

**friend  
me**



# friend me

Donna Carter



WHITAKER  
HOUSE

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## **FRIEND ME: Turning Faces into Lasting Friendships**

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donnacarter.org  
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## DEDICATION

It seems appropriate to me to dedicate this book on friendship to the very first people with whom I found a profound sense of belonging: my family of origin. The nest in my family tree was safe, both physically and emotionally. It was full of nurture, truth, and fun. And when it was time to fly away, I could do so with confidence and competence because of the love and affirmation I had received there. The warm relationships associated with the nest keep drawing me back to stay engaged with the wonderful people God chose to be my family.

Mom and Dad, your example is undiluted by any falseness. I have never once doubted the authenticity of your love for God, for each other, or for your three daughters. Seeing Mom's faith expressed over a lifetime of service made serving God and people seem like the natural thing to do. Mom, if King Lemuel's mother had met you, she wouldn't have had to fabricate the virtuous woman described in Proverbs 31. You are my hero.

I have two sisters: Debbie, the “nice sister,” so accepting and kind, is older; Jocelyn, the “fun sister” with the sparkling personality and big heart, is younger. I’m the middle sister with the identity crisis who thinks too much. Despite the usual childhood arguing and sibling rivalry that occurs in most families, I have long known that my sisters are beautiful women, and I love them dearly. I didn’t know how fiercely they loved me until I arrived home safely after being evacuated by the Canadian Armed Forces from the rubble of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, after the 2010 earthquake there. I came through the sliding doors of the secure area of the airport, only to be nearly knocked down by the intensity of my precious sisters’ hugs and sobs. I belong.

Now it seems Debbie has to leave us. Unless God performs a miracle, it will be soon. Often I find myself asking aloud, “How will we live without her?” And then I answer myself with the truth whispered deep into my heart: “With God’s grace.”

Debbie, all through your illness, you have denied my attempts to tell you how irreplaceable you are to me. But this is *my* book, darn it!—I can say whatever I want—so I am going to say it now.

Since I was a tiny girl, you were my safe place. I would have followed you anywhere. And I did. Into haunted houses and wild rides at the Calgary Stampede. On horseback and water skis. Doing things I never would have done, had I not adored you as I did. I followed you into a relationship with Jesus. You couldn’t have been more than eight years old when you led me in a prayer to invite Jesus into my life. Later I followed you into ministry, and we enjoyed a wonderful synergy, blending your behind-the-scenes leadership gifts with my behind-the-microphone ones—kind of like Moses and Aaron. Then, an agonizing ministry experience drove us even closer together in spirit, though it drove us apart geographically. The parting was so difficult that we couldn’t say

good-bye without setting a date for the next time we would be together.

This time, that is impossible. I can't follow where you are going now, and I don't know when I will. This parting is so painful, I feel as though my arm is being severed from me, one inch at a time. This whole family has your cancer, and we weep while the tearing continues. And in your wise and gentle way, you grieve—not for yourself, because you know your glorious destination—but because your imminent departure causes us such pain. How you will be more beautiful in heaven is hard to imagine. One day, I won't have to imagine it. I will follow you. Until then, God's grace will be enough if we walk with Him moment by moment, day by day, in tear-stained joy. His grace is enough.

Though it appears I won't follow Debbie anytime soon, unless God heals you, Dad, you will. How can I express what your steadfast presence has meant in my life? You affirmed my femininity while instilling in me the firm belief that I could do anything I chose to do. Your tender strength prepared me to engage in healthy, hope-filled relationships with men and women alike. That bedrock of trust provided the foundation for the nurturing marriage Randy and I have enjoyed for more than thirty years.

Every day, you told your daughters that you loved us. Having a dad who was affectionate, protective, and involved made trusting God with my life an easy leap. Although our remaining time together on this earth is short, I will never outlive your imprint on my life. You leave a legacy of serving God with your time, gifts, and resources. And of loving your family so well.

I am keenly aware that I have a lot to lose only because I had so much to begin with. Though I grieve in this season of profound loss, I am so blessed. Mom, Dad, Debbie, and Jocelyn...I love you with my whole heart.



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## PREFACE

**M**any people have relationships a mile wide and an inch deep. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace, enable us to keep in touch with hundreds of people. But do we really *know* those people? We read headline-style updates about their lives and witness their big moments in photo slideshows, but rarely do we see their hurts, know their dreams, or understand their needs. Many of us approach the latest technology in smartphones and iPads as time-efficient devices to help us manage our relationships while expending the smallest amount of energy.

There is no denying the convenience of social networking sites, and there's nothing wrong with using them to keep in touch with a broad range of people—family members, friends, co-workers, and so on. My husband has over a thousand “friends” on Facebook. However, he also has face-to-face friends with whom he shares the ups and downs of his life. We all need those people in our lives—friends who know our struggles and insecurities,

who are familiar with our pains and our pasts—people who have probed the depths of our character over the long haul, who know it all and love us, anyway. We need friends who value us in our unmasked state and accept us as we are, yet also nurture us in our weakness and challenge us in our shortcomings. While it's true that our relationships are often the source of our deepest wounds, the fact remains that we were made for relationship—we need it to survive. The key is to establish “safe” friendships—places where we can be ourselves without fear of judgment or condemnation.

*Friend Me* is a tool to do just that. This book explores the barriers to “safe” friendship—for example, the fear of being known, the fear of rejection, feelings of jealousy or inferiority, and plain old busyness. We will discuss the characteristics of true friendship, as well as the indicators of toxic relationships, and explore how to safely navigate a relationship through calm and turbulent waters alike. We will also answer the question “How can I find a friend?” even as we acknowledge that there are times when God sees fit to let us experience periods of solitude or even isolation, for the purpose of drawing our attention to something inside of us or to another relationship, whether it's with another person or with our heavenly Father Himself. After all, He is the best Friend we can ever hope to have!

If you long for true friendship with more than face value, read on, and don't give up. The road may be hard, at times, but it's a journey well worth taking.

*Some people come into our lives and quickly go.  
Some stay for a while and leave footprints on our hearts.  
And we are never, ever the same.*

—Flavia Weedn



Part I

# THE POWER OF FRIENDSHIP



# 1

## JUST ONE FRIEND

**M**y friends all thought they were there to help me celebrate my fortieth birthday—to have lunch, sing, eat cake, and laugh. But that wasn't why I had invited them to the restaurant. I had something quite different in mind. The poor waiter must have been confused by the whole event. One minute, he walked into the private dining room we occupied and found us laughing uncontrollably; when he came back, moments later, he found us all in tears.

Why had I arranged a gathering of my friends at the restaurant that day? Because I was determined not to repeat a mistake for which I was still struggling to forgive myself. On that day, I told my friends—all of the dear women who mean so much to me—how much I appreciated them, the specific ways in which each of them enriched my life, and how thankful I was that God

had brought them into my life. I knew I might not have another chance....



I could hardly believe it. After twenty years of living at least half a continent away from each other, my dearest childhood friend, Sonja, and I would finally be living in the same neighborhood again. After years of missionary work in Europe and ministry elsewhere in Canada, Sonja, her husband, Brian, and their children were moving back to Calgary.

I first met Sonja when I was ten, and we were inseparable from that point forward. When we grew up and got married, she was my maid of honor, and I was hers. At my wedding reception, I introduced her with several lines from “Seasons in the Sun,” a song by Terry Jacks that was popular then—specifically, the verse that reminisces about the joys of childhood friendships and the shared lessons of life and love learned in that season.

Shortly after our marriages, our paths diverged. And it wasn’t until August 2000 that we were together again.

But there was a problem.

During Sonja’s second pregnancy, thirteen years prior to our reunion, she had developed a pesky cough that wouldn’t go away. The doctors suspected pneumonia. After performing some tests, they delivered some good news: Sonja was carrying twins. They also delivered some bad news: Sonja had cancer—specifically, a very aggressive cancer called non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.

She and Brian were stationed in Germany at the time, and because the doctors couldn’t guarantee the effectiveness of the

treatment protocol on a pregnant woman, they scheduled her for an abortion. Sonja and Brian both refused, and they brought their family back to Calgary, where she underwent aggressive chemotherapy, even though the doctors weren't sure how it would affect her unborn babies. Their speculation about deformities and other severe birth defects challenged Brian and Sonja's faith daily as Sonja endured the treatment and its side effects.

But the treatment seemed to be working. The twins were born three months premature, and, while they faced profound breathing problems and other issues common among premies, they were otherwise healthy and whole. Immediately after the twins' cesarean birth, Sonja's radiation treatment began.

Only months after Sonja and her family returned to Germany, the cancer came back. So, it was to Canada again for further chemo, followed by a bone marrow transplant. The treatment was successful, in that Sonja was cured of cancer—yet the treatment also resulted in complications that now posed a new risk to her cancer-free body.



I met Sonja halfway through the school year in fifth grade at Mapleridge Elementary School, when she moved to the area with her family. I remember thinking that my new classmate looked very grown-up and very, very, groovy. Her hair was long, styled in a wavy shag, and her blue eyes peered somewhat shyly through her oval wire-rimmed glasses. She wore denim hip-huggers and a macramé belt. She was tall and curvy; I was skinny and, well, skinny. I was very impressed by this cool new girl, and I wanted to be her friend. So, I introduced myself. And our lives were forever changed.

A few weeks later, we were standing outside the school, talking, as usual, until we had to part ways. We couldn't walk home together because Sonja lived to the west of the school, while I lived to the east. That day, Sonja told me that her parents were getting a divorce. I felt sad for my friend. I couldn't imagine how I'd feel if my parents decided to separate.

I started inviting my new friend to attend various church activities with me, including girls' club, camp, and Sunday school. Sonja seemed happy to oblige, and it wasn't long before she made the decision to become a follower of Jesus. Faith in God was just one more thing we had in common. Beyond our shared interest in boys and books and clothes and music—and our mutual, alarming lack of athletic prowess—we now shared the unique bond of those who have given their lives to Jesus. What had been a close friendship became much more. We were, in the words of L. M. Montgomery's character Anne of Green Gables, "kindred spirits."

As Sonja's parents' divorce was finalized, Sonja's mom, Bonnie, decided that she wanted to get away from Calgary—away from her ex-husband, away from the memories, just away. She decided to move with her three girls to Lethbridge, a city about two hours south. Sonja and I were devastated. We couldn't bear the thought of not seeing each other every day. We moped and we mourned.

And then, the house across the street from mine went up for sale.

My bedroom window overlooked that brown bungalow, and I'll never forget the day Sonja and I knelt together at that window and prayed to God that Sonja would live in that house instead of moving to Lethbridge.

The next phase of our plan was to march up to the door of the house, knock, and request entrance, to find out whether it would be a suitable home. (We needed to gather some ammunition for our argument to Sonja's mom if we hoped to convince her that she should move six blocks away rather than leave the city altogether.) I can only imagine what the homeowner across the street thought when two twelve-year-old girls showed up to talk real estate.

The house was all wrong for Bonnie and her three girls. It had only three bedrooms, the basement had not been finished, and, most significant, it wasn't located in Lethbridge. Still, I knew it was meant for Sonja and her family.

Bonnie bought the house. To this day, I don't know what made her change her mind and make such a radical change of plans. It must have had something to do with our childlike faith in a great God who loves to give good gifts to His children. For I can think of no greater gift in those early years of adolescence than having my best friend close by. Besides my family, Sonja was my whole world. To this day, I can't imagine what my teenage years might have been like without her.

I can think of no greater gift in those early years of adolescence than having my best friend close by.

Living across the street from each other enabled us to spend even more of our time together. Sonja became part of our family, and I part of hers. If she wasn't at my house, I was probably at hers. My other friends would actually phone Sonja's house and ask for me. More than once, I went along on a family vacation with Sonja, her sisters, and her mother. Maybe Bonnie wanted

to avoid all of the hugs and tears that went on whenever we had to spend a week or two apart.

I knew Sonja loved me for who I was, and I returned her unconditional love.

Living so close also meant that when I went to church, Sonja came, too. When my parents dragged me to girls' club, I dragged Sonja to girls' club; if I went to Bible camp, so did she. It was through these contacts that she learned to love God with her whole heart, grew a strong faith, and met a young man named Brian—with whom she eventually fell head-over-heels in love.

It was okay that I wasn't popular at school. It was okay if I was mocked for taking a stand when my faith demanded it. It was okay to say no to peer pressure. Because, at the end of the day, Sonja was still my friend; I always had someone to walk home with. Cool or uncool, cheerful or ill-tempered, succeeding with flying colors or failing miserably, I knew Sonja loved me for who I was, and I returned her unconditional love.

Our loyalty faced occasional challenges. When we were approaching our graduation from ninth grade (long before Sonja met Brian), Sonja secured a date to the festivities—a boy she'd met in band. I had no such prospects. Unwilling to leave such an important match up to chance, I mustered my courage and invited a high-school boy named John, whom I knew only slightly from church but had admired from afar.

He must have been flattered, because he agreed to go. Soon after, we started dating. Of course, everywhere I went with John, Sonja came along, because wherever there was a Donna, there was a Sonja, too.

Somewhere along the line, however, John's affections shifted. It turns out that I was the third wheel, not Sonja, and I didn't even know it. When I was on vacation, John made his interests known to Sonja, and they started spending time together.

When I returned, the truth came out. Sonja admitted to having stolen "my" boyfriend. We talked about it—amazingly enough, without a lot of emotionalism or drama—and decided that no boy was worth jeopardizing our friendship. Sonja dialed his number, I picked up another receiver, and together we made a "Dear John" call. As cute as he was, our friendship was way more important.

When I look back at the depth and quality of our relationship, I am simply amazed. I know I must have driven Sonja crazy at times. Walking to school with me every day meant earning at least a dozen late slips a year, for which she was not to blame. I was the flighty extrovert; she was the voice of reason. I had the wild imagination; she, the dry sense of humor. Outside my family, no one but Sonja could have known how fragile I truly was. How often she protected me, comforted me, and steadied me! Without her, this social butterfly would have dissolved like tissue paper in a pounding rain.



At my wedding reception, when I introduced Sonja with those lyrics from "Seasons in the Sun," I didn't quote the line that came next. Now, it haunts me, because it's basically a farewell to a dying friend.

During the summer months before Sonja's return to Calgary, I had been studying the life of King David and was deeply touched by the biblical account of his final encounter with his best friend, Jonathan, who knew that he was about to

die. In a moving scene of love, grief, loyalty, and commitment, Jonathan asked David to make a solemn promise: that when the battle was over and the dust had settled on his grave, David would take care of his family.

On Tuesday, September 19, I was on my way to see Sonja with the intention of making a similar promise to her. I knew her fragile body was failing fast, and I struggled to prepare myself emotionally for what I knew might be our last encounter this side of heaven. I stood in the main lobby of the Foothills Hospital, waiting for one of the six elevators to admit me. One set of doors opened, and out stepped Sonja's mom, Bonnie, and her sister Paula. They were as surprised to see me as I was to see them, and we stood there, looking at each other, not sure what to say in such a heavy moment.

Finally, Paula broke the silence. "She's gone!"

I stood there silently, trying to take it in.

I had missed my chance to say good-bye by mere moments.

Paula broke the silence. "She's gone!" I had missed my chance to say good-bye by mere moments.

Thankfully, I had been to see Sonja a few days prior. I had helped her into a wheelchair and moved her outside into the sunshine. She'd always loved the sun. We'd talked and prayed together. I'd hugged her and told her I loved her. But there was so much more to say.

I had tried to see Sonja two more times before she passed away, but neither occasion was convenient; either the room had been full of relatives or doctors, or Sonja had been taken elsewhere for tests. We never got to say all there was to say—to laugh at all our old jokes, to smile at all our long-held secrets,

to relive all our precious memories. I wish I'd had the maturity when we were teenagers, or the sensitivity later, when the miles came between us, to tell her just how much she had always meant to me.

Losing Sonja was like having the core of my childhood ripped out of me. That sensitive, silly young girl still living somewhere deep inside of me feels such a profound sense of loss.

Yet, in other ways, I have not lost Sonja at all. I would not be who I am today if it hadn't been for her. I would not enjoy the rapport I do with other women. The close connection I had with Sonja has become the standard, the template, for every friendship I've formed since knowing her—the foundation of empathy and trust on which all of my relationships have been built.

Thank you, Sonja, my friend.

## JUST ONE FRIEND

### *Questions for Reflection and Discussion*

1. Who were your closest friends in childhood and throughout adolescence? What was the basis for these friendships? (In other words, what common ground did you share?)
2. Were any of your childhood friendships similar to Donna's deep friendship with Sonja? How so? How were they different?
3. What role did your earliest friendships play in establishing the foundation for future relationships in your life?
4. If you had the opportunity to express your appreciation to your closest childhood friend, what would you say?
5. What's stopping you?