

What people are saying about ...

Talking to the Dead

“It isn’t often that I get so hooked on the characters and story that I forget time and purpose. *Talking to the Dead* caught hold of my heart from page one. It takes a gifted and intuitive writer like Bonnie to bring humor into the middle of such a serious story. Call her the Jodi Picoult of Christian fiction! Beautifully done! I can’t wait to read the next story she writes.”

Francine Rivers, best-selling
author of *Redeeming Love*

“Rarely have I read a book that so completely captivated me. After reading the opening line on page one, I stayed up half the night to finish it. Bonnie Grove earns the title of master storyteller in *Talking to the Dead*. The tale of one woman’s journey through grief, mental illness, and betrayal is uplifting and filled with hope. The description that fits best is hauntingly beautiful.”

Ane Mulligan, editor, *Novel Journey*,
and *Afictionado* columnist

“In *Talking to the Dead*, Bonnie Grove takes readers on a vivid journey through the memories of a woman grieving for her late husband. We’re drawn into Kate’s life, gripped by the slowly unfolding drama that unravels her sometimes-painful past and, more importantly,

reveals the key to her future. A captivating, powerful story. I highly recommend it.

Virginia Smith, author of *Age before Beauty* and the Sister-to-Sister series

“*Talking to the Dead* will break your heart and put it back together, better than new. God bless Bonnie Grove for this riveting, insightful, unforgettable story! I couldn’t put it down.”

Kathleen Popa, author of *To Dance in the Desert* and *The Feast of Saint Bertie*

“Bonnie Grove’s amazing novel takes the reader on a unique and compelling journey into loss and restoration; a blend of *The Pilot’s Wife* and *Girl, Interrupted*. Well done.”

Sharon K. Souza, author of *Lying on Sunday*

“*Talking to the Dead* is a deeply moving narrative about grief, sanity, love, betrayal, and hard-won redemption. Bonnie Grove entices, tortures, then salves her readers through gritty characters and pitch-perfect writing. I thought about this book long after I put it down, and it stays with me today. Highly recommended.”

Mary E. DeMuth, author of *Watching the Tree Limbs* and *Daisy Chain*

“*Talking to the Dead* is a shirk-your-duties kind of book. You’ll read it to the neglect of laundry and cooking and bring it with you to read in the car at stoplights. With a story that unfolds in the most surprising ways and a protagonist so true-to-life you feel like you

should be praying for her, *Talking to the Dead* delves deep into the recesses of grief, anger, and most importantly, redemption. Bonnie Grove has set the bar high with this one. I can't wait to read her next book."

Alison Strobel, author of *Violette
Between and Worlds Collide*

"With tightly woven prose that is achingly real and skillfully rendered, Bonnie Grove has crafted a deeply moving story of grief, betrayal, and redemption. Grove's engaging, authentic style is resonant, and her words linger long after you've set the book down."

Susan Meissner, author of *The Shape of Mercy*

"In *Talking to the Dead*, Bonnie Grove masterfully takes you on an authentic journey through grief and recovery with a twist, and leaves you wishing for more."

Debbie Fuller Thomas, author of *Tuesday
Night at the Blue Moon* and *Raising Rain*

"Bonnie Grove has a remarkable gift not only for can't-put-the-book-down storytelling, but she also takes on big, weighty issues—betrayal, grief, wrenching regrets—and handles them with compassion, humor, and ultimately, hope."

Joy Jordan-Lake, author *Blue Hole Back
Home* and *Why Jesus Makes Me Nervous*

"Masterfully written, *Talking to the Dead* thrusts you into the murky world of grief. Despite the deep subject, Bonnie Grove handles the

topic with a light hand as we sojourn with a woman who questions her sanity while viewing life with a quirky sense of awareness. With a bittersweet blending of grief and grace, *Talking to the Dead* leaves you feeling fully satisfied.”

Megan DiMaria, author of *Out of Her Hands* and *Searching for Spice*

“Bonnie Grove’s debut novel is one to savor, brimming with an addictive story, characters you come to love, and a perfect dollop of humor. Good gravy, is it good: I’m talking stay-up-later-than-your-early-morning-permits good. Dear reader, you are in for a treat.”

Kimberly Stuart, author of *Act Two*

“Bonnie Grove’s *Talking to the Dead* is a disturbing yet redemptive spiral through complicated grief. You can’t help but cheer for her heroine as she emerges from her chrysalis of pain a stronger, wiser woman, ready to soar. Christian fiction lovers will relish this tale.”

Claudia Mair Burney, author of *Zora and Nicky* and *Wounded*

TALKING TO THE DEAD



a novel

BONNIE GROVE

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FOR STEVE, BENJAMIN, HEATHER—
WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER
AND
FOR GORDON—WHO HELPED ME SEE



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Books are collaborative efforts. Forget the notion of the cloistered writer alone with her thoughts, the romantic myth of isolated keyboard clacking in a mountain cabin. Oh, certainly there is the writing, the idea that belongs wholly to the author (as much as any idea can belong to anyone)—but that alone creates only a manuscript. It takes much more to make a book. Here are the people it took to make this one.

My gratitude to the extraordinary team at David C. Cook—Dave Grove, for his enthusiastic love for his job. Deb Templemeyer, who took the time to care about what happened to the manuscript. Susan Tjaden, who has been a champion of this book from the beginning, and a joy to know and work with. You've brought joy to the journey. My thanks and admiration to Don Pape: You are the guy an author dreams of having in her corner, a man of integrity. I don't know where I'd be without Wendy Lawton of Books & Such Literary Agency. Wendy, you are a standout in this industry, a champion. And what would this book be without editor Nicci Jordan Hubert? Wrestler of words, grappler of paragraphs, grasper of concepts—it's my great

pleasure to know and work with you. It is obvious you do what you do for one simple reason: love. For readers, for authors, for art.

I owe so much to Isabelle Vouve, my dear friend who faithfully read every word and offered so much more than her “eagle eyes,” but gave her heart. I love you, Belle. And thanks to Debi Knutson, the friend who walked with me in the valley, and walks with me still. Much love. I’m grateful for the prayers of the people in our church home—they helped more than can be expressed.

Thanks to my family, my mom and dad who have rejoiced with each giddy step, prayed every day, and have turned into first-class booksellers. Great smooches and hugs to my children Benjamin and Heather, too young to understand what all the fuss was about. They are my heart. And my thanks to Steve, my favorite person. You’re the one who made all of it possible. Forever and a day.

1

Kevin was dead and the people in my house wouldn't go home. They mingled after the funeral, eating sandwiches, drinking tea, and speaking in muffled tones. I didn't feel grateful for their presence. I felt exactly nothing.

Funerals exist so we can close doors we'd rather leave open. But where did we get the idea that the best approach to facing death is to eat Bundt cake?

I refused to pick at dainties and sip hot drinks. Instead I wandered into the backyard.

I knew if I turned my head I'd see my mother's back as she guarded the patio doors. Mom would let no one pass. As a recent widow herself, she knew my need to stare into my loss alone.

I sat on the porch swing and closed my eyes, letting the June sun warm my bare arms. Instead of closing the door on my pain, I wanted it to swing from its hinges so the searing winds of grief could scorch my face and body. Maybe I hoped to die from exposure.

Kevin had been dead three hours before I had arrived at the hospital. A long time for my husband to be dead without me knowing. He was so altered, so permanently changed without my being aware.

I had stood in the emergency room, surrounded by faded blue cotton curtains, looking at the naked remains of my husband while nurses talked in hushed tones around me. A sheet covered Kevin from his hips to his knees. Tubes, which had either carried something into or away from his body, hung disconnected and useless from his arms. The twisted remains of what I assumed to be some sort of breathing mask lay on the floor. “What happened?” I said in a whisper so faint I knew no one could hear. Maybe I never said it at all. A short doctor with a pronounced lisp and quiet manner told me Kevin’s heart killed him. He used difficult phrases; medical terms I didn’t know, couldn’t understand. He called it an *episode* and said it was massive. When he said the word *massive*, spit flew from his mouth, landing on my jacket’s lapel. We had both stared at it.

When my mother and sister, Heather, arrived at the hospital, they gazed speechlessly at Kevin for a time, and then took me home. Heather had whispered with the doctor, their heads close together, before taking a firm hold on my arm and walking me out to her car. We drove in silence to my house. The three of us sat around my kitchen table looking at each other.

Several times my mother opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Our words had turned to cotton, thick and dry. We couldn’t work them out of our throats. I had no words for my abandonment. Like everything I knew to be true had slipped out the back door when I wasn’t looking.

“What happened?” I said again. This time I knew I had said it out loud. My voice echoed back to me off the kitchen table.

“Remember how John Ritter died? His heart, remember?” This

from Heather, my younger, smarter sister. Kevin had died a celebrity's death.

From the moment I had received the call from the hospital until now, slumped on the backyard swing, I had allowed other people to make all of my bereavement decisions. My mother and mother-in-law chose the casket and placed the obituary in the paper. Kevin's boss at the bank, Donna Walsh, arranged for the funeral parlor and even called the pastor from the church that Kevin had attended until he was sixteen to come and speak. Heather silently held my hand through it all. I didn't feel grateful for their help.

I sat on the porch swing, and my right foot rocked on the grass, pushing and pulling the swing. My head hurt. I tipped it back and rested it on the cold, inflexible metal that made up the frame for the swing. It dug into my skull. I invited the pain. I sat with it, supped with it.

I opened my eyes and looked up into the early June sky. The clouds were an unmade bed. Layers of white moved ruffled and languid past the azure heavens. Their shapes morphed and faded before my eyes. A Pegasus with the face of a dog; a veiled woman fleeing; a villain; an elf. The shapes were strange and unreliable, like dreams. A monster, a baby—I wanted to reach up to touch its soft, wrinkled face. I was too tired. Everything was gone, lost, emptied out.

I had arrived home from the hospital empty-handed. No Kevin. No car—we left it in the hospital parking lot for my sister to pick up later. "No condition to drive," my mother had said. She meant me.

Empty-handed. The thought, incomplete and vague, crept closer to consciousness. *There should have been something.* I should have

brought his things home with me. Where were his clothes? His wallet? Watch? Somehow they'd fled the scene.

"How far could they have gotten?" I said to myself. Without realizing it, I had stood and walked to the patio doors. "Mom?" I said as I walked into the house.

She turned quickly, but said nothing. My mother didn't just understand what was happening to me. She knew. She knew it like the ticking of a clock, the wind through the windows, like everything a person gets used to in life. It had only been eight months since Dad died. She knew there was little to be said. Little that should be said. Once, after Dad's funeral, she looked at Heather and me and said, "Don't talk. Everyone has said enough words to last for eternity."

I noticed how tall and straight she stood in her black dress and sensible shoes. How long must the dead be buried before you can stand straight again? "What happened to Kevin's stuff?" Mom glanced around as if checking to see if a guest had made off with the silverware.

I swallowed hard and clarified. "At the hospital. He was naked." A picture of him lying motionless, breathless on the white sheets filled my mind. "They never gave me his things. His, whatever, belongings. Effects."

"I don't know, Kate," she said. Like it didn't matter. Like I should stop thinking about it. I moved past her, careful not to touch her, and went in search of my sister.

Heather sat on my secondhand couch in my living room, a two-seater with the pattern of autumn leaves. She held an empty cup and a napkin, dark crumbs tumbling off onto the carpet. Her long brown hair, usually left down, was pulled up into a bun. She looked pretty

and sad. She saw me coming, her brown eyes widening in recognition. Recognition that she should do something. Meet my needs, help me, make time stand still. She quickly ended the conversation she was having with Kevin's boss and met me in the middle of the living room.

"Hey," she said, touching my arm. I took a small step back, avoiding her warm fingers.

"Where would his stuff go?" I blurted out. Heather's eyebrows snapped together in confusion. "Kevin's things," I said. "They never gave me his things. I want to go and get them. Will you come?"

Heather stood very still for a moment, straight-backed like she was made of wood, then relaxed. "You mean at the hospital. Right, Kate? Kevin's things at the hospital?"

Tears welled in my eyes. "There was nothing. You were there. When we left, they never gave me anything of his." I realized I was trembling.

Heather bit her lower lip and looked into my eyes. "Let me do that for you. I'll call the hospital—" I stood on my tiptoes and opened my mouth. "I'll go," she corrected before I could say anything. "I'll go and ask around. I'll get his stuff and bring it here."

"I need his things."

Heather cupped my elbow with her hand. "You need to lie down. Let me get you upstairs, and as soon as you're settled, I'll go to the hospital and find out what happened to Kevin's clothes, okay?"

Fatigue filled the small spaces between my bones. "Okay." She led me upstairs. I crawled under the covers as Heather closed the door, blocking the sounds of the people below.