



Jennie Allen

New York Times bestselling author
of *Get Out of Your Head*

FIND YOUR PEOPLE

*Building Deep Community
in a Lonely World*

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PEEK



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Restless: Because You Were Made for More

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the God Who Sets Us Free*

Chase Study: Chasing After the Heart of God

FIND YOUR PEOPLE

...

BUILDING DEEP
COMMUNITY IN A
LONELY WORLD

...

Jennie Allen



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FIND YOUR PEOPLE

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Dedicated to my village of friends.

THANKS FOR MAKING ME BETTER.

THANKS FOR FIGHTING FOR ME.

THANKS FOR STAYING.

It is not good for man to be alone.

—GOD, AFTER HE BUILT THE
FIRST HUMAN ON EARTH

—

So, as messy as relationships might be,
we cannot live life alone.
We have to figure this out.

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WE AREN'T SUPPOSED TO BE THIS LONELY



I HAD A PANIC ATTACK LAST WEEK. A FULL-FLEDGED, COULDN'T-catch-my-breath, on-the-floor-of-my-closet panic attack. I haven't had one in ten years.

I write these words with the rest of this book nearly finished. And yet I want to be honest with you: this is my reality today, after spending a couple years of my life living, writing, researching, and thinking about something that apparently at least three in five of us feel daily:

Loneliness.

I imagine you are here because you feel it too. That sinking feeling that you aren't seen, you aren't known, and you are on your own to face whatever difficult thing life is throwing at you.

I get it.

But I'm convinced that feeling is rooted in a big fat lie—a

lie that threatens to pull you and me into a dark place unless we learn how to fight back.

Case in point: my recent panic attack.

IT HAD BEEN BUILDING over the course of several weeks.

I'd hidden myself away to edit this book, and when I finally emerged . . .

. . . I was in a fight with one of my sisters. We hadn't seen each other in months, and we both live so busy. But my sisters are two of my closest friends.

. . . My husband was frustrated that I had been so disconnected, because even when I wasn't working on the book, I was distracted by the million things that had fallen to the wayside.

. . . I realized my people had been building memories together and sharing experiences without me. It had been so long since I was available to hang out, they had finally stopped calling. In my mind they had moved on together, and I was now alone on the outside.

All this hit at once, along with this crushing certainty: while I was writing a book about finding your people, I lost all of mine.

I was a complete fraud. I didn't have people.

The conflict, isolation, and fear went on for weeks. And it kept growing. I thought about it all the time. Then, after yet another person expressed disappointment in me, I found myself alone on my closet floor, unable to catch my breath. The lie that left me gasping?

I am all alone.

That same night I had a vivid nightmare in which my worst fears came true. My people were not only quitting me, they were gossiping about me, stabbing me in the back—and I had a book out in the world about how close we all were.

Drama, I know. I imagine you're now wondering about what kind of help you can expect from someone who was recently melting down over this very topic.

So why tell you this?

Because on some deep level, being alone is a fear we all share.

Maybe you're experiencing loneliness right now?

Maybe you had people and they quit you?

Or maybe you've never truly had your people?

Or maybe you have them, but even when you're with them, you feel distant and unseen?

THE ACHE OF LONELINESS is real, and it's haunting us.

I mentioned in *Get Out of Your Head* that my neuro-buddy Curt Thompson likes to say we all come into the world looking for someone looking for us. It's true, but it's incomplete; we are looking for more than that.

In a recent conversation about connection, Curt pointed me to these three words we need from infant to ninety!:

Every human is looking to be:

Seen

Soothed

Safe

We don't just want to be seen; we want to tell a friend or loved one about our disappointments and hopes and find comfort as well.

We want to be seen and comforted, and we want to be safe. But we aren't always safe.

We aren't always comforted, and it might feel like we aren't even seen.

Sometimes it's as simple as a fleeting thought. You're falling asleep with some worries about your future, and this whisper sneaks into your mind: *No one even knows what I'm going through.*

Sometimes it's a deeper reality: life has been so chaotic and stressful for so many years that you accidentally didn't invest in your relationships, and when you look up, your people are gone.

It's a profound, in-the-crevices-of-our-souls sense of isolation.

It's the wondering if you are truly known, seen, accepted, even cherished, such as when:

- You don't know whom to call to pick you up at the airport.
- You have something to celebrate or grieve and no one to celebrate or grieve with.

- You have an idea you want to brainstorm and can't think of anyone who would care enough to dream with you.
- You're dealing with a difficult situation at work but can't think of anyone safe you can talk it through with.
- Most of your friend group is married and starting to have kids, and you aren't even dating.
- Your kids are grown, and you are single and spend most of your time alone.
- You are eating another meal alone—again.
- You are looking at the weekend and don't have a single plan. Unless you initiate or go it alone, you won't have anything to do.
- You're talking to someone you thought was a good friend but realize you are on completely different pages about important issues.
- Your family is broken and unhealthy, when it seems everyone else is excited to be going home to see their (normal, happy, well-adjusted) families at Christmas.
- You need to talk but don't know whom to call.
- You haven't had anyone genuinely listen to you in so long that you honestly can't remember the last time you opened up.

These scenes strike at the quiet ache I'm talking about. It's just an inescapable reality of the human condition, right? Isn't it just something we all face?

Or is it just me?

Or is it just *you*?

Do you ever wonder that? If maybe you're the only person who feels *this* alone?

You aren't, by the way.

You aren't alone in feeling alone.

The morning after that vivid nightmare, I woke up and saw with crystal clarity:

I am believing the lie that I'm destined to be alone, and in believing that lie I'm making it into reality, because I am pulling back and judging those I love, guarding myself from them as if *they* were the enemies.

It was early but even as I was having that thought, one of my closest friends called. Instead of letting it go to voicemail and pulling the covers over my head, I thought, *This is my chance to fight back.*

When I answered, Lindsey said she was calling just to check in. I said, "I need to bring you all into some things that have been going on."

Now there was no chance of my going back into hiding. I have the kind of friends who won't leave me alone until I tell them everything. That night we got together, and I described for them the insecurities that had been growing for weeks, the nightmare, the fears of being a fraud, even the panic attack and difficulties with my family.

They wrapped me up with love and prayed and fought for me. As Lindsey dropped me off afterward, she smiled and said, "Jennie, I've never felt so close to you."

Then I called my sister and asked to get together. Over a meal, I looked in her eyes and described the hurt I felt, and

she described her hurt, and we laughed at how much confusion we'd both believed. We ended up spending the day together sharing everything going on in our lives.

One by one I went to my people and did exactly what I used to be terrified to do: *I openly acknowledged that I needed them.*

I fought back against the lie that had threatened to take me down.

I am not alone.

I am not a fraud.

I have people.

YOU MIGHT BE BELIEVING the lie right now that you are alone. But what if the people you need are right around the corner?

Come close and let me tell you my hopes for us here. **I want us to trade lonely and isolated lives that experience brief bursts of connectedness for intimately connected lives that know only brief intervals of feeling alone.**

Think I'm crazy? I'm here to tell you that I'm not.

I might have momentary setbacks when the lie that I'm alone creeps back in, but I've learned not to stay there. And in recognizing that I occasionally feel lonely, in experiencing and then sharing it honestly, I've found it brings people in—because now you know you are not alone in feeling alone!

The connection you and I both long to experience? I've seen for myself that it is possible. And once I saw it, I couldn't unsee it. I couldn't not fight for this kind of life.

You'll fight for it, too, I promise.

You'll see and not be able to unsee.

Fight back the lie with me. Let's find your people.

PART

1

...

**WE NEED
EACH OTHER**

...

1.

THERE IS ANOTHER WAY



*D*O YOU BELIEVE THAT YOU WERE BUILT FOR TRUE, RADICAL connection? Even if you're an introvert, we all are physically, emotionally, and spiritually hardwired by God for relationship. From the moment you were born until you take your last breath, deep, authentic connection is the thing your soul most craves. Not just as an occasional experience, but as a reality woven into every day of your life.

But to access this reality, you'll have to make some changes. Because something is fundamentally wrong with how we have built our lives.

We spend our evenings and weekends tucked into our little residences with our little family or our roommates or alone, staring at our little screens. We make dinner for just us and never want to trouble our neighbors for anything. We fill a small, little crevice called home with everything we could possibly need, we keep our doors locked tight, and we feel all safe

and sound. But we've completely cut ourselves off from people outside our little self-protective world. We may feel comfortable and safe and independent and entertained.

But also we feel completely sad.

Nearly all of us live this way, and yet it's just not working for any of us. As I mentioned, research says that more than three in five Americans report being chronically lonely, and that number is "on the rise."¹ These stats are indicators of a grave and costly crisis. Anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts are all on the rise. Scientists now warn that loneliness is worse for our health than obesity, smoking, lack of access to health care, and physical inactivity.²

So why are we letting it define our days?

Is this *living*? Is this how life is supposed to go?

Let me skip to the answer: No. It isn't supposed to be this way! You know what you were actually built for?

- Long, meaningful conversations with people who have known you for years and would donate their kidney if you needed it.
- People who drop by with pizza and paper plates unannounced because they missed you and aren't afraid to intrude.
- Regular unscheduled and unhurried time with people who feel like family, even if they aren't.
- The obvious few who scream with joy when you share your awesome news and cry with you when you share your hard stuff.
- People who show up early to help you cook and stay late to clean up.

- People who hurt you and who are hurt by you, but who choose to work through it with you instead of both of you quitting on each other.
- People who live on mission beside you, who challenge you and make you better.
- People who know they are your people, and you are theirs. People who belong to each other.

This is a book about how to find our people—the ones we'll live day in and day out with, the ones we'll risk being fully known by, the ones we'll gladly be inconvenienced by, the ones we will choose to love.

Yes, I know how complicated and exhausting making friends can be as an adult. Why didn't anyone teach us how to do this? Does it really have to be this hard? What are we missing?

I begin this journey with you aware of two things:

1. People make up the best parts of life.
2. People make up the most painful parts of life.

And I assume you picked up this book with one of those two truths more prominently fixed in your mind. So, whether you come with hopes or with fears or with both, it's okay. I suspect that if you really go all in with me, some of your fears may come true. But I also believe that your hopes will be exceeded.

It is possible to live connected—intimately connected—to other people.

But connection costs something, more than many are willing to pay.

If you choose to join me in this adventure of building authentic community, I promise that what you'll gain in the bargain is more than worth it, but it will require you to reconsider most everything in your life today. Specifically:

- Your daily and weekly routines.
- The way that you buy groceries.
- The new neighborhood you're considering.
- Whether or not you live near your family.
- The church you choose to be part of.
- What you do this weekend.
- And deeper still: how open you choose to be about your difficult marriage.
- And about your fight with anxiety, which is getting worse.
- And whether you'll ask the hard question of the person you love who is drinking too much.
- And if you'll forgive and fight for the people who have hurt you deeper than you could ever imagine.

Everything I'll be asking of you in our journey together requires that you risk your comfort and your routines. And yet everything in your life aches for the change I am inviting you to experience. Because I am convinced that we have been going about this all wrong.

Waiting for Connection

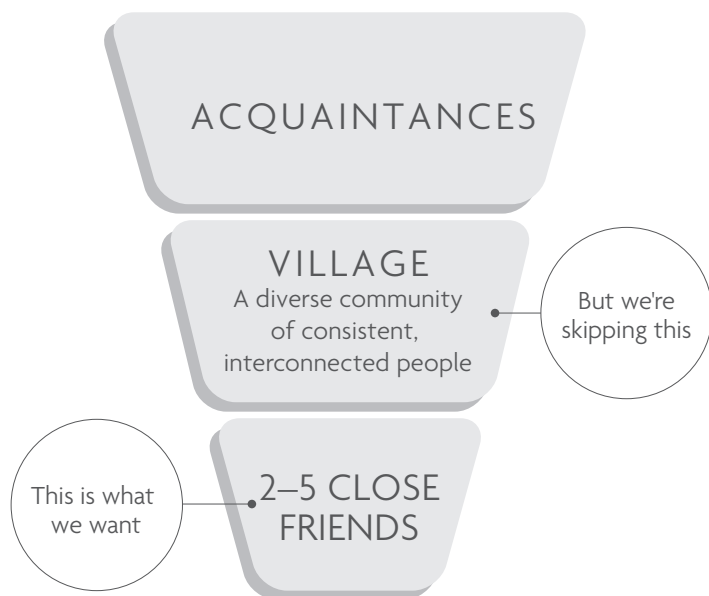
I still remember the day when the thought occurred to me that I didn't have any friends. I should clarify: I had plenty of friends, but those friends and I all had very full lives, which meant that our interactions were erratic—and rare. Back then, I was neck deep in parenting young kids as well as traveling a lot, speaking, and doing events with IF:Gathering, the ministry organization I lead. And while being on the road provided plenty of life-giving interactions with other women, reentry at home often came with a sting. Did any of my “friends” even realize I'd been gone? Did they know that I'd returned?

This was not my friends' fault, of course. They had obligations, commitments, relationships, and jobs of their own. In fact, they likely were asking the same questions about me: “Does Jennie know what's going on in my life? Does she even care?”

Isn't this familiar? **We're all just kind of waiting for connection to find us.** We're waiting for someone else to initiate. Someone else to be there for us. Someone else to make the plans or ask the perfectly crafted question that helps us bare our souls.

Here's what we do: We spend hours alone in our crowded, noisy, screen-lit worlds, we invest only sporadic time with acquaintances, and then we expect close friends to somehow appear in our busy lives. We think our acquaintances should just magically produce two to five BFFs. Then, we believe, our relational needs will be met.

But community is bigger than two or three friends. Community should be the way we live. Historically and practically,



people in all countries and generations have found their friends from their larger village of interconnected people.

I've been nerding out researching this, and here's what I've learned: there are scientific studies that show how many relationships we can manage and how we socially interact with people. Basically, we can handle a network of only about 150 people. Think of your Christmas list. People you talk to at least once or twice a year. Much more than that and it falls apart!

Inside that 150 are layers of friendship that deepen with how much time you spend with a person and the degree of your relationship with them. Research suggests that we can handle only fifty people in what we will call our *acquaintances*. Within those fifty people, there are fifteen people in our *village*. And within our village, we have a capacity to make five of them our BFFs. You read that right. Only five!

Extroverts may have slightly more capacity than five, but you get the picture.

How much time you spend face to face with a person is what determines where they fit in your 150. And what pushes people deeper into our inner circles of friends?

The amount of time we spend with them.

Time.

It is our best asset when it comes to building deep community.

So, as we begin, I want you to open your mind to something more than that handful of friends you've been picturing as your goal. My dream for you, God's plan for you, is to build a culture of community in every part of your life.

My friend Curt, the neurorelational expert, said it this way: "Every newborn comes into this world looking for someone looking for her."³ And that never quits being true.

You and I are both a little needy.

In fact, God built us this way.

And yet it's hard to need people. No, it's *terrifying* to need people, because sometimes when we acknowledge our need, we feel like there is no one who wants to take our call in the middle of the mess. Or at least that's what I believe in the moment.

Middle of a Cry

My friend I mentioned earlier, Lindsey, is the type of friend who calls me on the phone instead of texting, stops by unan-

nounced instead of asking first, and shows up to pull me out of my robe even when I say I want to be alone.

And she calls me in the middle of a cry, when she's hurting, raw, and still confused about why she feels so sad. She lets me into the messy moments because she knows that suffering alone only makes suffering worse.

When I cry, I get it all out of my system and then maybe call a friend the next day, after I've washed my face and analyzed my situation, after I feel totally prepared to spin some optimism around the issue and top it with a slapped-on, messy, crooked bow. Because I hate how needy I actually am. I am embarrassed in my brokenness, and maybe deep down I wonder if anyone would really even want to be in the middle of that cry with me.

Which is ironic, because when Lindsey calls me crying, nothing means more to me. That phone call makes me feel needed, and who doesn't want someone to need them? So why do I keep pretending that my own need isn't real?

Obviously, I'm not writing this book because I'm an expert. I'm writing because this kind of genuine community is essential to living but we have made it an accessory.

We've replaced intrusive, real conversations with small talk, and we've substituted soul-baring, deep, connected living with texts and a night out together every once in a while, because the superficial stuff seems more manageable and less risky. But let's face it: whether we live lonely or deeply connected, life is messy. The magic of the best of relationships

is the *mess*, the sitting-together-on-the-floors-of-bathrooms, hugging-and-sobbing mess.

But as I said, I'm not good at being needy. I'm needy, just not good at admitting it. And that has consistently damaged my relationships.

My tendency to hide my neediness is a painful topic for me. It always has been.

I've hurt people.

They've hurt me.

I have failed my friends. Some have forgiven me, and some have walked away. I am certain that if they knew I was writing this book, some would shake their heads and roll their eyes. *Jennie? A book on intimacy and friendship and showing up for each other over the long haul? Um . . .*

Those eye rollers would be right. While I'm doing better than I used to, I'm far from perfect in this area. And yet I'm going to keep working at it. Because the more I look into the why of our neediness and the problem of our loneliness, the more convinced I am that at our core we are made to be fully known and fully loved. Loved and known regularly and over time by family members, close friends, mentors, coworkers. **God built us for deep connection to be part of our day-in, day-out lives, not just once in a while in the presence of a paid therapist.**

It Hasn't Always Been This Way

In nearly every generation since creation began, people have lived in small communities, hunting together, cooking together, taking care of their kids together. No locks, no doors. They shared communal fires outdoors and long walks to get water, doing their best to survive day by day. People were rarely alone. They lived communally, in shared spaces, with a variety of generations present—leveraging each other's talents, sharing each other's resources, knowing each other's business, caring for each other's family members, holding each other accountable, and having each other's backs—not just to stay alive, but also in an effort to live more fulfilled . . . together.

And guess what? A lot of the world still lives this way. Hunting might have morphed into community gardens and local pubs, but most everyone who has ever lived on planet Earth has lived within a small huddle of a few dozen people, nearly always including their family but also including others, inside a radius of barely twenty miles—all their lives.

There is a foundational reason we as a generation have broken every record when it comes to how lonely we all feel.

Let me say clearly that brokenness and sin have been rampant throughout all history and all cultures. And loneliness too. Our hope in this journey isn't to re-create something old and broken but to learn from people who have approached this vital aspect of life in much healthier ways than we have. Yes, we need hope that transcends earthly relationships and connection. That is where the gospel comes in. But as one of

the first people groups on earth to live in such an individualistic way, we have much to learn from those who have chosen connection over isolation.

TAKE ITALY. WE HAVE family there. Some people have family in Oklahoma, but we have family in Italy. Nice, right? A few years ago, Zac and I rented a cheap VRBO, hauled ourselves, our four kids, and a lot of luggage onto a giant plane to spend a week in a nontouristy little village in the middle of Nowhere, Italy, to meet that extended family for the first time.

One afternoon, my husband and I wandered into a corner grocery store to pick up ingredients for a dinner we'd make later that night. We couldn't help but notice the four men smoking and engaged in deep conversation at the counter, the kind of conversation that looked like it might happen every day. One of them, we'd learn, was the owner, and he, together with the other three, seemed to be solving all the world's problems. Our entrance interrupted their discussion, and reflexively one of the men swiveled his head toward us in a way that seemed almost angry.

"Who are you?!" he asked.

I laughed. He wasn't impolite exactly, just surprised to see strangers in his corner of the world. I noticed then that pretty much every person in the market was now looking at us. We'd evidently burst some invisible insider's bubble. The thing is, this was a tiny town. I'm not sure exactly how many residents lived there, but however many it was, they all knew each other. And they all knew that strangers had shown up.

We wound up having a good conversation with several

people at the market that day, and the who-are-you guy even pointed out some Italian cookies he thought my American kids would love.

That night, while Zac and I were making dinner, I reflected on the vibe I'd picked up on in town. "Can you imagine living in a place where everyone in your whole town knows you and you know them? And where you can walk to the grocery store? And where you have to go to the grocery store at least every other day because the market—not to mention, the only market in town—carries mostly fresh food? And where that every-other-day grocery run will take you, oh, two hours or more, because you'll inevitably run into one or two or twenty-five people asking you the kinds of meaningful questions people ask when they're not strangers or even acquaintances but everyday friends?"

Cue the *Cheers* theme song now, if you are old enough to remember it.

Why don't we live in a village somewhere, I wondered, where everyone knows our names? Where everyone would be glad we came? I started thinking about where we lived and how we lived and whether something as simple as the lack of a local grocer might explain why I felt so lonely in sprawled-out Austin, where we lived at the time and where most of my closest friends lived a forty-five-minute drive away in traffic.

And then there's Uganda. A few years ago I traveled there with a group of people who wanted to tell the stories of South Sudanese refugees who had fled to the farmland of northern Uganda. Not only did these refugees all live together, but they worked together too. We would come to find out that they

also went to church together, and that many of their children, if sponsored, attended school together.

Our little group walked up to a hut where a church service was already in progress, and the energy of the worship drew us in. People were singing and chanting and laughing. Big belly laughs. Laughs that told the world to bring it. They could take whatever life dished up. They would overcome.

Hands were raised and swaying. Babies were bouncing on the backs of women and girls alike. Feet were sliding and stomping. The place pulsed with kinetic energy, as if all fifty or sixty people in the room had merged into one.

I stood there taking it all in, the hum of this place, the elation, the cooperation, the cords of camaraderie, the sense of wild delight that covered the pain. There had to be pain, right? Of course, there was pain. So many of these people had been displaced, had lost everything—even family members. And yet to look at them was to see something more. Resolve, maybe. Or peace.

And I thought, *We don't do this very well in the place I come from.*

We don't come together in our pain.

We isolate.

We insulate.

We pretend.

We call *after* the cry.

And as a result, we are flat miserable.

We hole away in houses separated by fences or stay stuck in our apartments with alarms carefully set. We don't tell the whole truth of our pain because it appears that everyone else is doing just fine. They aren't hurting. In fact, they're living happy, perfect lives. We decide the problem is probably us. We hide physically because if we aren't seen, we can't be known. And if we can't be known, we can't be rejected—or worse, have our vulnerability used to hurt us even further.

We live guarded because we fear someone will use our weakness against us.

In my research, I saw a five-foot-long chart of historical people groups: who they were and where and when each group has lived. To give you a sense of our place in the overall scheme of things, the blue wedge that represents those of us living in the United States shows up only on the bottom four inches of the chart. And all I can think about as I stare at that tiny segment is how badly I wish we would embrace the approach to life that every other people group has prized. I wish we would learn to come together—showing up, speaking up, and calling each other up to a new way of life—instead of defiantly pulling ourselves apart.

We live alone, we eat alone, we run our errands alone, and we suffer alone.

And I'm sick of it.

You and I both are sick of it.

We're sick *from* it, anyway.

My Regulars

I thought of these experiences in Italy and Uganda and the hole in my life where community should be as I sat in the airport flying home—alone, once again. And I knew I wanted something to change. I wanted someone beyond my family to realize I was gone, someone to know I was coming home, and someone to process all of it with me. I decided a regular get-together with a few people was the only way for it to consistently happen. So I texted several friends I didn't yet know particularly well and explained how I was feeling and what I needed. A handful agreed to meet. Together we committed to connecting not just occasionally but regularly and intentionally.

We most often met in the evenings on my back porch, where we'd say what was true of our lives. Whenever one of us was traveling or sick, the others would get together anyway. We prioritized these times together over just about everything else. For nearly three years, we met this way. What is that, more than a hundred evenings together? At two hours a pop, we logged some serious and intimate time.

I clearly remember waiting at some gate of some airport in some town, trying to get home after speaking somewhere, and

my heart would leap, knowing I would be seeing my friends the next day. Those meetups were oxygen to my connection-craving soul, gulps of fresh air I craved. We would talk about our marriages, we would talk about our kids, we would talk about our jobs, and we would talk about God. We'd laugh. We'd tear up. We'd sigh over disappointment and pain. It didn't stop with those group gatherings, either. Because we knew so much about what was happening with each other, our newfound intimacy bled into other parts of life.

We'd check in on each other.

And bring food to each other.

And shop with each other.

And listen to every small and big thing happening in our lives.

We traveled together and stuck together.

We were tight . . .

Until we were not.

One of those friends quit me. I mean, she actually looked me in the eye and said, "I don't want to be friends anymore."

I will never forget where I was sitting and how the world was spinning as she told me why she couldn't keep investing in our friendship. And as you'll see in the coming pages, this wasn't the first or last time this happened to me. Without going into details, it was completely my fault.

The point is, I lost my regulars that day. Our little team fell apart.

And yes, I still had lots of friends in Austin. But that “in Austin” part matters here. Austin is not a small town. Austin is far-flung, a hundred cities in one. If your kids aren’t at my kids’ schools, if your workplace isn’t a block from my workplace, if your house isn’t within walking distance of my house, if your favorite restaurants aren’t on the same side of the lake as mine, well, then we might as well live on different planets for the number of times we’ll happen to cross each other’s path. I had plenty of occasional friends, people I’d see at planned times during highly scheduled events. And I loved those friends! But in terms of my real, deep, everyday friends, the women who knew my weekly comings and goings, my family’s ups and downs, most of what was really going on with me, those few lunch friends were it. They were my people.

And after that one conversation with that one friend, I felt alone again.

The Best Parts Are Also the Hardest Parts

I start with this yo-yo of a story because I think it’s important that you understand how I got here. The desperate and glorious seasons of relationships in my life represent what is true for you and me both:

Outside of Jesus, relationships are the greatest gifts we have on earth and simultaneously the most difficult part of being alive.

There are seasons when it feels like our relational cup is overflowing and seasons when we wonder if anyone even knows we are alive.

Maybe you're a pastor's wife who knows the whole church but never really feels known.

Or you're single and just moved to a new town for a job and have to completely start over, alone.

Or you live alone and worry who would take care of your dog if you had to go to the hospital for some reason.

Or you have a lot of people who you consider friends, but you don't feel a deep connection with anyone.

Or you've tried three small groups and still haven't found the right fit.

Or you had the best of friends, but life happened and you drifted apart.

Or maybe you feel like you have absolutely no one and don't even know where to begin.

Whatever situation has left you feeling detached and adrift, I'm about to throw you a life preserver.