

Whose idea is it to broadcast the super-size faces of those who died to the far reaches of the school's auditorium? Everybody knows they're gone. Why emphasize the obvious even for the sake of a memorial? And why no rain on this joyless day? Never a good Texas thunderstorm when you need one.

I force a glance at the pull-down screen behind me, but immediately turn to focus on the line where the ceiling meets the wall at the back of the room. I can't bear to look into the crowd, but I can't look at the screen either. A giant reminder that I will never see those faces again. Weeks of grief have left me numb, but I should have worn my hair down to give me something to hide behind. Just in case.

Light pours in through the ribbon of windows high along the back wall. It crisscrosses the podium, making me squint at the sheet of paper in front of me.

It doesn't matter. I know the list by heart.

I blink through the glare and lean in to the microphone, not sure how loud I need to be. "Ashley Bannister."

My voice echoes across the vast room. Plenty loud.

All eyes rivet on the screen and a kid from Drama Club tugs the rope of the school bell slowly and deliberately for maximum effect. It must have taken practice to get a perfect *mournful* clang.

The audience's collective gaze swings to my right. To Chelsea standing at a matching podium, staring at her own list. She's leaning heavy on her crutches, and on the podium, too. She needs both to keep her vertical, apparently. I'm just glad I don't have to share the same half of the stage with her.

As always, I need my distance. That hasn't changed.

"Weston James Brown." Chelsea's lips tighten into a thin line. I'm amazed she gets the name out. The bell sounds again, even more slowly than the first time, and a chorus of sniffles and muffled sobs grows slightly louder.

I measure my breathing and tap my fingers along the edge of the sheet of paper in front of me. I have to keep my hands busy, distracted. Maybe if I keep moving I won't think too hard about the next name.

I switch to rubbing my palms up and down the sides of my pants. I just can't look at Kayla's parents who sit with my mom and dad in the front row. I pause too long and the principal clears his throat behind me. Very cliché, Mr. Myers. Doesn't he get that this is beyond difficult?

"Kayla . . . Marie . . . Carter." I speak her name to the back wall then take up tapping on the podium again. But not so loud anyone can hear. So much for avoiding the faces on the screen. All that loops through my brain is Kayla's wide smile.

*Quit worrying, Taryn. Blake's not getting back with Chelsea,* Kayla had said that night after the party. *I'll go find him for you and you'll see I'm right.* Then she walked right back into the old Gin Co. building.

Why was I forced to do this? I'm not the one who should be speaking the names of the dead in front of all these people. The list reads like the school's Who's Who, and I have no business pretending I'm one of them.

Except for him. How many more names until his? I'd scanned both versions as soon as they

were held out to us, snatching the one with his name among those highlighted. Chelsea has no right to it, to him. Not like I do. At least that's what I tell myself.

The light flickers from behind me, so I know they've moved on to the next abnormous face. A face that should be in the yearbook, not on a screen at a memorial.

A moan rises from the second row, competing with the plaintive tones of the bell. *Plaintive?* Where'd that come from? Now I'm conjuring up junior year Vocab?

One of Chelsea's crutches bangs against her podium. I can't help shooting her a sideways glance. She's still hunched forward. Definitely struggling and the service is just getting started.

Thankfully, I don't have to maneuver crutches and the names in front of me. Still, I will it to be over. My knotted stomach begs for it, and the fetal-position imprint on my bed is only growing colder. Who knows how long Principal Myers will feel obligated to address the assembled after our part is done?

Chelsea finally speaks, but the name comes out in a hiccupped sob. The noise of a bump, then a scrape carry through the sound system when she adjusts her crutches again.

"Keisha Lambert." I blurt it out when it's my turn, afraid to get stuck on a name again. I shut my eyes and try to erase the image that the crowd views behind me. Her exotic-for-small-town, multi-colored cornrows and pierced eyebrow, her excitement at being named cheerleader last May.

Chelsea reads the next name, verbally struggling yet again. It's understandable. She and Becca Martin were like sisters.

My throat tightens when I move in closer to the mic, but I'm determined not to lose it like Chelsea. Fixating on the list, I draw in a breath and the amplification of it hits the back wall. I cover my mouth, but it doesn't hide my embarrassment. The faces of the crowd blur, and all I can see is Blake's, creased with alarm as flames leap out of the building behind him.

Don't turn to look at the screen. Say his name, but don't look at his face. I hesitate, wanting—needing to. Wishing I could ask him the questions that plague me. They all start with "Why?"

Chelsea's crutches bump and scrape again, sending javelins of adrenaline into the pit of my stomach. I drop both hands onto the podium in front of me. I suddenly need something to hang onto.

Just say it. Say his name loud and strong. He deserves that. My lips brush the microphone and I taste metal.

"Blake Austin Montgomery."

His name erupts from my mouth and startles the crowd. The hushed crying and sniffing silences for a moment as if proper tribute to the late student body president mandates it.

Ignoring the looks from the audience, I clench the neatly typed names on the paper into a fist. Relief surges through me now that my part of the program is over.

But it isn't over, not really. The memorial is only the beginning of what was supposed to be the perfect senior year.

Blake, the object of my years-long crush, and I were a couple. Sort of.

We'd been elected student body officers—president and vice-president. We spent the entire last month of school sitting in homeroom eating doughnuts on the sly, discussing senior year. True, Blake had done most of the talking and me a lot of nodding, but he intended for us to be a couple, right? I was his date to Junior Prom. That has to mean something.

I head to my seat on the stage, avoiding Chelsea's eyes as the too-tanned blonde hobbles over to drop into the chair next to me. The principal takes my place at the podium on the left.

"I want to thank these ladies for volunteering for this assignment." He nods in our general

direction, before addressing the audience. “As you know, Taryn Young will step into the position of student body president and Chelsea Manor as head of the cheerleading squad.”

Volunteered? Yeah, right. I stare at my shoes, afraid to look anyone in the eyes. I’m on stage by default. I’m the only one of the newly elected class officers to survive the fire. But more than that I am a fraud. An abnormous fraud. An enormous abnormal fraud.

I would have never run for vice president if Blake hadn’t talked me into it. The position full out scared me, but how could I turn him down? Ever since that day in homeroom when he first noticed the doughnut glaze on my shirt sleeves, I couldn’t tell the difference between dream and reality anymore. They were the same. Now I wish I could erase the nightmare, or better yet, rewind it all so the night of the Ideal Gin Co. fire never happened.

I squirm in my seat, trying to get comfortable as Mr. Myers’ words buzz through the sound system.

No rewinds. No do-overs. Now I sit with the only other survivor of the fire in front of an auditorium full of people with questions. Why Taryn Young, they must be thinking? Why not my son or daughter, my sister or brother? No, just Taryn and Chelsea. A cruel reminder of those who didn’t make it out alive.

Things like this don’t happen at my school. Not in a town called Ideal, Texas.

I half listen as the principal begins his concluding remarks. “The first day of class is one week from today and counselors will be available. Line up outside Ms. McKinney’s door, no appointments needed. Our goal is to get things back to normal as quickly as possible. Let’s not forget,” he stresses, “here at Ideal High School we have a long-standing tradition of unity, pride, and respect. This will carry us through.”

I just want to crawl back into bed where only my pillow hears me scream.

“What about my brother?” A masculine voice coming from the side of the stage jars me. From the shadowed steps, the voice addresses the principal again. “You didn’t call out his name. Isn’t he good enough for your program?”

A figure steps into the stage lights. He wears faded jeans and a gray plaid shirt with sleeves rolled up and shirt tails hanging. The thud of cowboy boots punctuates his step as he edges closer to the podium opposite the principal. He’s about my age, and I can’t help noticing the square confidence of his shoulders, despite the pain that ruts his brow.

“My brother died in the fire, too.”

“Who’s that?” hisses Chelsea. She doubles over like she’s in pain, but maybe she’s just trying to get a better look. The same question seems to vibrate across the auditorium.

I fix my eyes on the intruder. I can’t wrap my brain around his claim. I know everyone who was at Ritter’s Crossing that night where the crumbling old cotton gin had stood for a hundred years before the fire destroyed it.

Mr. Myers takes a step toward the young man. “May I help you after the service? We’re almost finished here.”

“You can help me. You can have one of these pretty girls with their expensive clothes and neon white teeth stand at the microphone and shout out Tim’s name.” The stranger’s voice breaks, but he continues, “He’s important, too, even though no one knows his name.”

“Son, please,” Mr. Myers begins again. “Let’s discuss this afterwards in my office. I’m sure we can clear up any misunderstanding.”

I sense movement among the faculty members sitting on the stage around me, but I don’t take my eyes off the stranger. Mr. Myers seems unruffled, but my mood moves quickly from confusion to irritation. Who is this guy? Who’s his brother?

“Let me do it. Then I’ll leave y’all alone.” He reaches the podium where Chelsea stood

moments before. The mic's movement grates through the sound system when he pulls it to him, and I slide to the edge of my seat. I have to admit, now he's really got my attention.

"He was my younger brother. My only brother." The guy turns away from the mic, momentarily pressing his left thumb and index finger to his eyes. Mr. Myers motions for the others to hold back as the young man continues. "Sure he was new, an easy target for bullies. But he was a student here."

His words are half-whispers now where before he had been practically shouting. "Can't you say his name? Can't you give him even that much?" The guy takes a deep breath. His next words echo across the room, calm and clear. "Timothy Wade Jenks."

He turns, steps straight to the bell, and grabs the rope. Yanking it, he sends a single deafening bong reverberating across the room. He pauses, head bowed, then disappears down the same steps from which he came, leaving behind a brief, bewildered silence.

As the auditorium door closes behind him, the room erupts into chaos.