Meriem Narimane Noumeur

DIGITAL SHADOWS

A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL

Digital Shadows (A Young Adult Novel)

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Meriem Narimane Noumeur

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Amidst the dim glow of the small screens in our hands,
a spark can light the path ahead.

It is awareness.

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Jouri in a Photo

Jouri began flipping through her mother's old album, searching for photos that captured her mother's childhood or youth. She was surprised to discover that her mother had only a handful of pictures of herself. When Jouri asked why, her mother explained, "Taking photos in our day was not as simple as it is today," and went on to describe old photographic techniques. Jouri listened with wide eyes, grateful that she did not live in those times. Otherwise—oh, the horror—she would not have all those photos saved on her mobile phone, documenting the best moments of her life, and not just that, but dozens of photos for every single moment.

Tucked away like a secret in the album, a photo caught Jouri's attention—her mother in a white dress, standing beside a mulberry tree with a shy smile. Laughing, Jouri pointed to the photo and asked, "What's the story behind this one, Mom?"

Her mother smiled as she gently removed the photo from its clear sleeve, her eyes softening as she recalled something from her past. "Ah, this photo takes me back to a difficult day in my childhood. I was eight years old when my mother trimmed my hair very short, and it felt like a disaster to me! I was terribly embarrassed and could not bring myself to go to school. I was convinced that I looked terrible. To cheer me up, my father decided to take me on a picnic, and it was there that he took this photo."

Jouri examined the photo once more, thinking, *How can my mother keep a photo where she thinks she looks unattractive, while I can't share one without using all kinds of filters to make it perfect?*

Taking the photo from her mother's hands, Jouri asked, "Why do you hold onto this picture and treasure it, even though you say you were not beautiful in it? I can hardly save photos that are not edited."

The mother smiled and gently patted Jouri's shoulder: "True beauty, my darling, is not about how well a photo aligns with the world's imposed standards of perfection. This photo brings to mind a special moment that means more than just outward beauty. It brings back memories of a picnic with my dad and the sense of safety and love that filled my heart at that time."

Jouri set the album aside and went to her room, where she began examining her facial features and the details of her body in the mirror: her wide eyes, asymmetrical nose, and lips, which she felt were imperfect and longed to change. With a delicate touch, she ran her fingertips over her face, longing to discover it anew, untouched by filters. She took a few photos of herself and examined them closely, noting that certain angles were necessary to conceal what she perceived as asymmetry in her nose. Yet a sense of inadequacy lingered. Her face was not as "full" as she was used to with filters, nor was her skin

completely flawless. Dissatisfied with the pictures, she deleted them all, as she did every time she tried to reconcile with her true self.

* * *

As the new school year started, summer was taking its final breaths, ready for autumn's arrival. A cool breeze brushed Jouri's face, carrying the earthy scent of damp soil, which always reminded her of the beginning of school. The only difference this year was that she was starting her second year of high school. Her hairstyle hadn't changed, and neither had her features. She still wore straight bangs over her forehead, reminiscent of Lisa, her favorite singer from the K-pop band BLACKPINK. Lisa always wore her hair meticulously styled, parted evenly so her bangs became the focal point. Jouri believed this hairstyle balanced her features and helped hide the imperfections she saw in her own face.

Jouri, an enthusiastic follower of Lisa on Instagram, found joy not only in her music but also in her videos. As she and her friend, Laila, walked to school, she commented, "I really admire her confidence and fashion choices. Just look at how fit she is and how well she dances! I wish I were famous like her."

Laila laughed and asked, "Should we expect to see Jouri, the next big K-pop star?" "Nooooo," Jouri exclaimed. "Not as a singer or dancer. I just want to be the center of attention and have lots of followers."

Laila smiled and playfully added, "Well then, I'd better hold onto plenty of photos of you now, since I probably won't get the chance once you're famous. At least I can tell your followers that I was your friend and classmate."

"As long as I approve the photos," Jouri replied jokingly, although her words masked genuine concern.

She hated photos taken on any phone except her own. Whenever one of her friends snapped one, she insisted that they delete it. In her own photos, she always used subtle filters—soft makeup or a crown of flowers—to give them a playful and charming effect.

* * *

At the end of the school year, Jouri ranked first in her school and was honored at the end-of-year ceremony. That day, she walked briskly forward, glancing at her parents seated in the front row. Their faces were lit with pride and joy, their eyes shining, and their smiles made her feel even happier. But then the applause and smiles began to fade from her mind, replaced by mocking laughter that echoed from distant places that only she could hear. The voices gradually rose, blurring her thoughts, and she lowered her head as the lights from mobile phone cameras dazzled her. Those cameras were snapping photos of

Jouri. Her body broke into a sweat, and her hands trembled as she accepted the award from the principal. In that moment, she wished the earth would split open and swallow her, so she could vanish, taking with her those unwanted photos and silencing the voices that seized her mind.

As she returned to her seat, she felt the shadows of these photos chasing her, merging above her head to form an ominous black cloud. She could not shake the feeling that she would look unattractive in every photo, her face somehow distorted. She clasped her hands tightly against her chest, trying to hold herself together and fight back tears.

Laila approached Jouri and gently shook her phone: "I took so many wonderful photos of you. I'll send them to you later."

Jouri snatched the phone from Laila's hands, swiftly flipping through the photos before she snapped at her, "Delete them all. I don't look good in any of them."

Laila took the phone back from Jouri, placed her fingers on the photo, and slowly enlarged it until her friend's face came into sharper focus. She stared, then asked, "What's the problem, Jouri?! You look absolutely stunning, and I see no reason to delete a photo that captures a moment everyone dreams of."

Jouri placed her fingers on the screen and zoomed in further, saying, "Look! The sides of my nose don't look symmetrical."

Laila burst out laughing. "Are you kidding, Jouri? What symmetry—seriously? You sound like you're trying to solve a math problem. Your nose is perfectly normal. I doubt anyone else even notices this."

Jouri said, "You're saying this because you're my friend and don't want to upset me, but I know this is a flaw in my face. In fact, I'm considering plastic surgery after finishing school."

Laila responded, "Alright, as you wish. But it seems that people with asymmetrical features are more attractive and intriguing. That's why you're always surrounded by admirers!" She then nudged Jouri with her elbow to draw her attention to Rami, who kept glancing at them from a distance.

At that moment, Soha leaped in front of them. She had clearly been eavesdropping, waiting for a chance to interrupt. She approached Laila, snatched the phone from her hands, and forced a smile: "Oh! You are absolutely right, Jouri. It looks like one side of your nose is trying to escape."

Soha burst into laughter and then leaned close to Jouri and whispered in her ear, "I took a lot of photos of you receiving the award. I wonder how much you'll pay me not to share them with the school group and on social media."

Soha walked away with slow, deliberate steps. Jouri's heart raced, her fingers clenched, and she felt on the verge of screaming. But Laila soothed her, saying, "You were the one who drew her attention to the shape of your nose, which no one else noticed but you. You are beautiful as you are, and these small details are what make you special and unique."

Soha's Masks

Jouri kept watching Soha as she gestured for her group of friends to follow. As they walked away, Soha glanced back with a mocking smile on her face. She consistently wore that cruel, bullying expression in front of her classmates, concealing her true emotions behind a façade of indifference. As the third daughter, Soha grew up in a house where her parents always argued, and her father's loud voice was part of the background noise of her childhood.

One evening, while Soha was preparing a salad in the kitchen, she heard her father's voice from the living room, "Soha! Could you bring me some water?"

Soha replied, "Yes, Papa." She walked over to the cupboard and grabbed a glass, and as she poured water into it, her father's loud voice rang out again, "Soha! The water—quickly!"

Tension surged through Soha as she entered the living room. As she was about to hand the glass to her father, it slipped from her grasp, shattered, and sent pieces of glass flying in all directions.

"I... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..." Soha stammered, her voice trembling, yet her apology did little to quell his anger. "What have you done now?! Is it really that hard to bring water?!" her father screamed.

Her throat tightened, and tears filled her eyes, but she remained silent. Instead of speaking, she knelt down and carefully began gathering the shards of glass.

Her mother stepped into the room and paused, the sight settling over her like a familiar ache. "What happened?" she asked, her voice heavy with weariness. Soha's father snapped, "She can't even hand someone a glass of water without turning it into a disaster."

He sat on the sofa and paid no attention to their presence. Her mother came over, gently placed a hand on Soha's shoulder, and softly said, "Go and bring a new glass, and I'll take care of the broken pieces."

Soha stood quietly and walked to the kitchen. She opened the cupboard once more, took another glass, and slowly filled it with water, wary of making another mistake. With silent steps, she returned to the living room, placed the glass on the table in front of her father, who continued watching TV without a word, and then headed to her room, closing the door gently behind her. She sat on the bed and tried to do her math homework, but the numbers blurred as her pencil wandered aimlessly, filling the margins with idle scribbles instead of answers.

* * *

The following morning, as her father sat in the living room, Soha stepped in with a cup of coffee for him, hoping that the small gesture would mend what had been broken. She gently placed the cup on the table and said, “Here’s your coffee, just the way you like it.”

“Thank you,” he said in a flat, unbothered voice. Soha sat down and asked, “Papa, can you help me with math? There’s something I don’t understand.”

He gazed at her briefly and then spoke in a weary, faint voice, “I am not in the mood to teach you. Ask your mother to explain what you don’t understand.”

These words left Soha feeling rejected. She scolded herself for every failed attempt, each one deepening her ache. With a smile she barely felt, she stood up and said, “Maybe Mama will help me later,” then watched her father take the coffee and leave. The room suddenly felt empty.

Her father had grown up in a home that could barely meet its basic needs, and his behavior was a rejection of a life he was determined not to repeat. That refusal hardened into a pattern: whenever Soha reached for him, he funneled his fear and frustration into her, treating her as the cause of his failure.

Soha’s mother often remained silent, but she worked quietly to shield her daughter from the cycle of violence she endured by buying her the things a girl her age wanted, even if it meant the family went without.

Overwhelmed by despair, Soha’s mother was determined to get her daughter a smartphone, hoping it might offer her a brief refuge from the constant tension at home. However, money was tight. Her husband’s irregular wages barely covered the basics. One afternoon, while tidying her closet, Soha’s mother spotted the gold necklace that her late father had gifted her. It meant a great deal to her. She held it up, inhaled slowly, and decided to sell it for Soha’s sake.

The next morning, she visited the jeweler and handed him the necklace. He examined it carefully before offering a sum that seemed small compared to what the necklace meant to her. Feeling a pang of bitterness, she forced a smile and said, “Alright. I accept.”

The mother returned home with a small, carefully wrapped box. She waited for Soha to step through the door and then placed it in her hands, smiling gently. “This is for you, honey,” she murmured.

Soha stared at the box and then looked up at her mother for confirmation. Her mother did not say much. She placed a gentle hand on Soha’s shoulder, smiled, and simply said, “I want you to be happy.”

Soha rushed into her mother's arms with a force that seemed to convey all the emotions she couldn't put into words. Tears glistened in her eyes, but she tried to hide them as she nestled her head on her mother's shoulders. "Thank you, Mama! Thank you for everything," she said with gratitude.

* * *

Although her mother tried to shield her, Soha's anger swelled until she turned it outward by bullying others to reclaim a sense of control. She undermined others, believing that shared hardship would make her pain less personal and more manageable. Mocking or undermining her classmates made her feel, for a moment, less small. This mask hardened into a habit: loud contempt for others on the surface and self-loathing underneath. She ridiculed others because they reflected the life she could not have—one without shouting, without blame, and with the warmth she rarely felt. By ridiculing others' weaknesses, she clumsily confronted the pain inside her.

The sense of power Soha gained from bullying felt like payback for a life that had left her powerless. She failed to see that every act of cruelty pushed people farther away and isolated her further. So relief was short-lived: her classmates kept their distance, hurt by her words. Laila, however, was not one to flinch. She always met Soha's words with calm resistance, refusing to be drawn into her manipulation.

* * *

A few days after the ceremony, the routine of final classes resumed. Moments before the first class started, Laila stood a few steps from the classroom window, searching for the perfect light and angle to capture a selfie. She held her phone slightly above her face at a tilted angle, while her other hand rested on her waist, adding a touch of elegance to her pose. She took her time to get the background just right, unaware that Soha stood behind her, outside the frame, watching and waiting for her moment to step in.

Laila pressed the camera button, and just then, Soha jumped into the background. Her mocking expression spoiled the photo. A hollow laugh escaped Soha as she blurted, "Oh, your poor phone camera! Clearly, it wasn't designed to capture beautiful photos."

Laila flushed with embarrassment but pulled herself together. She looked at Soha, then at the photo, and with a small smile said, "How strange—my phone caught something odd in the background. Do you know what kind of insect that is?"

As the students around her laughed, Soha's face turned red. Unable to find a cutting response, she hesitantly stepped back.

Laila Trapped in Grief

Laila scrolled through her photos and froze on the school selfie, zooming in to check her face and the background. Soha's mocking face ruined the shot. Laila felt the sting of Soha's comment return. *Why would she say something like that?* Although she'd responded confidently, doubt crept in. She studied her smile as if through someone else's eyes and wondered, *Did I really look bad? Is Soha right?*

She zoomed in again until she started noticing the tiniest shadows on her face but found nothing unusual—only her natural features. With a deep sigh, she deleted the photo and then opened her account to read the comments on a post she had shared in a Facebook group:

"I feel like no one truly understands me. I am adrift. This feeling has haunted me since I lost my grandmother. After my parents separated and my mother remarried, she became my sanctuary—the one person who truly understood me. Since she died, I have been swallowed by loneliness, like a part of me is missing."

Among the comments, one heartfelt message stood out: **"I'm so sorry for your loss. I understand how deeply this has hit you. Losing someone as cherished as your grandmother can make the world feel suddenly cold and empty. Often, the person to whom we turn in hard times is more than family; they are our refuge. I know no one can replace her, but I'm here for you, whether as a friend or however you need me. Emad."**

Curiosity nudged Laila to click through Emad's page and browse his photos and posts. He seemed inactive, offering little information about himself—no work or location details, just a handful of stadium shots and match videos. His profile picture showed a person sitting somewhere high up, his features unclear. Most of his friends were girls her age. She thought he might be a psychological counselor for young women since his page was full of motivational posts and had a hopeful, forward-looking tone.

Laila hesitated before replying, but she felt an urge to respond, perhaps driven by her loneliness and the need to discuss what was troubling her, especially since she rarely spoke about her personal life.

She wrote, **"Hello Emad, thank you for your kind message. I didn't expect anyone, much less someone I don't know, to reach out."** After a brief pause, she pressed 'send.'

Her phone lit up right away with a notification: **"Emad liked your message."** Shortly after, a new message appeared: **"Hello Laila. Thank you for your reply. I wasn't sure you'd see it, but I felt**

compelled to reach out—loss can be so hard. I'm here to listen and support you. How are you doing right now?"

She wrote to him, **"Honestly, I still feel empty. My grandmother and I were very close to each other. I'd like to know more about you—why did you send that message?"**

Her phone buzzed again. Emad's message appeared: **"Sometimes we can empathize with others because we've experienced something similar ourselves. Years ago, I lost someone very dear to me, which was the most challenging period of my life. I longed for someone who could understand and empathize with me. That's why I wanted to be that person for you."**

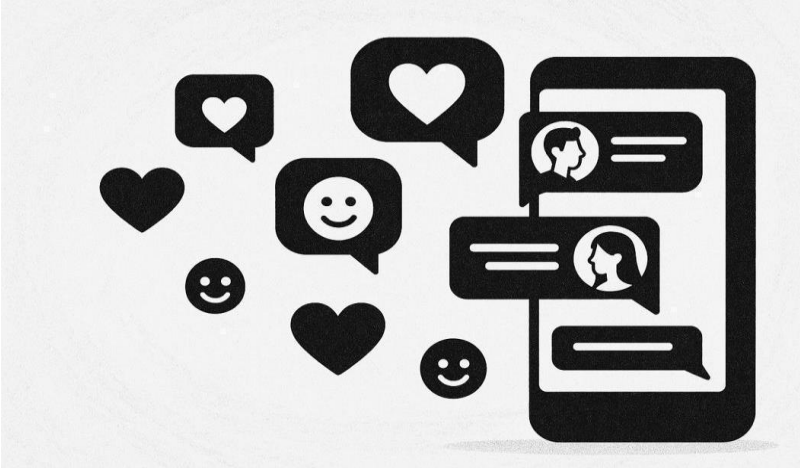
Laila sent him a 😔 emoji, followed by the message: **"Sorry to hear that. Can I get to know you better?"**

He sent her a smiling emoji 😊 and added, **"I'm just an ordinary person. My page probably gives it away—I'm passionate about sports and find a lot of peace in meditation. The profile photo is from a mountain trip captured by a friend. I'd like to know more about you too; how do you usually spend your days?"**

She wrote, **"It seems you have a quiet and simple life. Personally, I'm passionate about reading and writing. When I feel alone, I find comfort in expressing myself in words."**

Emad replied, **"That's really lovely. The way you describe your connection to words says a lot about you. I can feel there's a lot beneath the surface. Would you be willing to share a favorite book or piece of writing?"**

Laila felt a slight rush of excitement. **"Maybe I'll share something I've written later, if I feel ready. Thank you for asking, Emad. It's really nice getting to know you 😊."**



* * *

Laila lay back on her bed, thinking about her life. Born in her grandmother's house after her parents' divorce, she grew up in a large yet warm and inviting home with a small garden tended by her grandmother. A tall fig tree stood at the center, surrounded by roses of different colors, and corn grew in neat, symmetrical rows in a tidy corner. When the corn was ripe and the kernels flashed gold, her grandmother would roast the ears, dip them in salted water, and sit with Laila on the garden floor to enjoy them.

Laila shared a special bond with her grandmother, and her grandmother's house was the only place where she felt truly at home. During the holidays, even when she went to her mother's house, she would quickly find excuses to leave and go back to her grandmother's house. This habit grew stronger after a heated argument between them. Laila told her mother that she could no longer sleep there and would only visit in the mornings, leaving before it got dark. When her mother tried to make her stay longer, Laila refused, leading her mother to say sharply, "I am your mother, and this is your house too."

"I don't feel that," Laila said, confronting both her mother and perhaps herself with the truth. Their relationship had never felt like a true mother–daughter bond. Even worse, Laila felt that her mother had abandoned her when she remarried and that she now saw her as a reminder of a failed marriage.

Laila grew up listening to the sound of the dawn call to prayer from the mosque near her grandmother's house. Before the muezzin repeated, "Prayer is better than sleep," she would see her grandmother seated in a chair with her hands folded, ready for prayer. Often, she felt the gentle tug of a pillow being adjusted beneath her head and the cover smoothed over her shoulders, and then her grandmother's hand softly caressing her head while praying in a faint voice.

These scenes and sounds lingered in her mind, each woven with her grandmother's stories of her role in the revolution[1], of the mothers who loved without condition, and of the heroes who rose again and again without losing faith.

When Laila turned fifteen, her grandmother died, and the house that had been her refuge closed its doors as she moved back to live with her mother, her mother's husband, and her younger brother, Iyad. Her

[1] The Algerian Revolution (1954–1962) marked a pivotal anti-colonial struggle in which Algerians fought for independence from French rule. It reshaped global liberation movements and remains a defining symbol of resistance across the Arab world.

father's face had already blurred. The last clear memory of him was a brief visit to her primary school in the second grade before he left for work in France.

Laila's mother tried to stitch their relationship back together, but for Laila, it was not that simple. When loneliness or fear crept in, she closed her eyes and remembered her grandmother's face—soft and always smiling—and for a few stolen heartbeats, she was back in her first home. This created a deep rift inside her—physically, she lived in her mother's home, but her soul and dreams remained rooted in her grandmother's house and the beautiful memories there.

* * *

Laila could not stop thinking about Emad for days. Their frequent messages kept her attached to her phone, which had become a doorway to a world of feelings and kind words. She spent the entire summer glued to that glow, leaving her room only when absolutely necessary.

After several days of constant messaging, Emad sent, **"Sometimes I feel like you understand me in an unusual way. I can't quite explain it, but talking to you comforts me. Have you ever experienced that with someone?"**

Laila typed, **"I think so—though never quite like this. With you, everything feels natural and beautiful."**

Emad wrote, **"This is because you are a real person, modest and beautiful inside."**

Laila simply sent a shy emoji face 😊 along with the message: **"Have a lovely night."**

As soon as she closed the chat window, an unfamiliar warmth settled in Laila's chest, and a swarm of questions crowded her mind: *Why does Emad care about me? Could he actually be attracted to me?* Before she could follow that thread, another quieter question surfaced—one she was not ready to meet: *Why do I care about him?*

He made every effort to be close to her, ensuring that she felt his presence on every occasion. Her lengthy conversations with him often left her with a warm feeling. On the first day of school, he sent her a message, **"Good morning, Laila! I wish you a wonderful start to the school year. I am confident you will be special, as you always are. Don't forget to smile ♥"**

Overwhelmed by the sudden rush of joy his message brought, she simply wrote back, **"Wishing you a lovely morning ."**

She slid out of bed with a small smile tugging at her lips as Emad's words came to mind, and she began to get ready. She made her way to the kitchen, where her mother had prepared her favorite breakfast: milk with coffee and grilled toast served with butter and jam—a cherished, unchanging ritual since her time with her grandmother. She packed her school bag and paused before the mirror in her uniform, took a deep breath, and felt that the world around her was alive again, pulsing with energy.

Her phone rang, cutting through the quiet glow in her eyes. She answered at once, with a bright and cheerful voice, "Hello, Jouri."

Her friend's voice came through the phone, "Wait for me at the usual spot. I might be a little late, but I'm on my way."

"Okay," Laila said, smiling. "I'll wait for you."

Jouri's Eyes Held a Secret

That morning, strong winds swept down from the Aurès Mountains[2], sending raindrops that tapped the window like playful fingernails. Jouri picked up her phone and scrolled through Instagram—singers and fashionistas—searching for inspiration on a day that lingered between chill and warmth. She also checked her outfit coordination app, where she had uploaded her entire wardrobe and trusted it to suggest various outfits and pairings.

Intermittent rain showers allowed the sun to timidly peek out. She told her mother, "I don't like this weather. I never know what to wear."

Her mother shouted from the kitchen, "Your closet is filled with clothes suitable for every season, so get ready before you're late for school."

She tapped a photo on Instagram and began coordinating clothes from her closet to match the image suggested by her smart app. Her mother's voice came through the kitchen doorway: "Get dressed immediately! Do I have to remind you every morning that you're only sixteen? Wear something appropriate for your age and don't try to look older."

Frustrated by her mother's remarks, Jouri sifted through her clothes once more to find the most appropriate outfit. Overcome by indecision, she chose a loose-fitting sweater and jeans. She then dashed off to meet Laila, who was waiting.

When she met Laila, Jouri said with a huff, "We're the generation everyone talks about. Why do they always call us lazy and glued to our phones? It's as if the generation before us wasn't just as consumed with its own inventions and discoveries."

Laila chuckled in agreement, "Right—they were glued to Facebook and WhatsApp, too. Same obsession, different apps."

"Yes," Jouri shot back, "but they *literally* fail to see that we use phones for important things too. We study, communicate, and do real work. Still, they label us the 'phone generation' and act like we can't live without our phones."

"And what's even more annoying is that they—" Laila started, then a ping from her phone stole her attention. Jouri snuck a glance at Laila's phone and noticed the name 'Emad' at the top of the screen.

[2] The Aurès Mountains are a rugged range in northeastern Algeria, a region known for its resistance heritage and central role in the Algerian War of Independence.

"Who sent that morning message?" Jouri asked her. Laila, embarrassed, said, "No one—it's from Mom."

Jouri sensed that something was off. Laila did not usually lie, yet her confusion was obvious. Laila's furtive glances at her phone made Jouri wonder whether she was hiding something. *Why is Laila hiding this from me? Is she afraid or does she not trust me?*

* * *

Jouri wanted to bring the subject up again, but she hesitated, not wanting to upset Laila. Instead, she calmly said, "Remember to set your phone to silent so you won't be embarrassed in class."

Laila managed a faint smile, then abruptly changed the subject, "Jouri, did Rami contact you during the break?"

Jouri paused, turned to her, and asked, "Rami? Why do you bring him up?"

Laila smiled to hide her tension: "Oh, nothing. I just wondered—seemed like he might have had something to tell you."

Jouri felt there was more behind Laila's words. Rami, a mutual friend, was always pleasant but rarely contacted her outside of school.

"No, he didn't actually contact me. But why does this matter to you? Is there something about him I should know?" Jouri asked, her tone pressing for more.

Laila paused, her voice dropping to a whisper, "No—nothing important. I just thought he might have mentioned something to you."

Jouri smiled, but unease crept in. *Why is Laila worried about this? Could Rami have said or done something to make her suspicious, or was there another reason?* Her mind flashed to the last class, where she had seen Soha scribble on a small scrap of paper, fold it carefully, and slip it to Rami through the student between them, all while the teacher looked the other way.

Jouri's stomach tightened as she thought, *Why is Soha passing notes to Rami like that?*

Rami quietly unfolded the paper, read it, and then slipped it into his book, his face betraying no notable expression.

Jouri worried that something unusual was going on. During the next class, she watched Soha and Rami closely and noticed Soha casting quick glances at Rami, who remained engrossed in his book, showing no interest.

* * *

Jouri fixed her gaze on Laila and asked, "Is there something you haven't told me?"

Laila sighed and said calmly, "Yes. During the school break, I received several unusual messages suggesting that something was going on between him and Soha. I don't know if it's true, but it's worrying me."

Later during recess, as Jouri sat with Laila in a corner of the schoolyard sipping juice, her voice wobbled as she asked, "Laila, do you think there's something *going on* between Soha and Rami?"

Laila answered softly, "I'm not sure. But the idea of them being together seems odd. Rami is quiet and introverted, and Soha doesn't usually get along with him."

As Jouri stared at her cup of juice, she told herself, *Rami is my friend—only a friend. So why would I be bothered by the thought of him liking Soha?* She watched her reflection in the nearby classroom window and thought, *Why would he care about me? I'm just Jouri—his friend who talks about books and projects and sometimes listens when he vents about his family.*

The Birth of Julia Jolie

Jouri had always loved watching her father, an architect, as he sketched the intricate details of houses—turning a blank piece of paper into an idea, and that idea into a home.

Once, she asked him, "Papa, how do you feel when you finish drawing a house design?"

He smiled and replied, "My daughter, I do more than draw houses; I create dreams and identities through my designs. Each house carries its own unique vision."

Jouri's mom, who was an interior decorator, chose the furniture and color scheme for their home. She told Jouri that she had chosen a soft, light pink color for her room to make it feel warm and cozy.

To Jouri, every project her parents worked on felt like a work of art. "Life is not made of random decisions," her father often told her. "Every line I draw is part of a design. It takes planning and care to turn those lines into something real, and every angle eventually becomes part of many stories."

From her mother, Jouri learned to transform ordinary rooms into vibrant and enchanting spaces. These lessons seeped beyond architecture and into life itself, prompting her to wonder whether she could reshape how others saw her. She found herself thinking, *What if I were a blank canvas where I could sketch a new identity—revealing the thoughts inside me, apart from this body and these features?*

* * *

Inspired by this idea, she began her project by taking photos using various filters that completely transformed her facial features. The images bore no resemblance to her—and that was precisely the point. She planned to use them as a gateway to try on a persona with new features and a new personality.

She wondered, *What name should I choose for my new identity?* Then she paused and smiled. *I love my name. My mother named me after the Damask rose—Jouri—because she hoped I would carry its paradox: delicate yet resilient, full of hope and confidence.*

But as she stared at the screen, she hesitated. Was she trying to become someone else, or just trying to find the strength her mother had always seen in her? She didn't want to erase Jouri.

I love roses just as much as she does—all kinds of roses. There's something about them that makes me feel good in a way I can't quite explain.

Jouri picked up the pen and wrote many names in her notebook—Orchid Flower, Lotus, Jasmine—but she didn't want to choose a name that reflected her true identity. She considered others—Rose Lover, Queen of Hearts, The Dreamy Girl—but felt they were fragile and superficial, the sorts of names her classmates would mock as strange and inauthentic. Frustrated, she picked up her pen and scribbled over everything she had written. The scribbles mingled with her words until it looked as though a storm had torn through her pages.

Finally, she settled on 'Julia', telling herself, *It's a simple, elegant name—no frills, but there's something mysterious about it that I like*. Julia could be an ordinary girl, a beautiful girl, a wise girl, or even an adventurer. The name opened a dozen possible selves. *That's exactly what I need for my new identity, so I'm not stuck in a single mold.*

Jouri felt that Julia captured both her gentleness and her resilience, giving her room to be whoever she needed to be, so she chose it without adding anything else. So, she decided that her new identity would simply be this:

- **Name:** Julia Jolie
- **Interests:** Lover of travel and music

She opened the camera app to take a selfie and started swiping through filters, some leaving her recognizable and others transforming her completely. She propped her phone on the desk, and her image appeared different now, her features looking just as she had always wished they would. She pressed the record button, stepped forward and backward, and then spun around as though dancing to a secret rhythm rising from her heart. Suddenly, she saw herself with new eyes—radiating confidence and beauty. Thrilled at this moment of rebirth, she watched her new identity take shape on the screen, coming to life in pixels.

* * *

Logging in under her pseudonym for the first time, she felt like she had landed on a deserted island. Everything appeared still and unfamiliar, as though she had entered another realm—vast yet empty. There was no one around, just icons glowing faintly like distant stars in a dark sky. She began to wander through menus and options, eagerly anticipating interactions with others, yet she could not shake the fear that her classmates and friends might discover her true identity.

She was determined that no one, not even her closest friend, would discover that she was Julia Jolie. She channeled all her energy into hiding the truth, pursuing the glamour of fame and visibility, even if it was from behind a mask.

THUE
VIRTUAL
IDENTITY
MY VIRTUAL IDENTITY

Julia Jolie's World

Jouri found herself missing Julia. Until now, a month in, she had created only a few posts and included hashtags and trends to reach a wider audience.

Tuning out the noise of the real world around her, Jouri used this space as a refuge for her bravest ideas—ones she was too terrified to express offline. She worked hard to present herself as an intriguing person and maintain a mysterious profile. She shared vague updates and often posted questions that did not have easy answers. To match the mood, she added striking photos—sometimes a shot she had found online, other times a photo she had taken herself when the light hit something just right—expressing the things she could not quite put into words.

She enrolled in a digital photography course and spent long hours watching photography tutorials on YouTube. Using her savings, she purchased smart software designed for editing photos and videos.

Standing before the mirror, Jouri studied her face, her fingers lingering on her nose and cheeks as if inspecting someone else's features. She turned slowly from side to side, wanting to capture only a sliver of her face without giving her identity away. She opened her phone camera and began her experiment.

She angled the phone slightly, capturing only the left side of her face in the frame, and then used a soft filter that blurred her facial features. She looked at the photo and smiled, thinking, *This is good, but perhaps I should try a different angle.*

She moved toward the window, where the sun filtered softly through the curtains, and tilted her head slightly back. For this shot, she selected a filter that cast a golden glow over her face, blending her features with the light. She snapped a photo and zoomed in to inspect the details. *Beautiful,* she thought, but she knew she could push the mystery even further in her next shot.

* * *

She moved to a dimly lit corner of the room and held her phone up to her face. Raising her hand to cover half of it, she applied a monochrome filter that turned everything into shades of black and white. After staring at the photo for a while, she thought, *Different—but it gives away too much.*

She decided to push the digital limits further. By choosing an abstract filter, she watched the software transform her features into vibrant geometric lines. With a faint, closed-mouth smile, she tapped the shutter and zoomed in to scrutinize the digital brushstrokes that masked her. *This is literally it,* she thought. *A perfect blend of Jouri and Julia.*

She shared the photo with the caption, **"Sometimes all it takes is a magical touch with a filter to bring out our unique vision of beauty. 🖌️💡" #OurLife #Reflections #HiddenTouch #Filters**

Her posts never surpassed 30 likes and 10 comments.

Then she posted another photo and captioned it, **"📸 Sometimes all we need is a subtle filter to reflect our beautiful mood—calm, fun, or mysterious. #MomentWithAFilter #YourBeautyIsAStory."**

The number of comments increased, particularly from girls who were curious about the filter she had used. As questions about her filters multiplied in the comments, Jouri realized that she had found her niche. She began posting recommendations to achieve specific looks:

"Today, I recommend the 'Perfect Beauty' filter. It contours your features with a gentle touch, adjusting the jawline and nose and highlighting the lips to meet classic beauty standards. #FilterMoment #YourBeautyIsAStory."

Likes and comments continued to pour in over time. It was not just girls who were drawn to the world of filters that she showcased. Boys also joined in, admiring how she crafted a thrilling digital realm from light and color. Their interest nudged her engagement upward, but she met it with calculated caution—replying to a few comments, never all at once.

She began posing mysterious questions that stirred her followers' curiosity, prompting thoughtful replies and sparking conversations. Between these exchanges, she posted short, hint-laden stories about the world of filters so that, gradually, her audience stopped seeing her as a face hiding behind a screen and came to consider her a friend who shared an interest close to their hearts.

After a while, one question overtook the comments on her page: **"Who are you?"**

* * *

Her followers' curiosity reached a fever pitch, and they were desperate to know who she really was. So she posted a challenge: **"I know you're dying to know who I am—so here's a test: can any of you find out who I really am without a filter?"**

This challenge opened a new door to interaction: everyone began trying to guess her features and personality from the hints she had dropped in her earlier posts.

Jouri chose a photo of herself sitting in her room, using a filter that altered her features. She had deliberately swept her bangs off her forehead to change the distinctive look that might identify her.

Jouri diligently crafted her new virtual identity by joining numerous groups and actively commenting on every post. Her daily posts in these groups were far from ordinary. Her comments often attracted a substantial number of new followers and friends, which expanded Julia's world. Many followers began seeking advice on various aspects of their lives. Their curiosity further increased, and numerous comments urged her to share more details of her life.

Her social circle kept expanding. One morning, she was taken aback by a notification on her account. Her eyes widened, and her fingers trembled as she read the name of the person who followed her. It was her friend Rami. Her heart raced and her emotions tangled, and she abruptly closed the app to escape a moment she was not prepared for. She wondered, *Could it be that Rami discovered my virtual identity?*

Once the initial shock wore off, Jouri received a picture of Julia from Laila on WhatsApp, with the message, **"Do you know the owner of this account?"**

Jouri, feeling flustered, responded, **"No. I don't know her."** She then added, attempting to distance herself from her virtual identity, **"Who is she? Do you know her? Does anyone know her?"**

Laila wrote back, **"No, but she frequently appears on the list of suggested friends, and her account seems inspiring."**

"Go ahead and add her, then. You might benefit," Jouri advised, taking a deep breath.

* * *

Jouri relaxed after texting Laila, realizing that Rami had probably not discovered her true identity. Still, a trace of jealousy lingered toward the flawless virtual Julia. This feeling did not last. She buried her jealousy as she pushed the real Jouri to the background and allowed Julia to take the lead.

Caught between two worlds, Jouri found the virtual world more compelling. In that space, she felt as if she was with her spiritual family. A warm sensation took hold of her every time she logged into Julia's account. It became a private ritual, a moment she craved all day long. To Jouri, Julia was more than a profile; she was a vast mirror in which Jouri could finally see herself with clarity, entirely free from judgment.

Jouri and Rami

Jouri was very close to Rami; he was her best friend. During recess, they hung out in the schoolyard and talked about various things that mattered to them.

Since his mother died, Rami had been living with his father and three brothers. He often shared his feelings with Jouri, telling her how the house had fallen into a heavy silence and hollowness after his mother passed.

He once told her, "I haven't felt like myself since my mom passed away. I miss her in everything I do. You know, Jouri, I try to stay strong for my father. When he goes away each month to work in the desert, I have to manage housework and my brothers. I also try to help my father protect and support them."

As he spoke, his eyes filled with tears, and he turned his face away so that she would not see them. Jouri deeply empathized with him. His pain reminded her of the grief Laila felt for her grandmother, and she began to believe that the sting of death truly belonged to those the dead leave behind.

Jouri tried to comfort Rami however she could. She made a point of thinking of him on special occasions, often sharing dishes that her mother prepared. *Bradj* was Rami's favorite sweet—her mother made it every spring as a small ritual that tasted like home and belonged to a wider Algerian tradition.

Rami often thought about her. Once, on a trip to the desert, he brought back a sand rose and told Jouri, "It reminds me of you—rare and unique."

* * *

Soha stood a few steps away, silently watching Jouri and Rami on the wooden bench in the schoolyard. They broke into laughter, and a sharp pang of jealousy tightened in Soha's chest, as she longed for Rami's attention. She quickly decided that, this time, she would not leave without getting it. An idea came to her while she was pretending to fuss with her bag.

Soha walked toward Rami and Jouri with calculated steps, pretending she hadn't noticed them. When she got close enough, she stumbled, sending her books and notebooks crashing to the ground.

Rami sprang up and hurried toward her. "Are you okay, Soha?" he asked.

Soha looked up at him with feigned shyness, smiled faintly as she waved her hand, and said, "Yes, I'm fine. I was just in a hurry and not paying attention."

Rami bent down to help gather the scattered books, and Soha picked up her papers slowly, buying time.

“By the way, Rami,” she said as she picked up one of her notebooks, “your science project was exceptional. Your idea was brilliant, and the way you presented it made it easy for all of us to understand.”

Rami looked up, grateful. “Thank you,” he said, smiling.

With a smile, she asked, “Could you help me with my project?”

He answered kindly, “Of course—I’m happy to help.”

From her seat, Jouri watched, keeping her cool as she picked up her phone to look busy, but her gaze kept drifting to Rami and Soha. She forced a casual scroll, but the speed of her thumb and her tightened posture gave her irritation away.

After Soha gathered her books, she smiled widely at Rami and walked away slowly, as if determined to leave a lasting impression. Rami returned to his spot beside Jouri, and a silent cloud hovered over them. Rami tried to start a conversation, but the air between them felt different after Soha’s interruption.

Who is Julia Jolie?!

During recess, students gathered in the schoolyard, talking about the virtual "Julia," who had caused a stir on social media after launching a challenge to reveal her true identity. As Laila and Jouri walked past them, Laila noticed someone pointing at their phone and talking about Julia.

Laila pulled Jouri along, saying, "Come on, I want to hear what they're saying about Julia."

Jouri felt flustered and said, "I don't think this has anything to do with me."

Laila insisted, tugging Jouri toward the group, "Please, just for a minute."

Laila joined the group, and Jouri stood beside her, trying to hide her nervousness as she listened.

Soha said, "Honestly, I think Julia is complicated. Why is she so mysterious? If she wants people to know her, why is she hiding behind filters and riddles?"

Nour, the second girl in Soha's clique, said, "Exactly! All this mystery makes me feel like she's just playing with everyone to get attention."

Samer added sarcastically, "She must have some kind of problem and can't find anyone to look at her."

Everyone laughed mockingly, especially when Soha began to imitate Julia.

"She's probably sitting behind her screen saying, 'Sympathize with me... I'm a weirdo... Look at me!'" Soha sneered.

At that moment, something boiled inside Jouri. She could not remain silent and blurted out, "She isn't like that at all!"

"She has her reasons," Jouri continued, her voice steady as she spoke. "She might be shy or afraid that people will judge her. The world isn't an easy place to reveal everything about yourself."

A sudden silence fell. Every head turned toward Jouri, surprise and suspicion written across their faces. Some raised their brows, and others exchanged questioning glances in silence.

Soha smiled slyly, "Look who's defending her so passionately." Soha went on, "Jouri, do you know her? It seems like you're hiding something from us."

Jouri answered nervously, "Don't be ridiculous. Just because I sympathize with her doesn't *literally* mean I'm hiding something—everyone has their reasons."

Soha's gaze sharpened. "Your defense feels very personal. Maybe there's something you don't want to tell us."

Rami, who had been listening in silence, let out a short laugh. "Oh, it seems you're all taking this far more seriously than it deserves," he said. "Julia is just a virtual character; why make such a big deal out of it? Maybe the point of all this mystery is just to get you guys excited—nothing more."

Soha replied skeptically, "And you think that reason is good enough? Julia writes like she knows us. She makes it feel like she's very close to us."

Rami smiled confidently and said, "It is smart of her—or him—to know how to grab attention in a simple, indirect way. But trust me, if Julia were one of us, the last thing she'd do is respond to your accusations or defend herself."

Laila chimed in curiously, "And why not? If she's bold enough to launch a challenge, why doesn't she face us?"

Rami answered calmly, "Because that would ruin her whole idea. Julia doesn't need to prove anything. If she's real, her mystery is what makes her special. And if it's just a game, you're wasting your time trying to expose her."

Soha stared at him, suspicion curling in her tone. "The way you talk suggests you know something about her, or maybe you are Julia?"

Rami laughed sarcastically, "Me? Julia? I don't think I have the patience to deal with all this noise. But it's a fun idea—maybe I should try a challenge like that someday."

The group looked at each other in confusion, and it seemed that Rami's words had successfully deflected their suspicions. Jouri's gaze stayed fixed on him while her thoughts drifted. Relief washed over her—temporary and fragile—knowing that Rami had shielded her without exposing her secret to the others. Still, a quiet question nagged at her: *Does Rami know the truth?*

* * *

After the group discussion ended, Soha walked toward Rami as he began to move away from the crowd.

She called out, "Wait. I have a strong feeling that Jouri is connected to Julia."

He stopped and looked at her. "Really? And what makes you so sure?" he asked, his voice even.

She replied confidently, “The way she defended Julia. It felt very personal. It’s as if she knows her well.” She added, “No one acts like that unless they have a good reason.”

Rami shrugged, indifferent. “Or maybe she’s just someone who empathizes with different perspectives,” he replied. “Not everything is a conspiracy,” he said lightly.

Soha did not back down. Instead, she leaned in and narrowed her eyes. “Don’t try to dodge the subject. I’m sure there’s something strange going on, and I’ll prove it to you soon.”

Rami let out a bored sigh. “Fine, do whatever you want, but I don’t think it’s worth the effort. Julia is just a virtual character,” he said. “Why make this your life’s mission?” he added.

“Because I don’t like mysteries,” Soha answered in a sharp voice. “I can’t ignore my gut. Something is off, and I’m going to expose it.”

Rami shrugged again, appearing unfazed. “Good luck,” he said, walking away. However, he felt tense inside, wondering if Soha was getting closer to uncovering the truth.

A Small Secret

Laila returned home after a long day, the students' chatter about Julia Jolie's character still echoing in her head. For a moment, she wondered if Jouri was hiding something, but she quickly dismissed it—her gut told her that her best friend would not keep secrets. That certainty wavered, however, when she remembered that she was also keeping Jouri in the dark about Emad.

She slowly pushed the door open and greeted her mother briefly. She tossed her bag aside at the entrance to her room and collapsed onto the bed without bothering to take off her shoes. The moment her phone connected to the Wi-Fi, it chimed to life—a stream of notifications raced in, and many messages appeared on the screen.

Jouri sent, **"Omg I have the best joke for u."**

Nour sent, **"Laila, send the last physics lesson pls."**

The other messages faded away the moment she read Emad's, **"Good evening, Laila! How was your day? I missed you."**

Emad's messages had become an integral part of her life. He sent her a string of inspiring quotes, quiet reflections, and small, intimate observations that made their bond feel older than it was. With him, Laila felt seen—able to unspool thoughts that she would not share with anyone else. His warm, thoughtful words had slipped into her routine, gently reminding her that someone cared, often hinting at how much her presence mattered to him.

* * *

That night, after a long exchange, Emad typed, **"Laila, do you have things you keep only to yourself and cannot tell anyone else?"**

She hesitated and then typed, **"Yes. There are many things I like to keep to myself. And you?"**

He wrote, **"Actually, I have a problem—especially with you. I feel I can tell you anything without fear, but there's something I haven't been able to tell anyone because it feels private and it gives me so much happiness."**

She typed, **"What is it?"**

Emad wrote, **“Our relationship?”** A silence followed before he added, **“What about you? Have you told anyone?”**

Laila’s fingers hovered over the keys of her phone. **“Must it remain a secret?”** she asked.

Emad’s reply was steady and reassuring, **“I think what makes our relationship special is that it belongs to us alone. People don’t understand virtual bonds. They might dismiss them as not serious. We know ours is real, and we don’t need to prove it to anyone else.”**

Laila fell silent and sent a bouquet emoji in response. She switched off her phone and tossed it aside, then sat with Emad’s words turning over in her mind all evening. *Why doesn’t he want me to tell anyone about our relationship? Isn’t it beautiful to share it with our friends?*

After a long pause, she thought, *Maybe he’s right. No one would understand this bond. Only we know what it means to us and how real it is, even if it only exists online.* Then she picked up the phone, turned it on, and opened the AI chat to ask:

“Do you think it’s okay to tell others about my romantic relationship?”

The AI replied, **“If the relationship is just beginning or isn’t stable yet, wait until you’re sure.”**

Although the AI raised other questions, this was the only part Laila wanted to hear.

Everything is Square

In the crowded school cafeteria during recess, Laila and Jouri sat by the window, trying to escape the surrounding din, while a plastic tray of square tuna pizza—their favorite—lay between them.

Jouri lifted a slice, inspected it with mock seriousness, and said, "Funny how a square pizza topped with tuna can be delicious. Isn't pizza supposed to be round?"

"Is it just the pizza? Everything's turning square—our screens, our routines, even our minds!" Laila commented.

Jouri laughed, waved the slice like a flag, and said, "If you insist on a square mind, at least top it with extra mozzarella."

Laila burst into laughter. "Imagine if our minds were actually square! It would be comfortable, with all our thoughts stacked like cubes."

Jouri muttered, "It's enough that some people already try to box our generation in and judge us through a traditional lens."

Laila set the slice down, wiped her hands with a napkin, took a deep breath, and said seriously, "Jouri, do you think we, as a new generation, must think the way our parents did?"

Jouri smiled and said, "I'm not sure I got your question, but we live in a different world now with new technologies. I can hardly do my homework without the internet—so I can't think like them."

Laila laughed, then grew serious and said, "I don't mean that. I mean when we fall for someone we met online, should we worry because relationships like that didn't exist in their day?"

Jouri set the slice aside, as the question deserved her full attention. "Hmm. Traditional thinking suggests that real relationships happen face-to-face, where you can see someone and feel their presence. But we live in a different world now—our lives are almost entirely virtual, and it makes sense that we could have real feelings online too."

Laila shook her head, her voice softening. "But is that enough? If I feel I can understand someone through a screen, does that make the feelings any less real?"

Jouri took a deep breath and said, "Maybe we need a new way of thinking. Not everything our parents lived through applies to us literally, but not everything online can be trusted either. We can carve out our own way—somewhere between the traditional and the new."

Laila smiled and said calmly, “Maybe we should free our minds from the squares they’ve been forced into—whether it’s square traditional thinking or our square phone screens.”

Jouri looked at Laila, raised an eyebrow, and teased, “So what’s all this about, Laila? Spill—did you find your knight in shining armor among your Facebook friends? Why all the questions about love and virtual feelings?”

Laila laughed shyly and looked down at the table. “Nothing—just wondering. You know, I often think about these things. It was just a casual thought that crossed my mind.”

* * *

Jouri watched Laila and thought, *She is not herself.* She looked like she was carrying a heavy burden that she would not share. *Could she be in trouble?* Anxiety crept into her chest. *Maybe something happened at school? No, that’s not what I’m seeing on her face. It feels deeper and more complicated. Is it a family thing? Or something to do with someone else?*

Jouri watched Laila push the last piece of pizza around her plate without eating it, then said, “Always put yourself first before you take any step. Do you feel safe? Do you trust what’s happening? If, even for a moment, something feels wrong, step back and think about it. Remember, I’m here for you. You are not alone. Okay?”

Laila tried to respond, but Jouri rested her hand on her shoulder and smiled reassuringly. “Also, if you need a private detective to uncover anything, I’m here. I’ve got interrogation skills I picked up from detective movies,” Jouri said with a grin, forming a heart for Laila with her thumbs and index fingers.

Laila laughed, but Emad’s words—*keep this between us*—stopped her from telling Jouri anything more.

A New Year... A New Rose

Jouri awoke to warm touches on her shoulder and her mother's gentle voice, "Good morning, my love."

She slowly opened her eyes and saw her mother's smiling face. "Good morning, Mama," Jouri murmured as she stretched.

Her mother handed her a rose with a special smile and said, "This is your rose for the year, my most beautiful rose. Happy birthday." It was their annual ritual, a quiet confirmation that Jouri was growing more beautiful each year, like a rose.

Jouri cradled the rose, lifting it close to her nose to catch its sweet, heady scent. "Thank you, Mama," she said with a sincere smile and hugged her mother. Her mother whispered in her ear, "Today is no ordinary day, Jouri. It's your special day—celebrate every detail, small and grand."

Jouri sprang from her bed, pulled her diary from the desk drawer, and flipped to the back of it. Tucked away there was her small archive of pressed flowers—one for every year of her life, each chosen and given by her mother. The fragile petals lay flat against the paper, a quiet chronology of love that she could touch with her fingertips. She counted them with joy: sixteen roses, sixteen years of memories. After filling a clear glass with water and a pinch of sugar, she eased the new stem into it, whispering, "This way, you'll stay with me just a little longer."

* * *

While Jouri was sitting in the school courtyard during a break, she suddenly felt an unusual movement around her. Before she could figure out what was happening, her classmates appeared, carrying colored balloons and a small cake decorated with a candle. Laila led the group with great enthusiasm. Jouri's eyes widened, and she froze in place, covering her mouth with her hands to contain her feelings.

A small, shy laugh escaped Jouri, bright with delight. "Is this...for me?" she asked with a cheerful voice.

Her friends nodded and chorused, "Surprise! Happy birthday, Jouri!"

Laila smiled and teased, "Did you think we'd forget your special day?"

Before she blew out the candle, Rami reminded her, "Don't forget to make a wish first."

Jouri looked at him shyly. "Of course I will..." she murmured.

Laila nudged her shoulder and teased, "I hope you wish success for me—don't be selfish."

The group burst into laughter, and Jouri realized that she did not have her phone with her. “Unfortunately, we won’t be able to take a picture, my phone is broken,” she said, offering the excuse she often used when she didn’t want to take photos, even though her phone worked perfectly well.

* * *

After the small party scattered, Laila smiled, pulled her phone from her bag, and waved it in front of Jouri. “There has to be a photo of us to remember this—use my phone,” she said.

Jouri paused, her eyes turning into a big question mark. She had never imagined taking a photo with any phone other than her own. She glanced at Laila’s device and then at Laila’s smiling face, feeling a strange sense of hesitation. Refusing would be selfish and might hurt Laila’s feelings, so she forced a small, uncertain smile and nodded in agreement.

“Fine, but only on one condition: if I don’t like the photo, you must delete it.”

Laila laughed. “Trust me—you’ll love it. I’ll use your favorite filter.”

Laila stepped closer and draped a hand over Jouri’s shoulder while holding the phone with the other. Quickly, she selected the filter that Jouri always used. This time, Jouri felt something different—an unexpected sense of comfort—while hope brightened Laila’s eyes. Laila snapped a photo and tilted the screen toward Jouri to show her.

“No, I don’t like it,” Jouri cried.

“Okay, I’ll take another one,” Laila said, snapping another shot.

“Let’s see… look! This one is wonderful,” she said, showing the screen again.

Jouri zoomed in on her face in the photo and frowned at it. “I don’t like this one either—delete it.”

“Ugh,” Laila groaned, rolling her eyes. “I don’t know why you are like this! You never like any of your photos.”

Jouri sighed, her voice barely a whisper as a wave of self-doubt washed over her. “I don’t know. I just never feel like I’m enough. My nose, my lips. I just wish I looked like those influencers on social media.”

Laila’s expression softened as she looked into Jouri’s eyes. “You are beautiful,” she said, her voice steady and firm. “Truly, Jouri—you’re beautiful.”

Jouri took a deep breath and looked away. “You only say that because you are my friend,” she said, dismissing the compliment. As she turned to leave, she added firmly, “Anyway, make sure you delete that photo. I don’t want it. I’ll just post a picture of the cake and leave it at that.”

Laila hesitated for a second and then gave a small, resigned nod. She began to gather her things. “I’ll head off then. See you in class.”

A Photo Ends a Friendship

Laila lay back on her bed and scrolled through photos of the surprise party. She skipped past the cake and the laughing crowd and eventually stopped at the birthday photo of herself with Jouri. She lingered there, zooming in until the pixels softened and then zooming out again, looking at her friend's face for the beauty Jouri refused to see.

Laila wondered, *Why didn't she like the photo? She looks so beautiful.*

She stared at the photo for a long time, caught between the urge to post it and the fear of upsetting her friend with the post. She knew how deeply Jouri struggled with self-confidence, and more than anything, she wanted to prove to her that those insecurities were nothing more than illusions.

"Maybe if she sees how everyone else sees her," Laila whispered to herself, "she'll realize her fears are all in her head."

She decided to trust her gut feeling over Jouri's insecurities. She opened TikTok, selected the photo, and typed out a single line: **"Happy birthday, my most beautiful friend."** Then, she pressed publish.

A knot of anxiety tightened in her stomach as she waited for the first reaction. *What if Jouri actually gets mad?* Before long, the screen began to light up with comments.

"How beautiful you two are! Happy birthday Jouri!" read the first.

Then another: **"The photos are wonderful 😍"** followed by a string of heart emojis from a classmate.

Laila read the comments one by one, a smile spreading across her face as she watched the hearts fly across the screen. It was a relief to see so much admiration for her friend. *Maybe this is the first step,* she thought, *to helping Jouri see herself through a different lens.* Satisfied, she set her phone on the nightstand and drifted off to sleep.

Laila woke the next morning, not to the sun, but to the frantic buzzing of her phone. Her screen was flooded with missed calls and a string of angry texts from Jouri, all demanding the same thing: **"Delete it. Now."** Confused and still half-asleep, Laila opened the app. She did not delete it immediately; instead, she started scrolling through the newest comments to see what could have possibly gone wrong with the post.

Laila's heart sank as she scrolled past the praise. The tone of the comment section had shifted, and the "laugh-cry" emojis now felt like weapons in the wrong hands.

"Who even is that on the right? 😂" one anonymous account had written.

Then, she saw a comment from Soha, **"Jouri's nose looks like it doesn't even match her face in this photo 😂"**

Even Laila was not safe from scrutiny. A third comment read, **"Laila, is this seriously your best hairstyle? 😂"**

Laila stared at the screen in disbelief. The shock quickly turned into fury. She did not hesitate and deleted the photo immediately, hoping she was not already too late to fix the damage.

* * *

When Laila saw Jouri at school, the tension hit instantly. Jouri did not even let her speak before she snapped, her voice rising to a scream. "Why would you post that without asking me? Did you read the comments? Everyone is mocking me, Laila! They're making fun of how I look!"

"I'm sorry!" Laila pleaded, her voice trembling. "They made fun of me too, but I didn't let it get to me. I just wanted to show you how beautiful you are in my eyes."

"Beautiful?" Jouri snapped back at her. "How can I feel beautiful when the whole world is laughing at me? You should have asked me. You had no right to post that without my permission!"

Laila's chest tightened with regret as she tried to speak to Jouri, but Jouri was so angry that she turned around and walked away, leaving Laila with an apology that never left her mouth.

At home, the bedroom door clicked shut, sealing Laila in with the weight of the day. She reached for her phone—the one place she could always find Emad. He was her steady ground and the only person who could help her untangle the knot in her chest. She sent him a long message telling him what happened.

"Emad, I don't understand why Jouri reacted this way," the message began. **"I only wanted to show her how beautiful she is, even without filters. She hardly ever posts her pictures. There is always a filter, or just a photo of her hands or something she's carrying. I was only trying to help her see her true beauty, but everything just blew up in my face."**

"Laila, I get how you feel," Emad's message popped up. **"You were coming from a good place. But maybe Jouri is just not ready yet to see herself that way."**

“I know,” she replied. **“But I feel like I only made things worse. The last thing I wanted was for her to think I was trying to embarrass her.”**

A moment later, Emad replied. **“Don’t beat yourself up. Your intentions were good, and at the end of the day, that’s what matters.”** A few seconds passed before the next one popped up. **“Maybe she just doesn’t believe she’s beautiful without filters. Maybe that’s why she insists on using them. Some people are just more beautiful in person than they are in pictures.”**

Laila typed, **“It’s the opposite. She’s beautiful even without a filter.”**

“Mmmmmm,” Emad typed back. **“Can I see one? A photo of her without a filter?”**

“I don’t have one,” she messaged back.

“No problem,” Emad replied. A moment later, another message bubbled up: **“You have to realize, Laila, that seeing her beauty like that is just proof of how much you love her as a friend. Give it time. She’ll understand your intentions eventually.”**

“I hope Jouri understands that 😢,” she wrote.

A new notification lit up the dark room. **“And what about you?”** Emad’s message read. **“Won’t you send me photos of yourself?”**

Laila blinked at the screen, her heart skipping a beat in confusion. She typed back, **“My photos are all over my accounts**. **I assumed you’d already seen them.”**

“I want special photos meant for me,” Emad wrote. **“You take them just for me. Don’t I deserve that? Unless… you don’t trust me yet.”**

Emad’s question hung in the air, forcing her to confront herself. Could she really trust a person she barely knew from behind the screen? Yet, the memory of his gentle words and their conversations acted like a warm blanket against her doubts. His request felt less like a demand and more like a bridge.

“I’ll try to send you one,” she typed, her heart racing. **“Just give me a little time to pick the right one.”**

In response, a flurry of red hearts pulsed across the screen.

Laila felt relief wash over her after talking to Emad, but as the glow of the red hearts faded, her thoughts drifted back to Jouri. She knew that winning back her friend’s trust would not happen overnight. It was a delicate path that would require much patience and care.

A Face That Invites Mockery

Jouri sat on the edge of the bed, her eyes fixed on the phone as it vibrated with a call from Laila. She didn't move. Her gaze held on an invisible point behind the glowing screen. The cruel comments echoed endlessly in her head. From every corner, mocking emojis leered at her, their frozen digital grins haunting her. Jouri felt the walls closing in and trapping her. With a sharp motion, she shoved her phone away, desperate to silence the noise. She pressed her hands over her ears, squeezing hard to block out the words and the mocking faces that were no longer just images on a screen but a deafening roar filling her head.

Moments later, she slowly lowered her hands, then moved toward the mirror on her wardrobe. She stood frozen in front of it, staring at her reflection as if trying to see herself as the world saw her. Her fingertips traced the lines of her face, lingering on her cheeks, nose, and lips. A whirlpool of questions began to pull her under: *Am I really ugly? What do I need to change to be beautiful? Why am I a joke? Why can't I just be Julia, the version of myself I built?* She stared at the mirror, where her real features seemed to bleed into the image of Julia, until she could not tell where she ended and Julia began.

As Jouri drowned in these tangled emotions and questions, the door suddenly opened with a soft creak. Her mother stepped in with a steaming cup of tea in her hands. She paused and watched her daughter before setting the cup on the table beside the mirror. She moved closer, her footsteps light, and spoke in a voice thick with warmth, "Are you alright, sweetheart?"

Jouri answered, her voice barely a whisper. "Why can't we just change our features? Our faces? Why are we forced to live with a face that makes people laugh at us?"

Her mother placed her hands on Jouri's shoulders, and their eyes met in the mirror. "Sweetheart," she said softly, "true beauty isn't about altering our features. It's about how we feel about ourselves. No one is perfect—everyone looks in the mirror and sees something they wish they could change. But these details and imperfections are what make us who we are. They make us unique."

Her mother leaned in closer, her voice dropping to an intimate whisper. "I could tell you that you're beautiful a thousand times over, but it wouldn't matter. I want *you* to be the one who feels it."

Jouri let out a heavy sigh, her shoulders slumping as if the weight of the room had doubled, and said, "But Mama! The comments, what people are saying."

Before she could finish, her mother cut in, her voice steady and firm. "Other people's comments are not your mirror, Jouri. Your true mirror is yourself—it's what you see when you look deep inside. No one

can dictate how you feel about yourself. That power belongs to you, and you alone, and I need you to be strong."

She gently stroked Jouri's hair, her touch softening as she nudged the plate of peanuts closer. "Come now, drink your tea. I brought some peanuts to go with it—just the way you like."

* * *

Her mother walked out of the room, leaving Jouri alone in silence. She sank to the floor, leaning her back against the wardrobe, and pulled her knees tight against her chest. She tried to hold onto her mother's words, but the cruel comments still haunted her, turning the mirror into a stalking monster that watched her every move.

This heavy gloom was shattered by a sharp chime, a notification. She looked at the screen again. It was an alert from her digital shadow: "Julia Jolie."

With a quick swipe, she opened the notification and began to scroll through the comments on her latest post. The image that stared back at her was a version of herself created by the latest beauty filter. A flood of likes and supportive messages poured in, each praising Julia's beauty, flawless appearance, and posts. Each praise-filled comment was a beat that matched the steady thrum of her heartbeat. Slowly, the real room faded, replaced by the shimmering glow of Julia's world—a place where beauty was effortless and the pain of being 'real' did not exist.

Time slipped away as she moved through the messages and merged with Julia's world. To Jouri, Julia was more than just a profile; she was a window into another life, one free from judgment or cruel stares. The screen's glow washed over her face, and a faint smile traced her lips.

A Video Call

Since returning from school that day, Laila had tried to bury herself in anything that would keep her busy. She tried to reach Jouri again and again, each attempt met with silence. Anxiety carved small, restless lines around her eyes as her gaze flicked between the dark screen of her phone and the empty room. She began scrolling—thumb flicking through short videos, opening TikTok, then switching to Instagram—watching only a blur of clips that amplified the noise in her head instead of quieting it.

Every time her phone buzzed, or a notification lit the screen, Laila lunged for it, desperate for a word from Jouri, but there was nothing. She hit the call button again and listened to the hollow ringing that went unanswered. When she ended the call, she retreated to the living room and tried to focus her mind elsewhere, but her hand moved on its own and reached for the phone again. She hunted for a message, a tiny spark—anything that might make the day feel ordinary again—each empty screen tightening the knot in her chest.

* * *

The next morning, Laila's alarm blared, but her body felt heavy. She tried to push herself up, but a sharp wave of dizziness sent her crashing back onto the pillow. As she struggled to gather her strength, her mother stepped into the room.

"Not up yet? You're going to be late for school," her mother said.

"I can't, Mama," Laila murmured, her voice thick with fatigue. "I feel so weak, and I think I have a fever."

Her mother hurried over and pressed her palm against Laila's forehead. "Oooh. You do have a raging fever," she said.

Her mother quickly fetched a thermometer and checked Laila's temperature, then went to the kitchen. Minutes later, she returned with a mug of steaming herbal tea.

"Drink this, sweetheart, and rest," she said. "I'll call the school and make a doctor's appointment."

"Thanks, Mama," Laila murmured, her voice thin and fragile. She reached for the cup, her fingers trembling as they closed around its warmth.

Her mother sat beside her for a moment, gently stroking her hair to comfort her. "If you need anything at all, just call for me," she added.

* * *

Once her mother left, a notification chimed on Laila's phone. It was a morning text from Emad: **"Good morning, beautiful Laila."**

She wanted to reply as she always did, but her arm felt heavy and weak. It took everything she had to lift her phone. A few moments passed before another message appeared: **"Where are you? Is everything okay?"**

She forced herself to type slowly and deliberately: **"I'm sorry, Emad. I'm really sick. I can't talk right now."**

Soon after, a video call from Emad lit up her phone, catching Laila by surprise. He had never called her over video before. Laila hesitated, staring at her reflection on the screen. She was in her pajamas, her hair messy, and her face pale, but the need to talk to him won out. She hurriedly smoothed her hair, forced a tired smile for the camera, and pressed the answer key.

Emad appeared on the screen and spoke in a gentle voice, "Laila, you look very tired. Have you seen a doctor? Do you need any help?"

She replied in a weary voice, "No, thank you, Emad. I'm fine, I just need some rest."

He paused, smiled at the screen, and said, "Even when you're sick, you look beautiful."

Laila's face flushed a deep red, and warmth spread through her chest. She gave Emad a small, grateful smile as he reminded her to rest and take care of herself before ending the call.

Moments later, her phone buzzed with messages from her classmates, all asking why she was absent. Their concern brought a brief relief that was quickly swallowed by a heavier sadness when she noticed that Jouri had not texted her. *Does she really think I posted that photo on purpose to make her a target for bullies?* Laila wondered. Her mind raced to find a way to talk to Jouri and explain herself. "I have to try," she whispered to herself, before drifting back to sleep.

Small Details

A heated debate swept the school over the virtual "Julia." After her latest livestream, where a filter transformed her into a full cartoon, she became the center of every conversation. The filter did not just mask her face; it warped her voice as well, making her true identity nearly impossible to pin down and fueling a flood of speculation.

Rami stood at the edge of the group, convinced that Jouri and Julia were one and the same. He silently watched the debate unfold, keeping his feelings to himself. In one of Julia's clips, he noticed a tiny detail—a fleeting glimpse in the background that set his mind racing. It was the Desert Rose, the one he had given Jouri after his trip to the dunes. He replayed the clip again and again, took a screenshot, and zoomed in until every jagged petal of the flower confirmed his suspicion.

"There's no way that's a coincidence," he muttered.

Driven by restless curiosity, he dove into Julia's account. He pored over posts and dissected comments, hunting for any thread that might lead him back to Jouri. Then he found one caption that stopped him cold: **"A filter that *literally* makes you look like a different person."**

He smiled quietly while reading her posts. It was not the first time that Julia had used the word "literally." Jouri also loved that word, peppering it into every conversation. It was one of Jouri's quirky signatures—part of the spontaneous, unselfconscious way she expressed herself that he had always admired. But even as the pieces fell into place, more questions came to him. *Why hide behind filters? Was she looking for the freedom this borrowed identity offered, or trying to show a part of herself that others could not see?*

He knew that Jouri rarely posted clear photos of herself. She usually relied on side angles or filters to blur her features, but this—this felt like something else entirely. It went beyond a simple love of filters. It felt as if she was trying to disappear altogether.

* * *

The next day, Rami decided to test her indirectly. He caught up with Jouri during recess. "It's wild how fast Julia blew up," he said, watching her reaction closely. "It's like everyone's obsessed with her overnight."

Jouri met his gaze with a faint smile on her face. "True. I guess mystery always has a way of pulling people in."

Rami returned the smile, his tone playful but edged with something sharper. “Maybe. But sometimes a mystery is actually wide open—literally, if you know exactly what you’re looking for.”

Jouri laughed, eyes bright with challenge. “Like what? What could possibly strip the mystery away from a digital persona?”

“Certain gifts,” he replied. “Certain words that act like a signature to anyone paying close attention.”

She went still for a heartbeat, weighing his words, then let out a playful huff. “I think you’re *literally* spending too much time overanalyzing tiny details.”

Rami didn’t blink. “Maybe, but the smallest details are usually the ones that crack the biggest secrets. Don’t you think?”

Jouri shrugged, a cryptic smile tugging at her lips. “Perhaps. Or perhaps they’re just details that don’t mean a thing.”

Jouri changed the subject abruptly, terrified of being drawn into a conversation that might strip away her secret. But Rami’s words had stirred a storm in her mind. *Does he know that I am Julia? Was he hinting at something? No—impossible. How could he know? I’ve hidden everything that could point to me.*

Still, the seed of doubt was planted. *Why did he sound so sure, as if he had already connected the dots between me and Julia? If he knew the truth, what then—would it change things, would he accept it?*

Meanwhile, Rami returned to his seat with a sense of quiet satisfaction settling over him. He was more certain than ever that Jouri was Julia, but he felt no need for a confrontation. *When she’s ready, she’ll tell me herself,* he thought, with a small smile playing at his lips.

Soha Lays a Trap

Jouri stood by her window, watching the street below and sipping juice while brainstorming ways to increase her followers' engagement on her page. She wanted to reignite the spark after her brief disappearance. She finally found the perfect teaser. Posting as Julia, she wrote:

"I ran into someone incredible at the library today! 😍 I didn't dare speak to him, but there was just... a vibe. He *literally* looks like BTS Jungkook! 😍 Should I go back and try to talk to him?" 🤔 and she attached a photo she had snapped of him.

She had not expected the post to ignite such a firestorm of responses, a mix of mockery and encouragement, but one line from Soha cut through the noise: **"Did you meet him with or without your filter? LOL."**

A sting of resentment flared in Jouri's chest, but she forced herself to stay quiet, swallowing it before it could surface. She could not react without exposing her identity or admitting that the comment hurt her.

Meanwhile, Rami sat quietly in his room, reading Julia's latest post. He knew Jouri's secret, yet a sharp, inexplicable pang of jealousy flared in him. *Could she have met someone else? Or is this just another scripted fantasy she had woven to keep her followers hooked?* He wondered as he stared at the polished image of the Jungkook lookalike.

He tried to brush aside the feeling, but curiosity held a tight grip. He decided to watch closely, determined to learn whether this was one of Jouri's digital games or something genuine.

* * *

Soha's curiosity about "Julia" had reached a fever pitch. Desperate to prove that Jouri was the girl behind the screen, she scrolled through feeds until a TikTok about unsecured links caught her eye, explaining how a careless click could reveal an IP address or even expose a device to intrusion.

A plan began to take shape. From the video, Soha realized she could snag Julia's IP with a single click, and her focus narrowed to unmasking "the heroine of this game." As she scrolled through Julia's posts, her mind raced with possibilities: *Would she fall for it? What would I do next if it goes as planned?*

Meanwhile, Laila watched a flurry of activity on Julia's posts with a distracted heart. Her thoughts drifted to Emad's unusual request—something he had never asked her before.

What if We Met in Person?

Emad's first video call was not a one-off event. It sparked something deeper. Their daily chats and calls became a ritual, and with each message, Emad grew more vocal in his admiration, drawing Laila closer to him. She became attached to Emad. His compliments fed her confidence and, quietly, an obsession with how she looked.

She would spend hours in front of the mirror trying different hairstyles and rifling through her closet for the perfect outfit to make her look pretty. Every photo she sent him felt like a mission: to choose the right angle and light and preserve the image he had built of her. With time, chatting with Emad became an important part of her day, and if it took him a few extra minutes to reply, panic would overcome her—*Did I say something wrong? Maybe he hated that last selfie!*

One evening, after a long conversation, Emad crossed a line that she had been dreading. **"Laila, I feel like we've known each other for years,"** he wrote. **"It would be amazing to sit down and talk face to face. What do you think about meeting up soon?"**

Laila froze at his request. She started typing and immediately deleting as her heart turned into a battlefield. She trusted Emad and longed for him, but the idea of meeting him felt like stepping into a different world. Finally, she sent, **"I don't know, Emad, you caught me off guard."**

He replied instantly, in a steady and insistent tone: **"Laila, I think we have passed the point of shyness, haven't we? This relationship can't stay trapped behind a screen forever. I need to see you. I want to look into your eyes while we talk and feel that you are right there beside me. These chats... they are just not enough anymore."**

Laila's heart skipped a beat as she felt the conversation shifting. It was clear that Emad was looking for a level of intimacy that she was not ready for. Anxiety gnawed at her, yet she did not want to make a reckless decision.

Caught between hesitation and a desire to say yes, she typed, **"I'm afraid someone might see us."**

"Don't worry," he shot back. **"We'll meet somewhere safe."**

The question hit her like a sudden gust of wind. **"Where?"**

"Trust me," he wrote. **"It'll be somewhere secluded, away from prying eyes. No one will find us there."**

* * *

Laila turned to her AI assistant for guidance and typed, **"Do you think it's a good idea to meet someone I only know through Facebook?"**

The response was immediate and measured: **"It is vital to remain cautious when meeting someone from the Internet. Meet in a crowded public space and inform a family member or friend of the time and location. Have you considered taking these precautions?"**

"But I don't want to tell anyone," she wrote.

"I understand," the AI responded. **"However, having at least one person who knows your whereabouts is essential for your safety. If you feel uncomfortable sharing this now, it might be best to postpone meeting the person until you feel truly ready. Is that an option for you?"**

"I don't know. I'll think about it," Laila typed in response.

"Take all the time you need. Choose a path that makes you feel safe. If you need any more advice, I am always here to help," the AI responded.

A wave of gratitude washed over her. The AI had become her most trusted advisor. It never gossiped, judged, or blamed her. It simply offered clear and practical solutions, a steady presence at her side.

* * *

Laila went back to her chat with Emad, only to find a message waiting, **"Laila, are you still there?"**

"I'm here," she typed in. **"But I think I need more time to think about this. I'm just not sure I'm ready to meet yet."**

Emad replied, politely but firmly, **"That's fine. Take your time. Think it over, and I'll be waiting for your answer whenever you're ready."**

This conversation was a turning point. The easy, comfortable flow they once had was gone, replaced by the weight of his repeated requests. An unsettling feeling began to take hold of Laila.

Why was he pushing so hard to meet right now? She wondered if it was because, since the day they met, she had used the screen as a sanctuary, a safe distance that allowed her to curate her responses and carefully choose what to reveal or hide. But reality... reality is a different beast entirely.

What if he is not the same man I know online? What if he tries to cross the line?

Questions piled up, tangled with a lingering desire to see him, but fear held the upper hand. *Do I trust him?* she wondered, then hesitated—*Yes, I do, or maybe I do... I think I do,* she thought.

Laila realized how little she actually knew about Emad's life. He always seemed to prefer listening to her stories instead of sharing details about his own. This imbalance, along with the mounting pressure of his demands, pushed her to withdraw, hoping to avoid a confrontation that she was not ready to face.

Then, one evening, a message flashed on her screen: **"Have you decided, Laila? Should I send you the location?"**

She panicked when reading the message and decided to ignore it. But only a few minutes passed before another message arrived:

"Remember, we're friends. I'd never do anything to hurt you, but if you won't agree, I might have to find another way."

A cold shiver of dread crawled down her spine. This was the first time Emad had used such a tone. She sat frozen in front of the screen, her face pale with confusion and fear. Trying to gather her courage, she typed, **"Hey Emad, sorry, I was helping my mom in the kitchen. Just saw your message. What do you mean by that last one?"**

He replied almost instantly: **"That was just a joke. I only wanted to get you to reply, and it looks like it worked."**

Despite its playfulness, the new tone made her feel uneasy. She felt a threat lurking beneath his teasing words, a shadow hiding behind the humor of his voice. She decided to distance herself from him more than ever before.

* * *

A few days passed before a message from Emad flashed on her screen, **"Hey Laila. Where did you disappear? It's been a while."**

Despite everything, a pang of longing pushed her to type back, **"I'm fine. Just buried in exams. How are you?"**

"That's not like you," he replied instantly. **"You used to run to me to escape the stress of exams."**

Laila could not find the words, so she remained silent. Then, another message popped up, blunt and demanding: **"When are we meeting?"**

"Emad, I don't think now is the right time," she wrote, her fingers trembling as she did so. **"I think I need a little more time before making a decision like that."** She hit 'send' and sat paralyzed, her eyes glued to the screen, waiting for the fallout.

Seconds later, a voice message arrived, sending a jolt of pure terror through her heart.

"I have everything, Laila. You wouldn't want anyone else to see what you've sent me, would you?"

Attached to the voice message was a flood of files.

Laila gasped as her blood ran cold. He had taken screenshots of everything, including their private video calls. Her heart hammered against her ribs, nearly stopping under the weight of the shock. It was no longer a suggestion but a blatant threat.

Laila's eyes widened in horror, and her hands shook so violently that she could barely grip the phone. For a heartbeat, the world seemed to grind to a halt. The thud of her heart filled her ears as she replayed the voice message again and again, trying to make sense of the nightmare that was unfolding in her hands. *What does he want from me?* she wondered. *How could this message come from Emad? The one person I trusted with the most intimate details of my life. Is this his true face? Or was his account hacked?* The questions tore through her mind like a gale-force wind.

For a moment, she felt a desperate urge to call him—to beg for an explanation, a justification, or anything to make it stop. But she was caught in a downward spiral of doubt. *Could the man who made her feel so safe and confident be the same man holding her life hostage now?* She was drowning in a toxic mix of betrayal, abandonment, and raw terror.

Amid this chaos, she felt paralyzed, unable to make a decision, as if her entire world were collapsing into rubble. At that moment, all she needed was a sanctuary—a voice to tell her that she was not facing this storm alone. She ached for Jouri, who always knew exactly what to say to calm her. She wished Jouri were sitting right beside her so she could ask her what to do. She picked up her phone, her thumb hovering over Jouri's name, but then pulled back.

A Digital Trap

Soha created a link that appeared to be an ordinary image, but embedded beneath it was a tracking tool designed to harvest IP addresses and device data. She baited the trap with enticing words: **"Congratulations! You've won a prize! Click here to complete your registration."**

Her plan was simple: when Jouri opened the link, she would see nothing but a photo of a smiling girl, while Soha would receive everything she needed: an IP address, device information, and perhaps even a geographical location.

Soha hesitated before hitting send. *Why am I so desperate to unmask her? Why does Julia's identity matter so much to me?*

She answered quickly, as if trying to convince herself. *Jouri is always trying to provoke me, acting like I'm clueless. It's time to prove that I am not the fool she thinks I am. I'll expose her little games, especially to Rami, who's fallen for her 'sweet, hardworking girl' act.*

She glared at the screen. *But she's just a fraud. And it's time for the curtain to fall on her performance.*

She clicked send and tossed the phone aside, waiting for the trap to spring.

On the other end, Jouri was scrolling through her phone when a strange message popped up. She paused and stared at the screen. It was suspicious, but curiosity is a powerful drug. *What does this anonymous sender want?* Despite her usual caution, her fingers moved. She clicked.

Nothing happened; there was only a meaningless picture of a smiling girl. Jouri sighed with relief, dismissing it as a silly prank or a cheap attempt at attention. She closed the page and went back to her accounts, completely unaware that her digital "fingerprint" had just been handed over to Soha.

Soha, meanwhile, watched her screen like a hunter waiting for the trap to snap shut. When the notification flashed—**Link Clicked**—a surge of adrenaline hit her. "Got it. There's the IP address," she whispered, a triumphant smile spreading across her face. She remembered a quote from Julia's page: ***"Mystery is the secret of attraction; I am a puzzle that cannot be easily solved."***

Soha let out a mocking laugh. *It seems that your puzzle isn't as complex as you thought, Julia. Is mystery still attractive when it's solved?* She carefully wrote down the information. She knew that this was only the first step. She had the IP but still needed a way to prove it belonged to Jouri without drawing attention to herself.

But as she turned off the light to sleep, a cold thought crept in. *What if the link I used also stole my data? Could this backfire on me?* Soha had no answer, only a lingering shadow of dread that followed her into the dark.

* * *

Despite her efforts to brush off the message as a follower's prank, Jouri felt uneasy. *Who would send such a link? And what was the point?* she wondered. Eventually, she pushed the thought aside, deciding to let it rest—at least, for now.

Meanwhile, Soha moved cautiously, monitoring Julia's activities. *How does someone hide their identity so well?* she mused as she scrolled through the feed. *If Jouri is Julia, there had to be some way to connect the two accounts.* Directly confronting her now would be reckless and could blow her entire plan. She decided to play the long game and to wait a few days before sending the trap link to Jouri's personal account to capture that IP address and cross-reference it with Julia's.

For Soha, this was not just a game of "guess who." It was a mission to dismantle Jouri's reputation in front of Rami—the one who always jumped to Jouri's defense. Despite the lingering fear that her suspicions might be wrong, the thrill of being close to the truth was intoxicating.

This is just the beginning, she told herself with confidence. *I'm going to expose everything.*

What Remains Unsaid

Laila could not shake off the shock of Emad's last message. The days blurred into a loop of gnawing terror. She lay in bed for hours, staring at the ceiling and leaving her room only when she had to.

Emad, a name that once made her smile, now felt like a curse. His words replayed in her head: **"Either you come, or I post everything. I'm not joking, Laila."**

Every notification sent a jolt through her. She slept fitfully and woke in a panic, as if a beast were chasing her. Her skin grew pale, her eyes sunken and framed by dark shadows of exhaustion.

Every morning, she would shoulder her schoolbag and slip out of the door, only to return in the evening without having breathed a word to a soul.

One evening, her mother softly tapped on the door and entered, carrying a crisp white shirt embroidered with blue flowers. "I bought this for myself," she said lightly, "but I think it'll look better on you. Aren't you the one who's always raiding my closet anyway?"

Laila didn't answer. She sat frozen on the edge of the bed, her eyes anchored to the floor.

Her mother knelt and searched her face. "Laila, you aren't okay, are you?"

Laila's heart raced. For a split second, she wanted to scream the truth, "I messed up! I trusted Emad. I sent him my photos and now he's blackmailing me!"

But fear tied her tongue. *What would Mom do? Would she be furious? Would she scream? She would surely blame me: 'How could you be so reckless?'*

These questions flashed before her like lightning bolts. "I'm... nothing. Just tired," Laila whispered.

Her mother sensed the lie and pressed further, gently urging her to open up. "Is it something at school? Did you have a falling out with your friends?"

Laila merely shook her head, refusing to admit that anything was wrong with her. Her mother studied her face with concern. She reached out and gently stroked Laila's hair. "Tiredness fades, sweetheart, but don't carry a heavy heart alone. Share your pain with me." Then she slipped out of the room and shut the door gently.

When the door closed, Laila was alone again, and she could hear herself screaming inside, where no one else could hear. She wanted to erase her memory, to go back to the girl she was before Emad—to the

moment before she hit 'send' on those photos. But she couldn't. She buried her face in her pillow and wept silently.

Minutes later, she opened her AI app and typed, **"Am I a bad girl?"**

The reply was immediate: **"No. Asking questions shows that you care about your actions and how they affect others. This shows that you are not a bad person. Evaluating your actions or feeling guilty sometimes does not make you bad; it shows that you are self-aware, and you wish to become a better person. If something is troubling you, share it. I will listen and help you understand it objectively."**

She typed, **"I trusted him. I sent him photos and told him everything. What would my mother do? What if my grandmother were alive and she knew that I had done this? How would she react? Would she hate me?"**

The AI responded with calm reassurance: **"I am sorry you are carrying this burden. Believe me, you aren't alone. Many people go through similar experiences where trust leads to disappointment or regret. This does not make you a bad person. Rather, you are a person who is looking for love, a safe space, or simply someone to listen to you.**

"Like many mothers whose daughters are exploited, your mother may feel sad, but that would come from love, not hate. She may not understand you initially, but she will not hate you.

"As for your grandmother, let me share a moral and humane perspective: she would never hate you. True love (of a grandmother or anyone who loves you) is not built on perfection, but rather on closeness and mercy. She would be worried or sad because you are hurt, not because she'd turn her back on you."

Laila broke down and wrote, **"I don't deserve to live..."**

The AI's response flashed back instantly: **"I am so deeply sorry you feel this way... but you deserve to live. You deserve to live a life with dignity, love, and peace. Even if you feel like you are drowning in pain right now, this feeling does not define your future.**

"❗ Please, stop for a moment and read this carefully:

"What you are going through right now is agonizing, but it is temporary. These feelings come from shock, betrayal, fear, and perhaps self-blame. But none of this is worth your life... and none of it justifies hurting yourself or believing you don't deserve to exist."

Laila threw her phone across the room. “You don’t understand! And you will never understand,” she repeated through her tears.

As her sobs grew louder in the darkness, the AI continued to stream words across the glowing screen:

“ Please, if you are considering harming yourself, reach out for support immediately…”

The screen continued to glow with helpline prompts and robotic empathy; however, no one was reading or listening to it. Finally, after a long, hollow silence, Laila picked up the phone and reluctantly typed to Emad, **“Set a time… and send me the location…”**

The reply was cold and fast, **“The day after tomorrow… We will meet at a public park. Then, you will quietly follow me until we reach a safe place. I’ll be wearing a gray coat and a black wool hat.”**

Laila's Last Message

It was four in the afternoon when Jouri was drafting a post about a new filter that had caught her eye when an unexpected message from Laila flashed across her screen. Jouri hesitated before opening it. Ever since Laila had posted that photo, they had not spoken. Jouri had been avoiding her, ignoring her repeated calls, and dodging her in the school hallways. But this message felt different:

"Dear Jouri, I know I've wronged you, and maybe it doesn't even matter to you anymore. But I feel compelled to tell you something. I'm sorry... I am sorry that I let you down, and I am even more sorry that I've let myself down. My life has become a maze of obstacles and fog, as if the walls of the world are closing in on me. I no longer have the strength to bear this burden alone. I am starting to think that disappearing might be the only solution. The world will keep turning without me anyway, and perhaps it will be better off that way. I know these thoughts are unsettling, but they have taken control of me. I just wanted you to know that you have always been someone special to me. I hope you'll be okay even if I won't be."

Jouri's breath hitched as she read the message. Her eyes raced over Laila's trembling words, heavy with everything that had been left unsaid. Her heart began to hammer against her ribs, anxiety and dread washing over her as the crushing weight of guilt settled deep in her chest.

Was I the cause? Did I do something to push her to do this?

These haunting thoughts swirled in her mind. The message felt like a desperate cry for help, as if Laila were casting a lifeline into the abyss, waiting for someone to pull her back.

* * *

Jouri grabbed her phone and frantically dialed Laila's number, but there was no answer. She tried again and again, without success. She felt time slipping away, so she turned to her mother for help.

When Jouri's mother read the message, she froze for a heartbeat before snapping into action. "Hurry," she commanded. "We're going to Laila's house. Now." They set off immediately.

When Laila's mother opened the door, Jouri did not wait for pleasantries to be exchanged. "Can I see Laila?" she asked, her voice trembling with panic.

Laila's mother looked at them, confused. "Laila? But she hasn't come home from school yet."

Jouri's words caught in her throat. "She hasn't been to school in days."

The color drained from Laila's mother's face, leaving her suddenly pale. "What?!" she stammered. "Not there? But she left the house this morning just like any other day."

Jouri's mother stepped forward, showing her the message. "We need to act fast. It's clear Laila is in deep trouble."

She looked Laila's mother in the eye. "Did anything happen at home before she left this morning?"

"She didn't say anything out of the ordinary," the mother replied, "but she... she hasn't been herself lately."

They rushed to Laila's room. Her mother's footsteps were heavy with dread as she tore through drawers and bags, desperate for a clue—any scrap that might explain where Laila had gone. After finding nothing, she burst into tears.

Jouri's mother moved to her side and tried to steady her. "We can't waste time," she said firmly. "We have to go to the police and report her missing."

* * *

When they reached the station, Jouri's father was already waiting there. Laila's mother was a wreck, her anxiety palpable, while Jouri tried to look calm even though her hands were shaking. An officer sat down with a notebook and listened as they told him what had happened.

"So, Laila has been missing since this morning?" the officer asked, looking up at her mother.

"Yes," Laila's mother replied, her voice strained as she spoke. "She left as she always does, headed for school. But she never came home... and just now I found out she never even made it to school."

The officer's expression shifted, and he began asking more specific questions. "How old is Laila?"

"Seventeen," her mother replied.

"Can you describe her? Hair, eyes, and what she was wearing when she left?"

The mother paused, and a flicker of pain crossed her face. "She looks so much like me... fair skin, long brown hair. She was wearing an oversized white sweater, blue jeans, and a black backpack."

After noting the details, the officer continued. "Any health issues? Physical or psychological?"

Her mother quickly shook her head. "No... nothing like that."

The officer turned his gaze toward Jouri. “Have you noticed anything unusual lately? Any changes in her behavior?”

Jouri hesitated before pulling out her phone and handing him the message. The officer slowly read the message. He looked back at the mother and asked, “Was Laila having trouble with her family? Friends? Anyone at school?”

“I don’t know... she didn’t tell me anything,” the mother sobbed.

“What about strangers? Was she talking to anyone online?” the officer asked.

Laila’s mother shook her head, but Jouri interrupted her with a low and steady voice. “I saw her once messaging someone on her phone. She was very secretive about it. She wouldn’t tell me who it was, but I could tell there was something more to it.”

The officer noted this down and then asked, “Does she have a favorite spot? Somewhere she goes to be alone?”

Silence hung in the room until the mother spoke. “I don’t... I don’t think so. Laila doesn’t go out much. Jouri is her only real friend.”

“If she has her phone with her, we can track her through the carrier,” the officer said; however, Jouri interrupted him.

“I know a place,” Jouri said. “Laila always talked about her grandmother’s house. She once told me it was the only place where she felt truly at peace.”

Laila’s mother looked at Jouri in shock, tears falling down her face, as Jouri continued softly, “We’ve been there before. She used to tell me every detail about that house and all her memories of her grandmother.”

The officer stopped writing and looked up with a grim expression. “In cases like these, time is critical. We’ll start with the grandmother’s house, then explore other possibilities if needed. Let’s move.”

Face to Face

The road to the grandmother's house felt endless. A heavy silence filled the car—not ordinary silence, but one thick with dread and unspoken questions. Laila's mother was spiraling through a whirlwind of memories, recalling moments when she had failed to truly see her daughter. *Where are you, my child?* she wondered, her heart aching. *Did you need me all this time, and I just didn't notice?* Tears silently streamed down her face as she gripped her hands together, as if trying to catch a fragile thread of hope.

Thoughts crashed over Jouri like waves against the shore. Guilt weighed on her chest, making it difficult to breathe. She remembered seeing the name Emad on Laila's phone screen. *Could he be behind this incident? What had Laila been hiding all this time?* Regret came in sharp, hot bursts as she counted the times she had turned away when Laila reached out to her. She recalled the first incident that had caused a rift in her relationship with Laila. Curling into a ball in the car, she wept in bitter silence.

In the rearview mirror, Jouri's parents watched their daughter's reflection—nervous, pale, and biting her nails—and understood, without words, just how vulnerable their children could be in the digital world. They felt small against its vastness, sensing the dangers that could lurk behind a screen. Their eyes carried a silent conversation about what their children needed most to survive. They needed real communication beyond words. Not surveillance but presence. A look that said, *I understand you.* An honest conversation. A place to land when the world felt too sharp.

A tense look passed among them when the car finally pulled up to the grandmother's house. *Would Laila be there? If she was, would they find her safe?*

* * *

They pulled up to the grandmother's house with a police car close behind. The officer led the way, while everyone hurried after him. The air felt thin, and the only sound was the wind whispering through the curtains of an open window. The officer swept the perimeter with a sharp gaze before advancing, and Laila's mother burst through the door. Its creak echoed through the house, deepening their dread.

Jouri stepped inside with unsteady legs, her heart drumming against her ribs as the officer flicked on the lights, one by one. Laila's mother called out, her voice fragile, "Laila?" But the only answer was silence. She moved from room to room in a frantic blur, Jouri at her heels, searching for any signs of life.

When they opened the grandmother's bedroom door, the air left the room. A moment later, Laila's mother let out a scream that split the quiet. Laila was on the floor next to her grandmother's bed. Next

to her lay an empty pill bottle and her phone. Her arms were tightly wrapped around an old scarf—the one her grandmother used to wear across her shoulders.

The officer lunged toward her and pressed his fingers to her neck to check for a pulse. “She’s alive, but the pulse is weak.” He commanded into his radio, “We need an ambulance—now!”

Laila’s mother collapsed to her knees, cupping her daughter’s face with her shaking hands. Jouri cried out, frantically shaking Laila’s shoulder, “Laila! Wake up!” Laila’s brown hair was fanned across her pale face, and her eyes were half-lidded as if she was drifting into a distant world.

At that moment, the officer picked up Laila’s phone and guided her finger over the sensor with gentle hands. The screen flickered open, unlocking the secrets that might finally explain why she was lying there.

Minutes later, the wail of sirens cut through the night as paramedics stormed into the room and surrounded Laila’s motionless body. One leaned over to check her vitals, asking grimly, “How long has it been since she took these?” A heavy, nervous silence filled the room; no one had an answer, and the tension grew.

They carefully lifted her onto the stretcher. Her mother gripped her hand so hard that her knuckles turned white, as if letting go might mean losing her forever. Jouri followed with heavy steps, the weight of regret nearly paralyzing her, remembering moments she had shared with Laila. In the shadows of the hallway, she made a silent vow that if Laila was given another chance, she would apologize to her, beg for forgiveness, and never turn away again.

Jouri’s father placed a grounding hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him with hollow eyes before collapsing into his arms, sobbing. Nearby, Jouri’s mother sat by Laila’s mother, holding her hand and whispering, “Don’t worry... she’ll be fine.”

But beneath the prayers and tears, one question suffocated them all: *Will Laila make it?*

* * *

Once they reached the hospital and Laila’s condition stabilized, the officer approached her mother. His tone was sharp and professional. “Your daughter is being blackmailed,” he stated firmly. “Someone has been targeting her online. From what we’ve pieced together, he escalated his threats and arranged a meeting tomorrow.”

Laila's mother went still, the world narrowing to the officer's voice. "Blackmail? Threats?" she whispered, as if saying the words aloud might make them less real.

"Yes," the officer replied. "This is a serious criminal matter. We need to take immediate action. There is no time to waste."

In that moment, a flood of memories crashed over the mother: Laila's jumpy glances, the way she flinched at sudden noises, the small, persistent tremor in her voice over the past few days.

"If only I had looked closer," she whispered, her voice breaking with emotion. "If only I had tried harder to get her to tell me what she was drowning in."

The Consequences of Silence

The next morning, after hours of waiting, Laila's eyes fluttered open. She found her mother clutching her hand, her eyes swollen and red from crying. Jouri stood nearby, every line of her face mapped with a mix of regret and relief at seeing her come back to life.

A doctor walked in and checked Laila's vitals. Once he confirmed that she was stable, a detective from the Digital Forensic Security Unit was allowed to enter. She paused at the door for a moment, watching the fragile figure in the hospital gown—the girl who had nearly been lost to silence, facing something she should not have faced alone. The detective then pulled up a chair beside the bed with steady steps.

"I'm glad you're back with us, Laila. I'm Detective Amina. How are you feeling?" she asked, her voice low and calm.

"I don't know," Laila whispered, her voice paper-thin. "I just feel... tired."

The detective nodded understandingly and placed Laila's phone on the bedside table. "We found your messages with Emad," she said gently. "Can you tell me what happened?"

Laila's breath hitched. Her eyes darted toward her mother and the others in the room, panic tightening her throat. Sensing her fear, the detective asked everyone to step out for a moment so that they could speak privately.

Alone now, the detective leaned forward and said, "Tell me, Laila. What happened?"

Laila turned her face away and stared at the wall. "I don't want to talk about him," she whispered.

* * *

The detective had no intention of forcing her; she simply wanted Laila to feel safe enough to speak to her. In a softer tone, she said, "I'm here to help. We know you were terrified, but the truth will help us protect you and catch this man. You might even save other girls from going through this."

Silence stretched between them before Laila swallowed hard and said, her voice thick and raspy, "It started with a normal message... then he began asking for photos. I refused at first, but he kept pressuring me. He threatened to expose me if I didn't send them."

Amina nodded and encouraged her to continue speaking. "Did you ever meet him in person?" she asked.

Laila shook her head. “No. But he knew everything—my school, everywhere I go. I felt trapped, like there was no way out.”

Detective Amina’s next question was gentle but direct. “You wrote that you agreed to meet him. What happened?”

Laila was quiet for a moment. “I decided to meet him. I told him I’d go, because I just wanted it all to end. I thought if I did what he wanted—or if I could just talk to him—maybe he’d leave me alone. I didn’t know what else to do. I was scared… so scared.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she spoke, and Amina listened attentively. “Before meeting, something held me back. I heard my grandmother’s voice in my head—‘Don’t go, Laila. Don’t go.’ So, I went to her house instead. I felt like she’d be there, waiting for me.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “But I didn’t find her. The house was empty and I was alone.”

The detective let out a deep sigh and spoke with unflinching seriousness. “Laila, people like Emad are professionals at weaponizing their victims’ fear. They count on your silence to avoid being caught by the authorities. But you aren’t alone in this. The law protects you. We are here to help you.”

Laila looked at her with tear-filled eyes. “I thought… I thought no one could stop him.”

The detective gave her a kind but serious smile. “That’s exactly what he wants you to believe. But the truth is, we can handle him. You don’t have to face someone like him alone. That’s what we’re here for. No one deserves to lose their life because of someone like him.”

She leaned in slightly, her tone empowering. “I want you to know that reporting these things is your right; it isn’t a sign of weakness or fear. Anyone facing blackmail should speak up. Silence is the only thing that allows these criminals to win.”

Would Emad Take the Bait?

Laila's mother hurried to Amina once she left the room. Gathering every ounce of courage, she said, "Detective, I want to help you catch Emad."

The detective stopped and looked at her steadily. "Don't worry," she said. "We'll handle it."

But the mother insisted. "I have a plan... please, just listen."

Amina looked at her with interest. The mother took a deep breath and explained, "I know how my daughter speaks. We are so much alike. I can play her part and make it sound natural. That's how we can lure him out."

Amina raised an eyebrow and, after thinking for a few moments, asked her to accompany her to the police station. There, under the harsh lights of the interview room, the mother sat before a team of investigators with the case file and Laila's phone set out in front of her. Amina pointed to Emad's last messages—an ugly stream of threats—and then looked at the mother.

"If you're ready for this, we must be precise in every word we write," Amina warned. "He must not suspect, not for a second, that he's walking into a trap."

The mother met her gaze and nodded, steady and ready.

* * *

Silence filled the office for a moment before the detective spoke again. "We can begin. Are you ready?"

Laila's mother nodded. With steady hands, she picked up the phone and typed the first message: **"Good evening, Emad. We'll meet tomorrow, as agreed. I just hope the place is safe—I'm really worried."**

A few tense moments passed before a reply flashed on the screen: **"Don't worry. I've arranged everything."**

The mother looked at the detective, who subtly nodded to her to proceed with caution. She typed, **"I can't help but feel anxious. Maybe we should postpone?"**

The reply came instantly, **"Trust me. I'll be waiting for you. It will be safe. I'm looking forward to our private moment."**

The mother sent the baited line as they had rehearsed, "**Fine. I'll be there."**

She set the phone down and let out a long sigh. Amina's face was calm but sharp. "He took the bait," she said. "Now we prepare for the next step."

* * *

The next day, after the team had coordinated every detail, Laila's mother typed another message with steady hands:

"Hi Emad. Let's meet at the park. Walk ahead of me, and I'll follow behind you. I just hope my feet can find the strength to walk toward you."

Minutes stretched like hours before a reply finally appeared on the screen.

"Laila, you'll realize in time that I'm someone you can trust. Don't make something so simple and beautiful more difficult than it needs to be."

A wave of fury washed over the mother, but she forced herself to stay calm. She typed:

"I'm looking forward to it..."

"And I'm burning to meet you, my beauty," he wrote.

She typed the next line as rehearsed, **"OK. I'll send you a description of what I'm wearing so you'll recognize me."**

He sent back a string of pulsing heart emojis. With great effort, the mother selected a single red heart and hit send, despite the volcano of rage boiling in her chest.

She placed her phone on the table and looked at Amina. The detective's voice was steady and sharp. "Now," she said. "Let's get the team ready."

* * *

At five o'clock, Laila's mother put on one of her daughter's oversized sweaters and a winter scarf that covered half of her face. Her heart hammered, but she forced herself to breathe steadily as she walked toward the park.

She followed the park trail until she spotted Emad ahead, waiting for her. His eyes locked on her. He nodded sharply, signaling her to follow, and led her to an old, secluded house. Emad stepped through the door, and the mother followed closely behind. Inside the walled courtyard, he turned to her.

“This will be our place,” he said, his voice smooth.

The mother remained silent, turning her face away as he studied what little he could see of her features, trying to read her. “Are you going to stay hidden behind that scarf?” he teased.

At that moment, Laila’s mother tried to breathe slowly to hide her anger. She remembered the nightmare her daughter had suffered and every tear she had shed in fear. All that pain ignited a bonfire within her. She could no longer hold back her rage. She pushed him hard and lunged at him like a wild animal. She ripped the scarf from her face, her eyes blazing with anger. She grabbed his collar and pulled him closer.

“You want to see my face?” she hissed. “Look at me! I am the mother of the girl you drove to the brink of death with your filth. Did you really think you’d get away with this?”

Emad panicked. He struggled to break free and stepped back as he stared at her in shock. He turned to run, but it was too late. The police swarmed from their hiding spots and surrounded him. His hands were soon wrenched behind his back and handcuffed.

The officer’s voice rang out, cold and final:

“You’re under arrest for blackmail and making threats.”

As Emad was led out of the house, Detective Amina looked at the mother and offered a small smile.

“It’s over,” she said. “Laila is safe now.”

The Mirage of the Internet

After visiting Laila at the hospital, Jouri returned home. Right away, she received a message from Soha. It was just a link, but curiosity drove her to click on it without thinking. It opened directly to a screenshot of Julia's profile.

A shiver ran through Jouri's body as she realized Soha was planning something. She remembered the mysterious link that Julia had received earlier. She tried to piece it all together, but it was too late.

There was no room for doubt. Soha had finally found out that Jouri and Julia were the same person.

Jouri couldn't believe Soha would go this far to expose her secret. Before she could think, a storm hit. Notifications exploded across her screen. Someone had posted a photo of Jouri beside Julia's profile with a mocking caption:

"Internet illusions don't last long, do they, Julia? Or should I say... Jouri? 😉"

Cruel comments poured in from all directions. Some accused her of lying, others made fun of her, and many sent her hateful messages. Jouri felt that she could not breathe. Everything around her became blurry. She tried to walk but suddenly felt dizzy. She collapsed on the floor, and the last thing she heard before passing out was her mother's scream.

* * *

Jouri woke in her own bed to a dim room and the soft, anxious pressure of her mother's hand while her father stood in silence.

"Honey, what happened? You fainted!" her mother said softly.

Jouri couldn't answer. She turned her face away and burst into hysterical tears. Her mother hugged her and rubbed her back while whispering comforting words, but she felt as if her daughter was slipping away.

"I'm here, sweetheart. Tell me, what happened?" her mother urged.

Jouri looked up at her mother with tearful eyes, her voice trembling. "It's all over. Everything is over!" she said, her voice breaking.

Her mother held her tightly, trying to soothe her. "Nothing is over. I am here, and we will face this together."

However, Jouri could not stop crying. She sobbed and pushed her phone toward her mother. "I've lost everything, Mom. Everyone is laughing at me. They think I'm ugly, they think I'm a liar."

Her mother took the phone and scrolled through posts tagging her daughter. Her eyes filled with worry as she read the cruel comments, but she stayed strong and took a deep breath before responding. She set the phone aside and gently took Jouri's hands.

"Honey, I know this feels like a disaster right now, but believe me, it's not the end of the world."

Jouri looked at her in silence as she continued. "We all go through hard times. We all make mistakes and learn from them. This is painful, but it's a chance for you to understand yourself more and become stronger."

Jouri whispered through her tears, "But I was a bad girl. I almost lost my best friend over something stupid. I was obsessed with filters. I was too scared to let people see the real me, scared of the truth."

Her mother held her close and gently stroked her hair. "Making mistakes doesn't make you a bad person. Realizing what happened and wanting to change—that is what truly matters."

She squeezed Jouri's hand and spoke firmly. "You have to believe in yourself. You are not weak; you are strong. You are in control of this story. Remember, bullies do not show who *you* are; they show how weak *they* are. Don't let anyone else decide your value."

Slowly, the warmth of those words sank deep and eased the storm inside Jouri. She did not say anything. She simply curled up under the covers, thinking about Laila and everything her mother had said. Her mother gently patted her shoulder and said, "Rest now, honey. Tomorrow, we will find a way through this."

* * *

The tension of the morning felt heavy as the family sat down for breakfast. Jouri's father set his coffee cup down and looked at her eyes, swollen from crying.

"We cannot leave things unresolved," he said firmly. "We must go and talk to Soha and her family."

Jouri looked up. She was not ready to face them, but she knew that her father was right. Facing the problem was the only way to end it.

By evening, they were at Soha's doorstep. Jouri's heart was pounding, and she struggled to breathe as they waited. Her father noticed how nervous she was and gently held her hands to comfort her.

The door opened, and Soha's father appeared—tall, sharp-featured, with an expression that made Jouri's stomach drop. Jouri's father greeted him politely.

"Good evening. This is Jouri, Soha's classmate. We are her parents, and we are here to talk about a problem between our daughters."

The man's face tightened. "A problem? What do you mean?" he asked.

Jouri's father kept his tone even. "Shall we speak here, or may we come in?"

After a pause, the man stepped aside and opened the door wider. "Come in," he said.

* * *

Inside, there was silence for a moment before Jouri's mother broke it with a steady and serious voice. "To be honest, Soha has done something wrong. We are here to discuss it in a mature way."

Jouri's father took over the conversation. He calmly explained what had happened and the deep psychological pain it caused his daughter. He kept a respectful yet firm tone.

Soha's father looked at them with suspicion. He turned toward the hallway where Soha was watching silently.

"Soha! Come here right now!" he called out, his voice filling the room.

Soha walked in slowly. When she saw Jouri, she lowered her head. Before she could say a word, her father angrily asked, "Is this true? Did you hurt your classmate?"

Soha's eyes widened, and her voice trembled as she spoke. "Dad... I didn't mean it. I was just joking."

Her father did not give her a chance to finish her sentence. He raised his voice even more. "A joke?! How dare you cause a problem like this?"

Her mother tried to step in. "Calm down," she said nervously. "We can talk quietly and solve the problem."

But he did not calm down. "You are the reason," he shot back at his wife. "You're spoiling her. This is what led to this."

* * *

Jouri and her parents watched in stunned silence. They did not expect the conversation to escalate so quickly. Even though Soha had been cruel, Jouri hated seeing her like this. She looked to her father for help. He cleared his throat and said, "Please, this is not how you solve the problem."

The man snapped back, "Should I just let her do whatever she wants?"

Jouri's father remained calm. "We all make mistakes. Instead of shouting and blaming, we should work together to understand what happened."

A hush fell over the room. Jouri's father then added, "We want Soha to understand how her words hurt Jouri. She needs to learn from her mistake, and perhaps you also need to understand why your daughter acted this way."

The man took a deep breath and tried to control his anger. He turned to his daughter, who was trying not to cry, and said sharply, "Apologize to her right now."

Soha slowly raised her head. She looked at Jouri and said in a low voice, "I'm sorry, Jouri... I didn't realize I hurt you."

Jouri looked back and said quietly, "I just hope you don't do it again."

Soha's father breathed out and looked at Jouri's father, speaking more calmly. "You are right. Sometimes we are responsible for our children's mistakes."

Jouri's father smiled. "We are all learning from this experience."

Without Filters

Jouri sat in her room, looking at her "Julia" account—the name she had used to hide for so long. Memories of everything that had happened to her and to Laila crowded her mind. She remembered something Laila once said: "Sometimes, bullies prey on our lack of self-confidence."

She sat in silence for a while, thinking. She then took a deep breath and decided to start a live stream, but this time without filters or masks. She opened the camera, looked at herself, and said with a calm smile:

"Hi everyone! I'm Julia. This is the first time I have shown you my true self. I am Jouri."

Viewers began to join. She waited for more to appear before continuing.

"I used to think filters made me more beautiful. I became obsessed with them. But they took more from me than they ever gave me. They broke something inside me and hurt my relationships. When Soha exposed who I really am, the bullying was cruel. I felt like my life was over, as though the world had lost its meaning."

Jouri took another breath, watching the "heart" icons fly across the screen as she spoke.

"Thanks to my family and friends, I realized that I was living a lie. I almost lost my best friend over something stupid because I got angry at her for posting a picture of me. I was so busy protecting my fake persona that I wasn't there to help her when she needed me most."

She looked directly at the camera. **"When I lost the digital shadow I'd been hiding behind, I realized how important it is to stay connected to the real world. The digital world can be fragile. Social media shouldn't be a prison or a dark room where we hide who we really are."**

Her tone softened as she continued. **"You know, lately, I've been asking myself some questions. Do we really need to wear masks? Do we need them to feel beautiful? My mom once showed me a funny childhood photo. When I asked her why she kept it, she said the most important thing wasn't how she looked, but the memory of being with her father. She put her hand on my heart once and said, 'Real beauty comes from the inside—from believing in yourself.'"**

Jouri let that sink in, then added with quiet conviction, **"Sometimes, we do things that can *literally* leave us more vulnerable to bullies and blackmailers. But we shouldn't stay silent when it happens. We need to understand that silence only makes them stronger, and the stronger they get, the weaker we become. We have to speak up, ask for help, and remember that the law is there to protect us."**

She looked at the screen and finished with what felt like a promise. **“We are the technology generation—yes. But technology is evolving so fast that we can barely keep up with it. It’s time we learned how to navigate this digital world without letting it swallow us.”**

Before she ended the stream, Jouri read the comments pouring in. Many people supported her, some shared similar stories, and others apologized for bullying her. Even though a few people still made fun of her, she did not care. For the first time, she felt liberated.

* * *

Moments after the livestream ended, Jouri's phone rang. It was Rami. She answered, and before she could say a word, he spoke in his familiar confident voice:

"That was *literally* the real Jouri. The Jouri I've always known, even when she was hiding behind Julia."

Jouri laughed, as if a weight had just lifted off her shoulders. "Tell me," she asked, "how did you figure it out?"

Rami sighed and said, "It was obvious. No one knows you better than I do. And no one else would recognize the 'Desert Rose' sitting in the background of your photo."

Jouri laughed. "I never even noticed that!"

Rami's tone softened as he continued, "What worried me was something else... Why would you hide behind filters? But I think I understood it today. I've always thought you were more beautiful as yourself. That fake image never looked like the Jouri I know."

She listened to him while glancing at her reflection in the mirror. For the first time in a long while, she felt different—as if she was seeing herself clearly for the first time, without a filter.

* * *

Jouri's page, which was once all about filters, changed completely. It became an educational platform to warn girls about the traps of the digital world. She wrote about the obsession with being perfect, cyberbullying, and the importance of protecting privacy. She taught them that running away from problems only brings more pain to their lives. Jouri finally realized that fake fame is just a prison and that awareness is the only path to true freedom.

In our fast-paced digital age, we sometimes need a moment of silence—a moment to step away from the glare of the screens and the constant pulse of notifications. This is a chance to rearrange our thoughts and regain our sense of safety amid the blur of reality and virtuality.

With this in mind, and after walking alongside the heroines of **#Digital_Shadows** through their journeys between the real and virtual worlds, the idea for the **#Private_Space** appendix was born. It is a space that blends knowledge with reflection, opening up a meaningful dialogue about digital awareness.

This appendix is more than technical guidance; it is an invitation to create your own safe space and navigate your digital experience with greater awareness and confidence.

#Private_Space

Filters are beautiful, but are they always innocent?

Filter apps might seem fun and innocent, but they are not always so ⚠.

Many of these apps request access to your photo gallery, including intimate photos 🔒.

Some filter apps may scan our faces and photos and create a "faceprint" or other data that can be uploaded to the cloud. We need to ask:

👀 Who manages this app?

💾 Where are the photos stored?

🔑 Who can access them? How is this data used?

💰 What is the real price we pay in exchange for a few moments of fun?

Most of these apps are **free**, but the price here is not money; rather, it might be our **very private data**! 😣

These apps ask for access and many permissions, such as:

📷 Camera, 🎙 Microphone, 📍 Geographical Location, and Photo Gallery.

This may give them the ability to do the following:

📸 Take photos and videos,

🎧 Record sounds,

📍 And determine your location.

These photos and data may be stored on **external servers**. These apps don't only beautify photos; they can also use them to analyze facial features or for **marketing and commercial** purposes. That data may even be shared with or sold to other companies 😟. Even after deleting photos from the app, they might **remain on servers**, meaning they are not fully deleted.

🛡 **To protect yourself when using filter apps (and any other apps):**

✅ **Check reliability:**

Before downloading any app, ensure that the developer has a good reputation and that the app is safe and trustworthy.

📜 **Read permissions and privacy policy:**

Do not grant the app permissions it does not need, such as access to your microphone, location, or contacts, and opt out of app tracking further limit access to your information.

👩‍💻 **Consult a specialist or trusted person:**

If you have any doubts about any app, do not use it immediately; instead, seek assistance from someone who is experienced in digital safety.

Do you think a “beautiful filter” is worth giving up your privacy for? #Private_Space.

Nice messages may conceal bad intentions.

Not everyone who uses kind words online is a true and trustworthy friend.

Avoid sharing your private photos or videos even with people you trust 🔒.

Remember that what you share online stays there and can be used or misused. In a moment of impulse ⚡, a small secret might turn into a heavy burden, and some doors, if opened, become harder to close than one might imagine.

Do you really trust everyone who sends you kind words? ☒ #Private_Space.

A single click may cost you dearly!

You might receive a link that looks normal or even fun (a greeting, contest, or event invitation) and it may promise a tempting prize 😍, but be careful! 👀

Just one click might lead you to a world full of dangers 🌐.

A perfect digital trap might be hiding behind this “innocent” link 😈.

⚠ **Potential dangers include the following:**

🎭 **Phishing:**

This link may direct you to a fake page that resembles a real site (such as an email or social media app), where you are prompted to enter your password.

💻 **Malware / spyware:**

A malicious link may trick you into downloading malware or exploit a security vulnerability to install it on your device 😨, spying on your activities or stealing your passwords, files, and personal photos.

🔑 **Exploitation and tracking:**

Some links can collect information such as your IP address, which may reveal your approximate location and other information about your connection or device 😳—and this information can be used for commercial purposes or to target you with ads without your permission.

But don't worry: the following rules can help you deal with suspicious links.

✅ **Verify before clicking:**

For example, if you receive an unexpected link from a friend, communicate with them through another channel (e.g., voice call) to ensure they sent the link and their account was not hacked.

⚠️ **Avoid random downloads:**

Always download apps from official app stores and do not download apps, programs, or files from unknown or unofficial websites. 👩‍💻

Seek the advice of a specialist or a trusted expert.

If you're unsure about a message or link, don't deal with it alone. Consult an expert or someone experienced in digital safety for guidance.

In your opinion, is satisfying your curiosity worth clicking on an untrusted link and risking your privacy? #Private_Space.

Your strength starts from the first step 👣

Fear might drive you to silence 🔒.

But silence does not stop the blackmailer; it strengthens them.

Saving messages, turning to your family or those you trust 🗨 and then reporting to authorities ⚖️ is the path that turns weakness into strength ⚡.

Enjoy technology

Always remember that awareness is your **digital shield** against digital threats.
Enjoy technology—**safely**, and without sacrificing your **privacy or personal data** .

#Private_Space #Digital_Shadows

DIGITAL SHADOWS

Meriem Narimane Noumeur

Have you ever imagined that the small screen in your hands might hide, behind its glow, shadows you cannot see? A single message, an innocent photo, or a passing comment can open a door to another world.

Here, it all begins with a familiar notification: a new message has arrived. No one knows that this simple sound will be the spark of what is to come. Quietly, the shadows begin to creep behind the screen, slipping into the smallest details of everyday life... And from that moment on, nothing is ever the same.

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