

End House

James was singing as he drove his rental car towards Lochgilphead. It was a beautiful day and he felt good. He laughed at himself when he realised he was singing The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face. It had been on a cassette he bought when he was a student. He had played it over and over again during his last year at university.

On his last night in Paris, he and Sarah had sat on the tiny balcony of his apartment drinking wine and listening to this song. That was more than forty years ago. In all that time he had not seen Sarah until six months ago. They had met again, almost by chance, in Italy. Now Sarah had invited him to stay at her house in Western Scotland for a few days.

He stopped in Lochgilphead and checked his map and instructions; only another 25 km. He had emailed Sarah saying he would arrive in time for a late lunch. If he didn't get lost, he would be on time.

---The house is near the ocean --- Sarah had written. ---There are no neighbours. The nearest house is almost a kilometre away. I hope you won't find it too quiet---

He drove on along the near the coastline. He passed some houses standing alone in windswept gardens. Finally he came to a small village with a shop, a hotel, a church and a few houses. Past the village he started looking for a left hand turn.

---Turn left by the old fishing boat--- Sarah's instructions said. ---Drive about 2km. The house is on the top of the hill. You can't miss it---

James saw the house as he drove up the hill. There was a stone wall alongside the road. The house was big and it was surrounded by a large garden. Then James saw the cars. There were two black vans, two police cars and an ordinary car. They were parked on the side of the road. There were a number of people in the garden.

James was worried. He drove towards the wide gates that led to the house. The gates were shut. James stopped the car. A policeman stepped up to the driver's window. James lowered the window.

"What's happened?" he asked. "Has there been an accident? Is Sarah OK?"

"You can't stop here, sir," said the policeman. "Please drive on."

"No way!" answered James. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing to do with you, sir," answered the policeman. "Now please just drive on, or drive back the way you came."

James drove the car to the side of the road. He parked it in front of the police cars.

Then he got out of the car and walked back to the policeman.

"I am a guest of the woman who owns this house. I'm going in," he told the policeman.

"No, you're not," said the policeman. "Not until my boss says you can. But wait here. He will probably want to talk to you."

The policeman took out his mobile phone and talked quietly to someone. James looked at the garden. There were people in white overalls crawling around on the ground. A woman also wearing overalls was taking photographs. To one side of the house he could see a stretcher.

There were other people close to the wall of the house but there were trees and bushes in the way, so he couldn't see what they were doing.

The policeman stopped talking on his phone and turned to James.

"The boss is busy, but one of the detectives is coming out. Wait here."

"But just tell me what is happening!" James was sure something terrible had happened to Sarah.

A young man in casual clothes came out of the house. He walked up to James.

"I'm Detective Constable Rory McClellan. Could you give me your name please, sir?"

"I'm James Winchester. I'm a friend of Sarah Dumbarton. What has happened?"

The detective didn't answer the question. "And your address?"

James gave the detective the address of his apartment in Rome.

"And I understand that you are a guest in this house," said the detective.

"Well, I will be a guest when you let me go in! I flew from Rome to Glasgow very early this morning. I picked up a rental car at the airport and drove here."

"So you weren't in Scotland last night?"

"No," answered James.

"Can you prove that?"

James gave the man his boarding pass and the rental car agreement. The detective read the papers carefully.

"So you weren't here yesterday or early this morning?"

"No. Now will you please tell me what has happened?"

"I don't think that's necessary, sir. We have your name and address if we want to talk to you. I suggest you go to Oban or back to Glasgow and telephone Mrs Dumbarton."

She should be free to talk to you later today."

James was very angry. "Now listen to me!" he shouted.

Just then the front door of the house opened and Sarah came running out.

"James! James! Thank goodness!"

She ran down the wide path to the gate and opened it. "Come in!"

"Mrs Dumbarton!" shouted the policeman. "You can't invite people in! It's a crime scene."

Sarah ignored him. She turned to the detective.

"Rory McClellan! You can tell your boss that this is still my house and James Winchester is my guest!"

Sarah took James' arm and walked quickly with him down the path to the front door.

The door was open and she took James down a hallway and into a big kitchen.

"Sit down," she said. "I thought you would arrive soon, so I made coffee. I'm not allowed to go anywhere else in the house."

James suddenly felt very tired. He sat down at the kitchen table. Sarah poured coffee and handed him a cup. She sat down opposite him.

"Now, first," said James. "I am delighted to be here and delighted to see you! But what on earth has been going on?"

Sarah smiled at James. "I'm very pleased you're here. Let me tell you. There was a man's body in my garden this morning. He had been shot."