

CHAPTER 1

The Case for Fake

One of the greatest regrets in life is being what others would want you to be, rather than being yourself.

—Shannon L. Alder¹

All the money is gone. This was the final answer at the end of a long line of questions.

This trio of sisters had been sharing responsibility for their dad ever since their mom died, leaving the details of his finances and medical care in their hands. The sisters weren't exactly tight, but they each played a part in their father's care. It wasn't easy as two of them were out-of-state, and many times I had sat with my friend as she cried over the frustrations that came with this arrangement. But it was working. And this father was one of the sweetest people I'd ever known. I loved him like he was part of my own family. He was kind and loving.

And trusting.

Eventually my friend saw some red flags—a few areas

that seemed concerning—from the sister handling all the finances. She'd also received tips from concerned family members that things weren't adding up. She struggled to imagine how her Spidey senses and the whistle-blowers' accusations could be true, and when she confronted the sister in question, her explanations seemed solid. Life went back to normal.

These sisters had grown up together, had spent countless holidays together, had shared big family vacations together, and had connected often through phone and email. I knew this family, and I had seen throughout the years how important family was to each of them. So when my friend felt certain these allegations couldn't possibly be true, I believed that too. But soon more red flags began to wave.

I walked through those painfully revealing days with my friend. I watched well-crafted stories unravel. I was there when this family began to uncover the horrible truth that had been going on for years. And I wept when the sister's lies were exposed. She had been living anything but an authentic life.

They discovered a tangled web of lies, counterfeit living that had marked most of her adult life. This was the sister who had graduated from seminary, led youth groups, and spoken from a stage. She was a favorite among the nieces and nephews. This one ran in well-known circles. And she had stolen every bit of money her father had—every last penny. New credit cards had been opened. Debt had piled up. Medical insurance had been canceled. Savings had been spent. Investments had been drained. It was all gone.

In this sister's mind, she justified being inauthentic with those she claimed to love. She made up reasons for lying to

those who trusted her the most. And somehow she decided living fake felt safer than being honest about financial troubles. Living fake felt better than admitting failure. Living fake felt easier than finding the courage to be honest and upright and selfless. She bought into the case for fake. And it eventually cost this sister her life.

My friend graciously allowed me to share this part of her story with you, and out of respect for the continued heartache and healing of her family, I won't go into more detail. But you know what? I have my own whack-a-doo stories about family members choosing to live fake. I'm learning that these kinds of stories aren't that rare. Chances are someone in your own family tree has chosen counterfeit living instead of standing brave for truth.

But even worse, I can think of times I've lived fake—times I've been too ashamed or afraid of being myself. I have been in relationships where I didn't think my genuine feelings and thoughts mattered, so I hid them. I've wanted to speak out for an injustice but was too scared of criticism. Instead, I went along with the groupthink.

I think of seasons in my life when I was dying inside, battling demons from some childhood abuse, but I didn't ask for help. I grinned and bore it alone. Or times I felt overwhelmed and underwater but acted like everything was fine. And I can remember times I sat in silence or even joined into conversations with women being mean-spirited in their gossip. Even though I felt the Holy Spirit's prompting to speak up or walk away, I was afraid of ridicule.

I've acted more important than I really am. I've let others think I was more together than was true. I've pretended instead of being honest. I've been hypocritical rather than

genuine. I've been dishonest rather than risk my reputation. And that's just scratching the surface.

If you've read my other two books—*Untangled* and *Uncommon*—you'll know I'm pretty transparent with my life and my story. I believe there's power in testimony, so I'm an advocate for authenticity. Oh yes, I love diving into the deep waters of intimacy with conversations that reveal the heart. And from the stage, I try to challenge women to be real with themselves, others, and God. I haven't always been that way.

The Lord and I have done some work over the past several years—work that has given me the courage and confidence to be okay with who I am. This is a new way of living, and it has taken grit and grace to walk it out. Most of my life, it felt safer to live fake. In my insecurities, I chose to be phony. Fear told me to be deceptive, hiding the truth of who I really was instead of shining. But with each baby step out of the shadows of counterfeit living, I've seen the beauty of imperfection.

We need to cover one big reality now, because it will help us answer the “why” when we struggle to live authentic, not fake. I don't know about you, but I'm all in until things get crunchy. I'm sold out until the straight path begins to wind and point uphill. Those are the times I want to quit and go back to the status quo—back to hiding the real me from the world. It's when I end up asking myself, *Why am I advocating for authenticity?*

So let me start by stating the obvious. Ready?

Living fake is so much easier than living authentic. (Mic drop)

Here's why. To live the authentic life means we choose to believe we are who God says we are, not who we've been told we should be by other people or cultural standards. It

means our words and actions mirror our beliefs and values. We're going to unpack this in detail in the next chapter, but can we agree here and now that being real is hard to do?

And chances are you're presenting a counterfeit you right now and don't even realize it. It's not always a choice we consciously make, you know. Sometimes it's a defense mechanism to keep the hurt away. It's a habit we've picked up courtesy of the school of hard knocks. Other times it's what we were modeled growing up and it became our normal. It can also be part of our God-given temperament, especially when we're introverted or shy. And for many of us, we learned a long time ago that opening up and letting someone in sets us up for heartache, so we've chosen to present a more controlled exterior that rarely reflects our interior.

Let's think about it. How many times has someone asked how you are, and you've quickly responded, "I'm fine," or "Everything's great." Your marriage may be falling apart, but at Bible study you smile and act like life is just dandy. When you meet a friend for coffee, you talk recipes and Black Friday shopping strategies instead of sharing the deep fears you have about parenting. You might be drowning in debt, but no one has any idea you're in over your head. As far as anyone else can tell, your life couldn't get any better even if you tried.

Somewhere along the way, you decided not to share the real you with the world. You thought to yourself, *It's just easier this way. It spares my feelings. It cuts down on drama. And I don't have to justify or defend myself.* Maybe you think you're not worth knowing, and rather than let your insecurities get all tangled up, you bailed on authentic living. Maybe fear of

criticism or judgment got in the way. Maybe you have a long memory of times you opened up and it didn't go so well. Oh my gosh, I get it. Fake feels safer and easier. Yes and amen. And you know what? Sometimes it just might be wisdom.

It's not realistic to think we should be ready and willing to verbally vomit our innermost pain all over someone when they ask how we're doing. We may be a hot mess, but there is a time and place to open up and share. We don't have to walk around in tears every day when we're in a tough season. Sometimes we just have to put on our lipstick and mascara and find a way to *adult*. Right? Again, there is a time and place. And we don't always have to call someone out or get all heated up the moment our feelings get hurt. For Pete's sake, we don't have to attend every fight we're invited to. We can choose to extend grace or approach the other party in honesty once we've calmed down.

The truth is many of us may need a big dose of discernment so we know when sharing our true thoughts and feelings is a good thing. We must navigate a balance. But here's where the problem lies. Many of us never seem to find the *right* time or motivation to open up and reveal the true us. (Geez, I didn't for years.) Instead, we keep our authentic selves locked away and live our socially acceptable selves instead. We settle for fake because it's easier and safer.

I remember opening up to a friend about something that had hurt my feelings deep down. It was the knock-me-to-my-knees kind of hurt, and I was still trying to catch my breath from it. I hadn't really shared what happened with anyone until I did with her because I was still processing it. And as I unpacked the details of the event, I wept. I really let my friend peek inside my heart. It felt so vulnerable and

a little scary, but my protective walls had come down, and I didn't have the wherewithal to pull myself together at that point. It was an ugly-cry moment.

And then she said, "If God brought you to it, He'll bring you through it." Can I be honest? I almost punched her. Seriously, people. We have to stop using these kinds of Christian platitudes on each other. They may look great on a social media graphic, but few things will shut down authenticity faster. Same with quoting scripture. These platitudes do not often work well in those honest moments, girls. And this was one of those moments.

Now, I love God's Word and encouraging phrases as much as the next person, but here is some advice: When someone gives you the privilege of seeing the depth of their heart, consider it sacred ground. They usually aren't looking for guidance or for you to minimize their hurt with cute sayings or slogans. They need someone to listen as they purge their heart. They need a cry buddy or someone to give a hug when they need it the most.

You've just been invited into a beautiful moment of authenticity. Embrace it, because when you offer someone room to be messy and real without judgment or fix-it answers, that's one of the greatest gifts you can ever offer another human being. And it can be a touchstone memory of why they don't have to live fake.

Well I didn't punch my friend, nor did I tell her she handled it all wrong. But I'll be honest, that experience will make me think twice before opening up to her again. Her intention might have been good, but her response to my honesty was an authenticity killer. It encouraged the real me to stay tucked away without even meaning to. And worse, hers was the kind

of response that helps make the case for fake.

But you know what just might be one of the most compelling reasons counterfeit living seems like a viable option? *Shame.*

Shame keeps us from being authentic because it says who we are is not okay. Deep down, we believe the *real* us is unacceptable, so we present another version—one that looks less messy and more put together. Shame weaves its way into our self-worth, reminding us of all the times we put ourselves out there and didn't measure up. Shame makes us remember moments we've shared the depths of our heart and were met with ridicule or judgment. It sucks the life out of us. Shame makes a strong case for fake living.

You know what else? Shame gives us an honesty hang-over. Do you know what I mean? It's the feeling we shared too much. . .we looked too messy or too needy. . .we didn't sound gracious enough. . .we were unfair with our words . . .we sounded too full of ourselves. . .we talked too much. Shame hits us hard after we open up with our honest feelings and whispers, "You are ridiculous." Yep, shame has a way of telling us we're either not enough or too much.

When shame tangles me, I usually tuck away. I hide from community because I'm embarrassed by what I've done or who I am. Sometimes shame makes me feel like a scared little cat backed into a corner, and I come out attacking like a lion. Yeah, that's not pretty. But mostly I sit and ruminate over my failures and shortcomings. This creates self-doubt and knocks my confidence, but I try to look unshaken. And as I'm curled up in bed nursing my wounded heart, I watch one of my favorite chick flicks and cry for the hundredth time.

Now it's your turn. How does shame discourage authentic

It takes real grit to be honest about who you are and what you think. It takes guts to stand up and speak out for what you believe. And it takes grace to navigate it all. But I want you to know it matters, and God sees every choice you make to be real in a world that glorifies the fake. He alone will be your shield, your victory, and your hope.

In John 8, we meet a woman whose story can speak directly to this truth. My heart can barely handle the amount of embarrassment she must have felt. I hurt for her. I'm humiliated on her behalf. I can only imagine how uncomfortable she must have been in that moment. And honestly, the way she was treated makes me so angry. Let me set the stage.

Waking up early, Jesus left the Mount of Olives and made His way to the temple in Jerusalem. As He arrived and attracted a crowd, He sat down and started teaching. Can we stop here for a minute? I am so in awe of Jesus' willingness to shift gears. He was heading for the temple and allowed the needs of the people to distract Him. Soak that in for a sec. Girls, I am graceless pre-coffee, so this act of kindness blows me away—especially so early in the morning.

Now visualize this impromptu church service. Can you see the crowd sitting and standing around Jesus, hanging on His every word? Can you imagine how quiet it was as they listened with intensity to what Jesus was sharing? What a beautiful moment in time, right? And then that sacred space was interrupted.

I'm sure the crowd was caught off guard at the commotion coming their way. Within moments, a woman was standing in front of Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees had dragged her from the adulterous bed, and there she stood,

facing the Messiah. We don't know what she was wearing or how presentable she was, but we can assume she was not at her best.

I'm also sure she was scared, knowing she had committed a crime. She had to be sad, knowing this was how her life had turned out. She may have been angry that the man sharing her bed was assigned no blame in this situation. But I can *guarantee* you she was covered in shame, embarrassed about who she was.

I want to have coffee with this woman in heaven. I want to hug her neck and tell her how much I appreciate her story. Shame kept me living fake for so long, and her story of redemption has been an encouragement. She wasn't living as her authentic self—no one is born with the desire to have extramarital affairs—and it was an encounter with Jesus that gave her courage to be real. Those words stand true for us today.

Now let's grab our front-row seat and watch this powerful exchange unfold between Jesus, her accusers, and this embarrassed-beyond-belief woman scared straight out of her mind. You can find her story documented in John 8:4–11 (VOICE).

***Pharisees:** Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. Moses says in the law that we are to kill such women by stoning. What do You say about it?*

This was all set up as a test for Jesus; His answers would give them grounds to accuse Him of crimes against Moses' law. Jesus bent over and wrote something in the dirt with His finger. They persisted in badgering Jesus, so He stood up straight.

Jesus: Let the first stone be thrown by the one among you who has not sinned.

Once again Jesus bent down to the ground and resumed writing with His finger. The Pharisees who heard Him stood still for a few moments and then began to leave slowly, one by one, beginning with the older men. Eventually only Jesus and the woman remained, and Jesus looked up.

Jesus: Dear woman, where is everyone? Are we alone? Did no one step forward to condemn you?

Woman Caught in Adultery: Lord, no one has condemned me.

Jesus: Well, I do not condemn you either; all I ask is that you go and from now on avoid the sins that plague you.

Don't skip over these wonderful words, because they are life-giving. *Jesus doesn't condemn.* He does not berate us for our sins. And listen to this. *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* defines the verb *condemn* as "saying in a strong and definite way that someone is bad or wrong."² That's the very essence of shame. Even more, God has no part in spreading condemnation.

Remember, shame is feeling unhappy with who you are as a person. It's believing that at your very core you're bad and inherently flawed. When Jesus told this woman tangled up in her shame and exposed by her sin that even the God of the universe does not condemn her, her life was forever changed. That's revolutionary love and acceptance right there. And you know what? Get this. It's available to you and me right now.

But just like the adulterous woman from John 8, you and I have existed in counterfeit ways. We've made choices

that don't reflect who God created us to be. Our words and actions haven't revealed the truth of who we really are. And for far too long, we've justified living fake because it has just felt easier and safer. Shame has held us hostage, unable to see that who we are is good.

The truth is authentic living costs us something.

It costs us intentionality. It costs us vulnerability. It costs us comfortability. It forces us to muster the grit to trust again, being willing to put ourselves out there one more time. Authentic living requires grace to have realistic expectations for ourselves and others, and it necessitates a huge dose of confidence and courage so we can shine. This kind of living is the result of spending time with Jesus.

Yes, authentic living costs you something. But, friend, when we choose it over the counterfeit life, something beautiful happens. When we each decide to live and love the way we were created to live and love, we look like the church. Listen to this from Romans 12:3–8 in The Voice translation.

Because of the grace allotted to me, I can respectfully tell you not to think of yourselves as being more important than you are; devote your minds to sound judgment since God has assigned to each of us a measure of faith. For in the same way that one body has so many different parts, each with different functions; we, too—the many—are different parts that form one body in the Anointed One. Each one of us is joined with one another, and we become together what we could not be alone. Since our gifts vary depending on the grace poured out on each of us, it is important that we exercise the gifts we have been given. If prophecy is your gift, then speak

as a prophet according to your proportion of faith. If service is your gift, then serve well. If teaching is your gift, then teach well. If you have been given a voice of encouragement, then use it often. If giving is your gift, then be generous. If leading, then be eager to get started. If sharing God's mercy, then be cheerful in sharing it.
(emphasis mine)

I know, that's a lot of words in a long paragraph. Sometimes I see a big block of copy and get overwhelmed, so I skim it. But let's pick this apart together to find the gold nuggets, okay?

This passage reveals some awesome details about why choosing to live authentic is so necessary, even though it's hard. Paul is. . .

- confirming we each have a specific call (mission, purpose, gifting) to walk out in our lifetime,
- reminding us that along with that call comes the faith we need to make it happen,
- saying our different callings are designed to work together with other Jesus followers, and
- encouraging us to be our true selves and share our God-given gifts because doing it creates a stronger community that can accomplish more.

So if we decide *not to embrace* our calling, choose to disagree with who God created us to be, continue living counterfeit lives, and opt out of community, everyone around us will miss out on what we could have brought to the table.

Our fear of being real will let others down. It will neuter our effectiveness for the Kingdom. And it will tell our Creator

that we don't like His handiwork. (*Psst.* None of these are good.)

Let's make a change. Heck, let's *be* the change. Isn't there enough insincerity and dishonesty in the world? If you're anything like me, making a case for fake isn't hard. Gosh, we've been doing it for years. There's no arguing it's the safe and easy choice. But it's not working, and our hearts are craving authentic connections with others. We're yearning to be seen and known. And our passion to be real with God is burning.

Let's make authentic living in the name of Jesus cool again. Are you with me?