

## The Wrong Girl

### Prologue

He wasn't going anywhere, just driving. That's what he kept telling himself. There was a half-bottle of Teacher's on the van's passenger seat, mostly full, and he could hear a couple of empties clinking and rolling about underneath. He thought, although he wasn't sure, that they'd been there for some time.

Heat haze on the road. Where was he, anyway? All fields round here, far as the eye could see; not a building in sight. Quiet enough, though. He could stop and lie down on the plastic sacks of compost and bark chips in the back. He'd be happy to sleep forever – he'd not been able to manage more than two or three hours a night these last months, and it was killing him. In desperation, he'd tried manufacturing dreams for himself, consolatory fantasies to help him drift off, but he'd used them too often and they always went wrong.

Everything had gone wrong, too many times. How he'd prided himself on being Mr Fix-it, back in the days when he was a roadie – and the habit was still there, forty years later. What a joke that was.

Fix *this*, you fucker. But he couldn't fix entire lives, his own or anyone else's, any more than he could bring the child back.

He kept on driving. His back was aching and he was sweating like a pig, despite the open window, but he didn't know what else to do. He knew how he'd look to Jeff, if he ever got there: the gut, the bad teeth, the hangdog folds of the face. If he let his beard grow, he'd never have to look at himself in the mirror again. Except, he'd probably manage to mess that up, just like everything else.

He reached over to the passenger seat and, deftly opening the whisky bottle with his left hand, raised it to his mouth.

He'd tried not to remember things – or one thing, at least – and then found that he actually couldn't. Like the letter Pa had written. He'd lost that about six months after the old man had died, and now, seventeen years later – time accelerating away from him – he couldn't remember what it had said. An apology, yes, but not the *words*.

He ought to have asked while Pa was still alive, or asked his mother while he'd still had the chance. Now, he couldn't remember what had held him back. He'd stopped even trying to make himself think about it.

But – he took another swig from the bottle – he wasn't responsible for what had happened, not at the beginning. He'd just got lumbered with it. *Because*, jeered a voice in his head, *you're Mr Fix-it, aren't you?*

At the time, he'd pushed it away, disbelieving because he didn't want to believe. That wasn't 'fixing it'. Had he known the worst all along, or only suspected? He couldn't remember. The booze, he thought. What it does.

The whole business of knowing and not knowing. The tricks we play on ourselves. Honesty-lying, he'd heard someone call it. What alcoholics do.

Then this new thing. When he'd tried to fix that, he'd just made it worse. And if he did talk to Jeff, and managed to get some answers, would it make any difference?

He'd been afraid for such a long time. At first, he hadn't realised that what he was feeling was fear – and when he had realised, he'd tried to deny it. The booze had blotted it out, but never for long enough, and now he was full of fear, all the time. The first drink helped with that, and sometimes the second, but not the rest.

He'd made a mess of everything.

He took another drink and glanced at his watch. Past seven o'clock, now – time playing tricks on him. How long had he been driving? Longer than he'd thought. Several hours longer, in fact.

Janice would say he ought to talk about it – trying to be kind, but not having a clue... Or, if she did, that would make it unimaginably worse. And what if Jeff realised what he was really getting at? He'd have to be careful how he asked the questions. He'd be casual, pretend he was just passing through.

If he got there. He could still go home.

Except, this was his only chance, while Suzie and the others were away. Otherwise, she'd want to know where he'd been. They all would, and he couldn't face that.

No, he certainly didn't want to talk to anyone about it.

He was way beyond that.

Soon it would be dark.