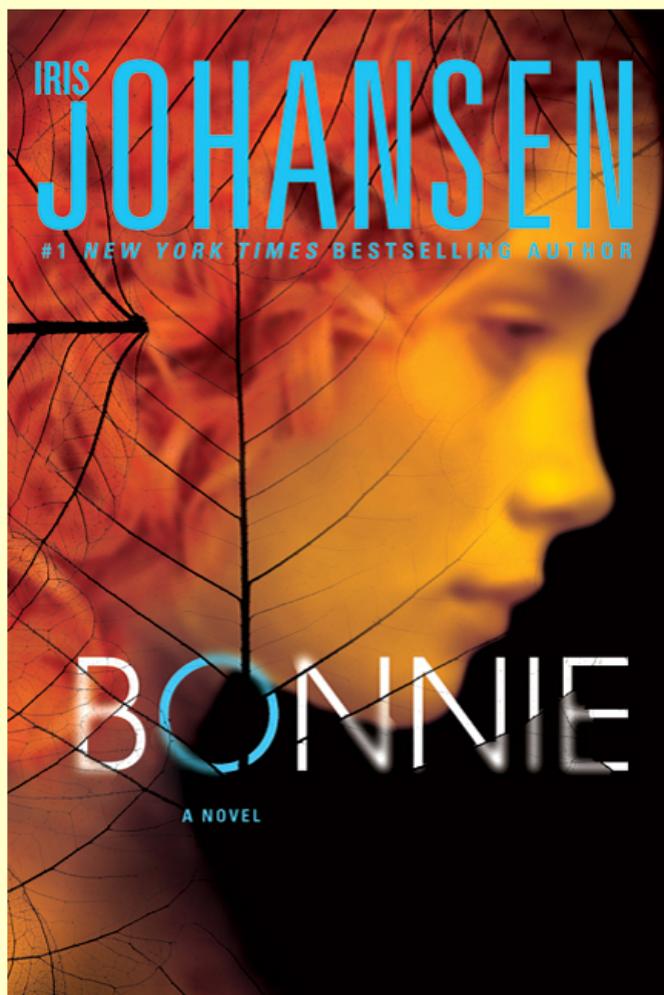


READ IT FIRST



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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CHAPTER

1

Atlanta, Georgia

The Past

“WHAT STAR IS THAT, MAMA?” Bonnie lifted her hand to point at a brilliant orb in the night sky. “It’s shining so bright.”

“That’s not a star, it’s a planet. It’s Venus.” She cuddled her daughter closer on her lap. “I’ve told you about Venus, Bonnie.”

“I guess I forgot.” She leaned back against Eve’s shoulder in the big rattan chair. “Or maybe it’s because everything seems so . . . different tonight.”

“Different? We sit out here on the porch almost every night, baby.” It was a precious time for both of them. After supper, they came out on the front porch and looked at the night sky. Eve had even bought a book on astronomy so that she could point out the constellations to Bonnie. “What’s different?”

“I don’t know.” Bonnie’s gaze never left the glittering night sky. “They just seem . . . closer. As if I could reach out and touch them. As if they want me to come and touch them.”

Eve chuckled and gave her a hug. “Maybe that’s what you

should do when you grow up. Would you like to be an astronaut and go from planet to planet?”

Bonnie giggled. “That might be fun. Like *Star Trek*. But I don’t have ears like Mr. Spock.”

“It could still work.” She smiled as she leaned her head back and gazed up at the sky. “But those stars are very far away, and you don’t know what you’ll find there. Would you be afraid, baby?”

Bonnie was silent, her eyes fixed on the stars.

“Bonnie?”

“I won’t be afraid, Mama.” She turned her head and looked Eve directly in the eye. “And don’t you be afraid either. I’ll be fine.”

Eve’s smile faded. There was something in Bonnie’s expression that was making her uneasy. In that instant, she didn’t look like her seven-year-old little girl any longer. Bonnie’s expression was serene, oddly adult.

Nonsense. It had to be imagination. “I won’t.” Eve gave Bonnie a kiss on the tip of her nose. “Because I think we’ll keep you here on Earth. No skipping from planet to planet. Your grandma and I would miss you too much.” She tugged at Bonnie’s ear. “And you’re right, your ears don’t look at all like Spock’s.” She hugged her again. “And now it’s time for your bath. Didn’t you tell me that your school picnic is tomorrow? Run in to Grandma and have her start your bath, and you decide what to wear.”

“Just one more minute.” Bonnie put her head back on Eve’s shoulder. “I don’t want to leave you yet.”

Eve didn’t want to leave Bonnie either. That instant of un-

easiness was still with her. Why not stay here until it faded away. "One minute. You're not the only one who has school tomorrow. I have to study for my English Lit test when you go in for your bath."

"But tonight is special, tonight is . . . different," she whispered. "Don't you feel it?"

Every day, every minute, was special with Bonnie. From the moment Eve had given birth to her, she had been the center of her world. But maybe there was something strange and beautiful about their closeness tonight. Something that Eve didn't want to give up until she had to do it. The thought brought an odd sense of panic. "I feel it." Her arms tightened around Bonnie's small body. "Yes, I feel it, baby."

BONNIE CAME RUNNING into Eve's bedroom in her yellow pajamas with the orange clowns all over them. Her wild red curls were bouncing, and her face was lit with her luminous smile.

"Mama, Lindsey says her mother is going to let her wear her Goofy T-shirt to the park tomorrow for the school picnic. Can I wear my Bugs Bunny T-shirt?"

Eve looked up from her English Lit book open on the desk in front of her. "It's not can, it's may, baby. And you may wear Bugs tomorrow." She smiled. "We wouldn't want Lindsey to put you in the shade."

"I wouldn't care. She's my friend. You said we always had to want the best for our friends."

"Yes, we do. Now run along to bed."

Bonnie didn't move. "I know you're studying for your test, but could you read me a story?" She added coaxingly, "I thought maybe a very, very short one?"

"Your grandmother loves to read you stories, baby."

Bonnie came closer, and whispered, "I love Grandma. But it's always special when you read it to me. Just a short one . . ."

Eve glanced at her Lit book. She'd be up until after midnight as it was, studying for that exam. She looked at Bonnie's pleading face. Oh, to hell with it. Bonnie was the reason Eve was working for her degree anyway. She was the reason for every action Eve took in life. Why cheat either one of them? "Run and choose a storybook." She pushed her textbook aside and stood up. "And it doesn't have to be a short one."

Bonnie's expression could have lit up Times Square. "No. I promise. . . ." She ran out of the room. She was back in seconds with a Dr. Seuss book. "This will be quick, and I like the rhymes."

Eve sat down in the blue-padded rocking chair that she'd used since Bonnie was a newborn. "Climb up. I like Dr. Seuss, too."

"I know you do." Bonnie scrambled up in her lap and cuddled close. "But since it's such a short book, can—may I have my song, too?"

"I think that's a reasonable request," Eve said solemnly. The two of them had their little traditions, and every night since she was a toddler, Bonnie had loved to share a song with Eve. Eve would sing the first line, and Bonnie would sing the next. "What's it to be tonight?"

"All the Pretty Little Horses." She turned around on Eve's lap and hugged her with all her might. "I love you, Mama."

Eve's arms closed around her. Bonnie's riot of curls was soft and fragrant against her cheek, and her small body was endearingly vital and sturdy against Eve. Lord, she was lucky. "I love you, too, Bonnie."

Bonnie let her go and flopped back around to cuddle in the curve of her arm. "You start, Mama."

"Hushabye, don't you cry," Eve sang softly.

Bonnie's thin little voice chimed. "Go to sleep, little baby."

The moment was so precious, so dear. Eve's arms held Bonnie closer, and she could feel the tightening of her throat as she sang, "When you wake, you shall have cake."

Bonnie's voice was only a wisp of sound. "And all the pretty little horses . . ."

SHE SHOULD GET BACK to her studies, Eve thought.

Not yet. She couldn't pull herself away yet. Bonnie had been so loving tonight. She had seemed to be reaching out for Eve.

She stood looking down at Bonnie curled up asleep in her bed. She looked so small, she thought with aching tenderness. Bonnie was seven, yet she looked younger.

But sometimes she seemed to have a wisdom far beyond her years. She had always been a special child from the moment Eve had given birth to her. Bonnie was illegitimate, born when Eve was only sixteen. Her passionate affair with John Gallo had lasted only four weeks but had given her Bonnie.

And she had thought that she might give her up for adoption, Eve remembered wonderingly. Gazing down at her daughter it seemed impossible to even contemplate. From the moment

she had seen her in the hospital, she had known that they had to be together forever.

Forever.

Those teasing words they'd spoken on the porch had only underscored the fact that Bonnie would be growing up and leaving her someday.

Pain.

She didn't have to think of that yet. Bonnie was still her baby, and she would have her for years to come. Until then, she would cherish every moment as she had done tonight.

She bent down and brushed her lips on Bonnie's silky cheek. "Sleep well, baby," she whispered. "May all your dreams be beautiful."

"Dreams . . ." Bonnie's lids lifted drowsily. "Dreams are so wonderful, Mama. You can reach out and touch . . ." She was asleep again.

Eve turned, and the next moment, she was silently closing the door to Bonnie's room behind her.

"She's asleep?" Eve's mother was standing in the hall. "I would have put her to bed, Eve. You told me you had that test tomorrow."

"I'll be okay, Sandra." She'd called her mother Sandra since she was a child. Sandra had been sensitive about appearing older, and so she had never been Mother to Eve, always Sandra. It was just a sign of how much she loved Bonnie that she accepted her calling her Grandma. "I needed a break anyway." She smiled. "And I don't get a chance to put her to bed every night." She headed back down the hall toward her room. "I wish I did."

“You go to school. You work to support her. You can’t do everything.”

“I know.” She stopped at the doorway and looked back at her mother. “But I was just thinking how lucky I am to have her.”

“How lucky *we* are,” Sandra said.

Eve nodded. “I know how much you love her.” And Eve would have had an even rougher time keeping Bonnie if it hadn’t been for her mother. She had been with them since Bonnie had been born. “She has a school picnic at the park tomorrow. I told her she could wear her Bugs Bunny T-shirt. I won’t be able to be there in the morning. But I should be able to be there by noon after I take my test. You’ll be there until I get there?”

Sandra nodded. “Of course I’ll be there. I’m intending to stay all day. I wouldn’t miss it. Stop worrying, Eve.”

“I just want her to have family there. Other kids have fathers, and I’m always afraid she’ll feel . . .” She frowned. “But we’re enough for her, aren’t we, Sandra?”

“I’ve never seen a happier child.” She shook her head. “And this isn’t like you, Eve. You never question a decision once it’s made. You’re not like me, who wobbles back and forth every time the wind blows. Even if John Gallo hadn’t been killed in the Army, you wouldn’t have wanted him to have anything to do with Bonnie. You told me yourself that it was only sex, not love, between you.”

That was true, and Eve didn’t know why she was suddenly worrying about Bonnie’s not having a conventional family. It was just that she wanted Bonnie to have everything that other

children had, every bit of security, everyone to care about her. No, she wanted more. She wanted her to be surrounded by a golden wall of love all the days of her life.

And she was, Eve thought impatiently. No one could love Bonnie more than she did. More than Sandra did. She was being an idiot to start worrying about something that probably didn't bother Bonnie at all. She had never once asked about her father. She seemed perfectly happy with Eve and Sandra.

"Go study," Sandra said. "Stop worrying about tomorrow. Bonnie is going to have a wonderful time." She turned away. "I'm going to bed. Good night."

"Good night." Eve sat back down at her desk. Don't think about Bonnie. Think about English Lit. Getting her degree was a way to protect Bonnie and give her all the things that she should have. This is what she should be doing.

And ignore this nagging feeling that something was wrong. What could be wrong?

Sandra was right. Bonnie was going to have a wonderful time at the park tomorrow.

NIGHTMARE.

Nightmare.

Nightmare.

"Let's go over it one more time," Detective Slindak said. "You didn't see anyone approach your daughter?"

"I told you." Eve's voice was shaking. "There was a crowd. She went to the refreshment stand to get an ice cream. One minute she was there, the next she wasn't." She stared blindly at the

three police cars parked next to the curb, the people standing around in groups, whispering and gazing at her. “She’s been gone for three hours. Why are you asking me questions? *Find* her.”

“We’re trying. Does your daughter often wander away from you?”

“No, never.” She stared at her mother sitting on the park bench with another police officer. Tears were running down Sandra’s cheeks, and she was leaning against him. “We were at the swings. My mother gave her money for an ice cream, and she ran to buy it. We could see the refreshment stand, so we thought it would be okay. She said she’d be right back. She wouldn’t have just wandered away.” But if she didn’t, then the other explanation was where the nightmares began. “I talked to the man at the refreshment stand. He remembered her.” Everyone always remembered Bonnie. Her smile, the way she lit up everything around her. “He sold her the ice cream, then she ran off into the crowd.”

“That’s what he told us, too.”

“Someone else must have seen her.” The panic was rising. “Talk to everyone. Find her.”

“We’re trying,” he said gently. “We’re questioning everyone. I’ve sent men to search the entire park.”

“They won’t find her here. Do you think I didn’t do that?” she asked fiercely. “I ran all over the park, calling her name. She didn’t answer.” The tears were beginning to fall. “I called and called. She didn’t answer. Bonnie would answer me. She would answer—”

“We’ll try again,” the detective said. “We’re exploring every possibility.”

“There’s a lake. I taught her to swim, but what if—”

“It’s an ornamental lake, just a man-made token. It’s only a drop of four feet in the deepest spot. And we’ve interviewed a father and son who have been sitting on the bench by the lake all afternoon. They would have seen her if she’d fallen into the water.”

“She has to be somewhere. Find her.” That’s the only thing she could say. That’s the only thing that made sense in a world that was suddenly drowning in madness. Bonnie had to be found. All the radiance and love that was Bonnie couldn’t be lost. God wouldn’t let that happen. They all just had to search harder, and they’d find her.

“We’re sending out another search party,” Detective Slindak said quietly as he gestured to the officers starting out toward the trees in the distance. “We’ve put out an all-points bulletin. You can’t do anything more here. Let me have an officer drive you and your mother home. We’ll call you as soon as we hear something.”

“You want me to go home?” she asked in disbelief. “Without my little girl? I can’t do that.”

“You can’t help more than you have already. It’s better that you leave it to us.”

“Bonnie is *mine*. I won’t leave here.” She whirled away from Slindak. “I’ll go with the search party. I’ll call her name. She’ll answer me.”

“She didn’t before,” Slindak said gently. “She may not be there to answer.”

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