

Susan Strecker



NOWHERE
GIRL

A NOVEL

CHAPTER 1

The day Savannah was killed, she was fifteen minutes late to meet me. I was cold, standing in the November wind outside our school. Because she'd told me to wait for her, I'd missed the bus, and now I'd have to walk home in the dark. Mrs. Wilcox's red Honda was the only car in the front parking lot. It was just me and a stone cherub above the entrance, giving me the creeps. Finally, I pushed back through the glass doors and plopped down in a leather recliner, furniture meant to make Kingswood Academy's waiting area feel like a living room rather than a school.

I knew I should have been out looking for Savannah, but I'd been a little pissed at her lately, coming home smelling like the cigarettes she'd smoked behind the carved oak trees out back with the upperclassmen girls. She was the one with the older, cooler friends; the secret boy crushes. She was the one who'd been getting high and having sex since we were fourteen. Somehow, she was also where she was supposed to be all the time. Which is how she fooled our parents, never giving them reason to suspect that their identical twin daughters were only the same on the outside.

Kingswood had been renovated the year before, thanks to a generous and wealthy alum. The skylights above me brought a constant brightness like the manufactured cheerfulness of a hospital's children's ward. Somewhere in the

2 SUSAN STRECKER

office, I heard Mrs. Wilcox typing on her computer. When I closed my eyes, I felt a vague sensual pleasure, as though someone had his warm hands all over me—a feeling rather than a thought. I'd only kissed one boy, barely touched our lips together, so I understood it was Savannah's experience I was feeling. As different as we were, I knew her the way a newborn knows to nurse and birds know to fly in a V.

That morning while she was flat-ironing her hair, INXS turned up too loud on the CD player in the bathroom, she told me to cover for her at the dance planning meeting after school.

"I'll ride the late bus home with you, and we'll just tell Mom and Dad I went."

I'd stood in the doorway of the bathroom watching her, wondering what had been making her smile so much lately.

"Where are you going?" I'd asked. But our brother, David, called us for breakfast, and she disappeared down the stairs.

She was probably off with Scarlet and Camilla, securing her place in that coveted inner circle of senior girls where no other underclassmen were allowed. Maybe my friend Gabby was right. Savannah was too cool for us; she only wanted to hang out with older girls now. There were so many days she'd asked me to take her backpack home and do her homework. Afterward, she'd come traipsing in the front door as I was setting the table for dinner, making up a lie about being at some school meeting that would look good on the college applications we wouldn't be writing for another two years. As I listened to Mrs. Wilcox type, I thought about something I'd been asking myself lately whenever resentment about Savannah began to creep in: *What if I said no? What if I walked home alone and told my mother I didn't know where she was?*

Of course, I knew from the second she didn't meet me outside the glass doors for the late bus that something was wrong. Still, when that hazy sensuality gave way to anxiety, I fought it. Panic crept into my stomach, my throat. If I'd allowed myself to hear Savannah, to listen to the message she was trying to send me, I would have known that, not more than a thousand yards away, she was dying.

I tried to tell myself that I was having an asthma attack, but it didn't feel like they usually did. It was more of a choking feeling in my throat than a tightness in my chest. When it got so bad I could barely breathe, I fumbled

in my backpack for the cell phone my parents had given me for emergencies only. I'd never used it before.

"It's my sister," I told the 911 dispatcher frantically. "She's hurt."

"The nature of her injuries, please," the operator said in a robotic voice.

"I don't know. I think she can't breathe."

"Is the victim with you?"

"No, no. I don't know where she is, but she's hurt."

"Miss." The operator's monotone turned to impatience. "If you don't know where she is, how do you know she's injured? Did she call you?"

"She's my twin." I was sobbing, not from the pain in my throat but because I knew even as I was on the phone with the police that it was too late.

I could tell the dispatcher didn't believe me, but she asked where I was and my name, and then she clicked off.

By the time I hung up, I felt weak, so weak I thought my knees might give if I got up. Somewhere far off, I heard sirens. And then suddenly, something left me. I felt washed out, empty. The wind could have blown right through me. Something ineffable and bright, a ball of light I'd been carrying since birth, exited my body.

All my life, I'd remember that moment. But it was when I was thirty-two that Savannah finally returned to save my life by leading me to her killer.