. 'Stand up for yourself, or he'll walk all over you,' Mrs Anderson encouraged her. Not that she'd said so at the time, but hadn't it also been obvious that it wasn't a love match? Oh, Diana liked him

well enough, but in Mrs Anderson's opinion the partnership had been a trade-off: financial security for Diana and Alexandra, her six-year-old daughter, and in return Mr William acquired a social secretary, someone presentable who would organize his life in Edinburgh and accompany him to Faculty of Advocates gatherings while making few, if any, emotional demands. There were worse foundations for a marriage, as Mrs Anderson used to tell Diana when she rang tearfully from Edinburgh after more of Mr William's fault-finding with her appearance, her weight or her incomplete education (she hadn't attended university).

Under the circumstances, Mrs Anderson liked to think of herself as the glue that held the marriage together. She'd done for Mr William at Brae, his weekend and holiday house, north-west of Ullapool, for so many of his bachelor years that she had learned to rub along with him despite his distance and moods. Hadn't she deserved the rewards of making Diana her project? The cottage beside Brae's walled garden, her home now for more than thirty years, was the most obvious, but there had been others, presents from Diana as well as innumerable kindnesses in recognition of Mrs Anderson's loyalty. There had also been the privilege (as she considered it) of belonging to a family like the Ritchies. Sometimes, she liked to think, Mr William and she shared a trait. Each recognized weakness and took advantage of it. A rich man like Mr William could do so by bullying and ill temper, a housekeeper by making herself indispensable, and that was what she had become to Diana.

Mrs Anderson closed her eyes and her head shook a little, a tremor from the past.

How long into the marriage had Diana broken the routine of accompanying Mr William for every weekend at Brae? Eight or nine years, Mrs Anderson thought. By then Alexandra was fifteen and out of control. She was seeing an older boy from Poltown and Diana had been determined to discourage the relationship by remaining with her daughter in Edinburgh most weekends. Mr William would love having Brae more to himself, Mrs Anderson looking after him, just as it used to be, Diana insisted. The truth, as Mrs Anderson knew, was that by this time Diana needed separation from her husband's unpleasantness just as much as she desired to prise apart Alexandra and her unsuitable boyfriend. If she had an opinion on Diana's strategy, Mrs Anderson thought Mr William would grow to enjoy his weekend solitude and would resent its temporariness as well as Diana when the family was reunited in Edinburgh on Sunday nights. As it happened, both were wrong.

What hadn't entered either woman's thoughts was Mr William's susceptibility to a seductress. Mrs Anderson's neglect of the possibility was mostly practical – that type of woman being as rarely seen in coastal north-west Scotland as pure-blood wildcats – and conditioned by observation. William Ritchie QC had never been romantic or a womanizer. By disposition he preferred the company of men, ideally other lawyers, and was awkward around women, avoiding even a social kiss on the cheek if possible. Then there was his age, late fifties, surely too old for a mid-life crisis, especially for a man who found pleasure in respectability and routine as well as in disapproving the incontinence and mistakes of others.

Mrs Anderson still referred to the affair and its aftermath as his 'madness'. They were desperate times with difficult decisions to be made, an agony for them all: the bloody mess that had to be cleared up. What was done was done, she said to herself with a wondering shake of her head. Not only Mr William's madness; hadn't insanity infected everyone to a greater or lesser degree? Afterwards, Diana had been so frightened he would kill himself she sat at night outside his locked bedroom door. Mrs Anderson remembered his crying. Such emotion: it made her wonder where he'd kept it all this time. Diana forgave him, of course, blaming herself for leaving him alone, as a pleaser would. For his part, Mr William appeared as regretful for the distress he had caused as for his moral lapse. From Mrs Anderson's observations, the shell of the man made a better husband; a better man even, certainly a nicer one. Hadn't he and Diana another twenty years together before his death, good years which Mrs Anderson remembered with affection, with each change of the calendar moving her closer to the centre of the family.

Suddenly she was overcome by a sense of loss: Mr William gone; now Diana too. She found a handkerchief in her bag and dabbed her eyes.

Of course, she'd offered to go to Edinburgh to nurse Diana but Alexandra had turned her down, saying her mother was too proud to let anyone but a stranger do *those* sorts of tasks for her, and anyway wasn't Mrs Anderson too old and decrepit herself now? Mrs Anderson's reply had been sharp – justifiably so. There had also been the hurt over the cremation which had been arranged so quickly, and in Edinburgh too. The lack of notice made

attendance by Mrs Anderson impractical. Alexandra apologized in her insincere way and said neither she nor Matt, that weak creature she had for a husband, thought it mattered. Couldn't people like Mrs Anderson attend the memorial at the church by Brae? Mrs Anderson snapped back. *She* wasn't *people*. Sometimes she wondered how Diana had managed to have such an inconsiderate child. *Miss* Alexandra, Mrs Anderson referred to her through gritted teeth.

By now the church was filling up and one or two mourners, presumably members of Diana's extended family, were taking seats in the reserved pews. Mrs Anderson recognized a man with white hair, from Diana's photograph albums. She nodded in polite recognition and he returned the gesture.

How gratifying, Mrs Anderson thought.

Soon the seats behind her were almost full. Some faces she knew from the general store in Poltown returned her stare but she didn't acknowledge them, nor they her. It was propriety in her case (weren't they there to remember Diana?) but jealousy and resentment, she liked to think, in theirs. Again she felt a frisson at the certain prospect of being promoted to a more desirable seat as she saw the family progressing down the aisle: Matt, Alexandra in rustling dark blue silk and the children, Richard and Sophia. Weren't they growing so quickly? Matt's sister was also there, and Diana's nephews and nieces, the children of her brother Malcolm, who was accompanied by his wife. Her name escaped Mrs Anderson, who was trying to catch the eyes of some of the family party as they drew close, any of them really. She'd picked up her prayer

book and was sitting on the edge of her seat, primed to move as soon as she was noticed.

A family she didn't recognize filed into the pew in front: a mother and father accompanied by two large teenage boys. They blocked her view, rendering it difficult for her to make herself seen or, more to the point, for anyone to see her.

Then a little man busied at her elbow, asking to be allowed into her pew. She didn't know him, nor, it appeared, did he know her, or else he wouldn't have used that condescending tone of voice. He lifted the rope and she stood to let him pass, but instead of coming in himself he ushered forward four others, two middle-aged women dressed (inappropriately in Mrs Anderson's opinion) in bright colours, green and pink, and two teenage girls, one so overweight that mottled flesh bulged between her trousers and shirt. Once they were seated there was no room for the man, who said in Mrs Anderson's ear, 'Are you sure you're in the right place?'

How was she supposed to answer? Of course, she wasn't in the right place. She should be further forward. She simpered, trying not to take offence, when, thank heaven, she saw Matt noticing her predicament and coming along the aisle towards her. 'It's all right, Henry,' he said to the man, who was still standing beside Mrs Anderson as if he planned to stay for the duration of the service. Mrs Anderson gave a slight shake of her head, letting Matt know that none of this was her fault. He leaned down and she could hardly believe what he said, or the abrupt way he said it. 'Would you move further back?'

What could she do? The congregation behind had gone quiet. She felt faces turning towards her, as if she were the cause of this problem. 'Please, Mrs Anderson,' Matt continued. 'We don't want a scene.' He put his hand under her right elbow and suddenly she was being propelled from the pew. She whispered a sharp protest but Matt either didn't hear or ignored her. He said to Henry, 'Sorry about that, old man,' and Henry promptly took her place. Before she could explain the misunderstanding to Matt, he tightened his grip on her arm and said angrily in her ear, 'Diana felt obliged to put up with you for all these years – God knows why – but we're not going to tolerate it any more.' And then he left her, standing alone in the aisle while he returned to the front pew. She looked around. People were nudging each other, pointing and exchanging whispers. She did the only thing she could. She walked. With every step she was sure her legs would let her down. Instead, her face betrayed her, flushing so red and hot it seemed ready to burst. At the back of the church a young man with short dark hair stood and offered his chair. 'Are you all right?' he asked, but all she could do was sit. Then, mercifully, the priest called the first hymn and the congregation rose. Mrs Anderson was too flustered to stand. Everything was a whirl of humiliation. The door, where the young man had gone to stand, was only a few steps away. It was still open for latecomers.

The next thing she knew, she was outside, on the gravel path, her heart racing faster than was advisable for a woman of seventy-seven. In her hurry to distance herself, she stumbled and fell. The prayer book, which she had omitted to return to the oak table, pitched into the grass

at the verge. The pebbles of the path dug into her knees. She cried out just as the congregation started singing 'Land of Hope and Glory', Mr William and Diana's favourite. Mrs Anderson looked in bemusement at pin-pricks of blood oozing through the shreds of her tights and at the fluttering pages of the prayer book. Then she felt herself being picked up by the same young man who'd offered her his chair. She stared at him blankly when he asked if he could help. But all Mrs Anderson could hear was Matt's venomous whisper, 'Diana felt obliged to put up with you for all these years . . .'

Felt obliged . . .

She let out another little cry of pain and shook off the young man. 'Are you sure you're all right?' he called after her as she made her way unsteadily past Mr William's grave, averting her face to conceal her tears. She went through the wooden gate to the path across the moor; the quickest route to her cottage. It took her twenty minutes, longer than usual because of frequent pauses to wipe her eyes. She was still sobbing when she entered her porch and fell back against her door.

She had never been treated so shamefully, she thought as she removed her gloves and placed them on the hall shelf.

To put up with you for all these years . . .

She had always disliked Matt, disrespected him too, as in general she did all men who described themselves as 'dealers' or 'agents' – in Matt's case, property dealer. Now her feelings for him turned to loathing. And for *Miss* Alexandra.

Still distracted, she picked up a letter which had been

pushed through the flap while she'd been out. She recognized the style of envelope, the sort Brae used for estate business. Going into the kitchen where the light was brighter, she opened it, her hands still shaking.

Dear Mrs Anderson

After reviewing the farm accounts following Mrs Ritchie's death, it has come to our notice that you have been occupying Gardener's Cottage on terms enjoyed by no other tenant on the Brae Estate. I have to inform you that it will no longer be possible for your utility bills or council tax to be met by the estate as was the case when Mrs Ritchie was alive. Also, the existing ex gratia rent-free arrangement is terminated; you will henceforth be charged rental at the market rate of £575 a month, all with immediate effect.

Yours sincerely
Matthew Hamilton

Mrs Ritchie. Not Diana. Matthew Hamilton. Not Matt. Not even a handwritten signature.

The letter fluttered to the kitchen floor. Her hands reached for the back of a chair. Her mouth hung open as her breathing became faster, each exhalation accompanied by mewling. Slowly, she looked around and wondered whether she could afford to go on living there.

Hurt heaped upon hurt.

Her pension was small, the house larger than she could afford on her own. A stab of anxiety went through her, a spasm of pain. Her garden, her hydrangeas – she realized they too might be lost. She swayed but managed to stop herself from falling by pressing hard against the chair.

Hurt upon hurt.

She shook her head. Why had this happened to her? Hadn't she been the most loyal of friends to Diana? What would have become of her without Mrs Anderson?

Put up with you . . .

So Diana only put up with Mrs Anderson because she had to. Because of what Mrs Anderson knew. Because of what Mrs Anderson had done when Diana needed her most.

Diana had always been a pleaser, even with Mrs Anderson, it seemed.

Mrs Anderson sat at the square kitchen table. In the middle was an earthenware jar with pens, pencils and scissors. Around about were tidy piles of everyday and useful objects – shopping catalogues, her diary, a pad of paper, envelopes, stamps and the phone book. She reached for a pen and the writing paper. She wrote quickly, two sentences in printed capitals so her handwriting wouldn't later be recognized. She folded the sheet and tucked it into an envelope, the flap of which she had to lick a few times with her dry tongue before it was wet enough to seal. She slid the phone book towards her and copied down the address of the social work department in Inverness. After putting a first-class stamp on the envelope, she went to the front door. As soon as she was outside, she set her face in an expression of indifference, the one she always wore when she took her car to the postbox by the shop in Poltown.

Going down the drive to the road, she talked to herself about her loyalty to the Ritchies: how she had kept Diana's secret, how *Miss* Alexandra owed her as a consequence.

Hadn't Mrs Anderson rescued Diana, getting blood on her hands? How the family shouldn't have let her come so close if they planned to abandon her. How they'd pay for what they'd now done. Oh, how they'd pay.