

faceless



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faceless is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and websites are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. The term "FriendBook" is used to describe an entirely fictitious future social media website, and the author is unaware of any current social media website or related kind of commercial entity whose identity would be confused with or business negatively affected by the fictional use of "FriendBook" here.

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to users of online social networks

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part 1

prologue

Her already bright eyes light up even brighter as he hands her a bouquet of red roses. This is one of the nicest restaurants in Beijing's Haidian District, and they are both dressed accordingly.

"Happy Valentines Day," he says in their local Nanchang dialect. With so many people everywhere, it's difficult for Chinese people to have private conversations. But the local Beijingers can't understand a single word spoken in dialects from the south like this one.

"They're so beautiful, and they smell lovely. This is one of my favorite festivals from the West." Her long, naturally black hair is dyed to a rich auburn that clashes a little with the nine flowers.

"I have to tell you something," he says.

"What is it? Why are you so serious?"

"Don't worry. It's just that I'm going away for a while."

"Where are you going?"

"I have to get out of the country."

"What? Why?"

He tries to keep a smile on his lips, but it's clear he's just as worried as she's becoming.

"I found something I wasn't supposed to see, and now I have to go."

"What did you find? What are you talking about?"

"I don't want to leave you, but I'm sure everything will be okay soon."

"You're scaring me. What are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry. It's not safe to tell you any more."

"I'll come with you."

"You can't."

"Why?"

"Whatever happens to me, keep these flowers safe. I want you to remember today."

Her eyes fill with tears. The Chinese word for "a long time" sounds exactly like the number nine. Lovers often give nine roses to symbolize the eternity of their love, but for her it's difficult to believe right now.

"Why can't I come with you? Where are you going?"

"Will you promise never to throw these flowers away?"

"Yes, I promise."

"Good. Let's eat our dinner now." He reaches across the beautifully set dinner table and tries to grab her hand. She pulls it away before he touches it. She is looking down at the table, tears silently streaming from her eyes.

"I'm going to wash my hands," he says, standing up. Before leaving the table, he touches her chin and raises her head. "I love you," he tells her closed eyes and heads toward the restroom.

She thought tonight was going to be a perfect evening with her boyfriend, but now a dark cloud has formed in her mind. She glances across the table and sees that he left his glasses to the right of his rice bowl. The dark cloud suddenly grows bigger.

"He's not coming back!" she thinks and hurriedly starts looking around for him.

Suddenly, from her vantage point on the second floor of the restaurant, she sees him on the curb below, just getting ready to jog across the street toward the stairs to the subway. Her chair falls backward as she stands up, pressing her hands against the huge show window designed to let people on the street see all the happy diners above.

A black sedan with tinted windows pulls up beside him. A window rolls down.

“No!” she screams, startling all the other customers. The ones sitting by the window are too focused on her to see the little flash of light from the muzzle of the silenced gun. No one in the restaurant sees the two men in black suits and sunglasses grab his limp body and pull it inside the car.

As the car zooms away, she stumbles backward into their table, on the verge of fainting. The tea spills. The roses fall to the floor.

1

not public enough

You're not eating very much, Dylan. Are you feeling okay?"
I don't really feel like talking to her about it. Moms can't understand what we're going through.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Something with Family?"

How did she guess? Mom doesn't even know how to use FriendBook.

"Yeah."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"Okay."

I'll be amazed if she can let it drop there.

"Is it because you'll be graduating soon and you haven't chosen a college yet?"

I knew she wouldn't drop it.

"No. She says we spend too much time together."

"What do you mean? She wants more space?"

"Not exactly. I mean, we love each other, and I really like spending time with her, talking, going places, walking. For her hanging out is just not public enough."

"What do you mean, 'public'?"

"Like the other day, after I dropped her off I said, 'Good night, I love you,' and she got really mad and said, 'It's easy to say, but why don't you type it anymore?'"

"Type it where? In a text message?"

"No. She's talking about FriendBook."

"That website?"

“Yeah. See, the way it works is you can post a message to someone on their Bulletin Board. If you say something on the Board, then everyone who logs in can read it. She’s mad because I only say I love her in person, and I don’t type it on the Board very often.”

“So you mean she wants her friends to see that you said you love her?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Doesn’t that make her friends more important than you?”

“I don’t know. And another thing, Valentine’s Day was last month. I gave her a box of chocolates and twelve red roses. She was devastated.”

“What? Why?”

“She tried to hide it at first, but then later when we were checking FriendBook together, she kept looking at her friends’ pages, saying things like, ‘Oh wow! Jess got three e-presents from her boyfriend and one from her mom.’”

“What in the world is an e-present?”

“It’s basically just a little picture that appears in your Treasure Chest in FriendBook.”

“Treasure Chest?”

“Yeah, it’s just a part of the webpage with a picture of an open treasure chest. If you click on it, you can see all the stuff people have given you. But you can’t post a picture in the Chest yourself. You have to pay real money for a picture of a rose or chocolates or a necklace or something to appear there.”

“Surely you’re not saying that Tami thinks a picture of a rose is better than twelve real ones?”

“No, really. She does! See, the real roses will fade, and the real chocolates will get eaten. But the e-gifts will sit there on her screen for everyone to see until the end of the world. She’s said things like, ‘If you really love me, why didn’t you spend this money on e-gifts?’”

“What’s the answer to that?”

“First of all, I didn’t know she felt like that until last week. Secondly, I would much rather have real chocolates than a picture of one on FriendBook.”

“Have you guys talked about this?”

“I tried, but she doesn’t want to talk about what she calls ‘deep issues’ in person. She wants them all to be on the chat so that she can have more time to think about what to say next and go back and reread them later.”

“I must say, this is kind of weird.”

“After we see a movie she doesn’t want to talk about it because it’ll corrupt her review on FriendBook. She logs in and gives it a rating of one to five stars and her reasons for why she gave it what she did. Then only after she’s finished can we discuss what we liked and didn’t. And if I say something that contradicts what she wrote about it, she gets really defensive and wants to change the subject.”

“So what do you guys talk about then?”

“We usually read what other people have written on our Bulletin Boards or someone else’s and give them props or smacks.”

“I’m afraid to ask.”

“You click a little thumbs-up icon to give someone props, which go into their overall personal score. They’re just points that others can give you if you do something cool or say something that people like. You can get props if you post a video of yourself doing something cool or funny or just stupid or if you say something insightful or witty or condescending about someone else’s video. If you do something lame, you get negative points called smacks.”

“So if you get props—is that right?—for doing stupid things and being condescending, what’s an example of a lame thing that will get you some smacks?”

“You get smacks laid on you if you say that something you’ve done is cool, but it’s really not or if you don’t reply to

someone's Bulletin Board message or if you don't agree with someone's movie review."

"Have you gotten any smacks or props?"

"Yeah, I'm at positive 188 right now. I was at plus 400 before Valentine's Day. But then Tami gave me smacks for, well, you know. And after her friends saw that she'd given me smacks, they thought it would be supportive to give me smacks too."

"So anyone can give you smacks and props?"

"Yeah. I don't even know some of these people."

"Well, I know what I'd do if I were you."

"Break up with her?"

"That's not what I was going to say."

"What then?"

"She's going to Arizona State University for sure, right?"

"Yeah, she's got a full ride."

"And you've got a full ride to ASU and University of Arizona?"

"Yes."

"Definitely don't go to ASU. Then you won't be able to hang out. You'll have to type and e-send everything. She'll be thrilled."

"That's a great idea. I think turning this into a long-distance relationship is the only way to make it work."