

Music filled his ears. He closed his eyes and tried to focus. Tried to clear his head. *Breathe.*

He didn't know why he was nervous. He had been doing this for so long now, and he knew he was good. After a lifetime of preparation and practice, it would be pretty pathetic if he wasn't. But maybe it was just the fact that tonight felt big. Tonight's performance wasn't like the others. They had invited him here, and the crowd out there, the crowd whose cheers were almost drowning out his introductory music, were here for him. They wanted him, and he was going to give them what they wanted.

No more hesitation. He walked out on to the stage. The blinding lights hid the faces; all those people cheering. He raised a hand and grinned. He felt like an idiot, but the cheers got louder. He did a little dance. He wasn't prone to whimsy, he was too old for that, but in this moment, *his* moment, he figured he could let go a bit.

His father would have said all sorts of terrible things if he was here. His mother would have shaken her head and poured another glass and turned a blind eye. But they were dead now and he had proven them wrong.

He pushed thoughts of them away. This wasn't about them. He raised the mic and started to sing. The song wasn't an original, but when he sang it, it was his, like it came from somewhere deep and private, somewhere he didn't share with the world except for in these moments.

The cheering continued. His set finished. He had tears in his eyes as he waved again as he left the stage. He could barely breathe. His heart was racing.

He took his time returning to the front of the bar. From here the crowd wasn't quite as big as he'd thought. Maybe ten. Those lights could be deceiving.

The MC was on the stage, introducing the next act.

'Without further ado, please welcome our last performer for the night in the annual Parkland County Karaoke Competition.'

He ordered a beer at the bar. A couple of girls were nearby, eyes on the stage. They hadn't noticed him. He thought about introducing himself. He took a step towards them.

'Can't be worse than the last guy,' one said, sipping her drink.

'As if you're complaining,' her friend replied. 'He was hilarious. You see that dance? That's why we come to this every year.'

He left his beer on the bar and walked out into the night. The lingering exhilaration was gone and he really shouldn't stay out late anyway. He had work tomorrow.

He sang under his breath as he walked home.