

MARTY: I didn't even want to defend you. But I couldn't stand what they were saying. I know you're not like that! I know you're—

LUNA: Yes I am!

MARTY: No, you're not! I know you're—

LUNA: Yes!! I am. I was like that. I just . . . I let him. (*Fighting tears.*) I don't know why.

MARTY: (*Pause.*) Well . . . I called him the "A" word, Luna. I slammed his head into a locker hard too. He was all stunned. It was so great. I wish you could have seen it.

LUNA: I'm sorry, Marty. I'm sorry for what I said to you. About everything. Does it hurt bad?

MARTY: They didn't hurt me. It'll heal. We're friends. What I did was no big deal.

LUNA: But it is a big deal. It's a big deal to me. It means a lot. (*Pause.*) I'm so embarrassed. It was so stupid. He said he wouldn't tell anyone. He said he really liked me a lot, wanted to take me out this weekend. He only wanted to see what it felt like. His friends watched. He told me they wouldn't tell anyone. It was a secret. Forever.

MARTY: It's okay. I understand.

LUNA: No! It's not okay! I knew he was using me. But I just . . . I'm an idiot. And a big slutty—

MARTY: You're not a slut!

LUNA: I just . . . I just . . .

MARTY: Wanted him to like you. (*Nods.*) It's okay. (*He bugs her.*) We all feel like that sometimes. Do stupid things so people will like us. It just means, it just means you're human.

LUNA: And what if you didn't talk me out of going tonight? What would have happened to me then?

MARTY: Nothing. We would have been there. Lumpy, Anne, and I would have killed them. We would have killed them. Plain and simple.

(*She looks up to him, not sure what to say. She suddenly bugs him.*)

## CRESCENDO

*Alexander, 21, returns home to care for Helena, 63, his grandmother, who is sick with cancer. Helena is a flamboyant, energetic older lady who has always exaggerated Alexander's talent. In this scene, Alexander confronts his grandmother about her overstated view of the world and, in particular, her distorted view of his talent for the piano.*

HELENA: Oh my goodness, let me look at you! Let me look at you, Alex!

ALEXANDER: Grandma, I—

HELENA: Bite your tongue, sir. (*Hits his arm.*) And shame on you for not writing or calling for six months. You can forget the inheritance now.

ALEXANDER: Helena, can't we just skip the whole look-me-over routine? It seems kinda too grandma for you anyway.

HELENA: I'll be the judge of that. (*Beat.*) What did they do to you in Las Vegas?

ALEXANDER: What are you talking about?

HELENA: Your eyes are all bloodshot. Shoulders are saggy. And you've a down inflection in your voice that I *do not* recognize. What did they do to you there?

ALEXANDER: Nothing. It was just a long car trip.

HELENA: The car? You should have taken a train. Trains are so much more romantic. Your grandfather loved trains, remember?

ALEXANDER: Yeah, sure.

HELENA: He took me on a lovely, long train trip through Siberia. The food and service was primo—absolutely artistic . . . roasted duck, little tea sandwiches, bittersweet chocolate puff things. All served by total gentlemen in crisp white coats. And the view, well—simply breathtaking, Alexander.

ALEXANDER: I remember. I was seven. I thought *you* took *him*. He was broke and drinking again as I remember.

HELENA: Well I don't remember everything. The point of the story was the romance of the train.

ALEXANDER: Somehow I don't think the train from Las Vegas to Vermont would be all that romantic. Last time I was on a train from Boston, the toilet broke and the smell of it kept wafting into the car.

HELENA: Alexander, there are some details one need not elaborate upon.

ALEXANDER: So how have you been, Helena?

HELENA: I will respond fully and completely once you have answered my question, which is, what did they do to you in Las Vegas?

ALEXANDER: Nobody did anything to me. I worked there is all.

HELENA: Yes, I understand you entertained at one of the casinos there.

ALEXANDER: No, I didn't entertain at the casino. I was a security guard.

HELENA: A security guard? I thought you were playing for patrons.

ALEXANDER: I did some street performing.

HELENA: Ohhh!

ALEXANDER: Like I told Mom.

HELENA: I don't think she told me that exactly.

ALEXANDER: I highly doubt she got that confused, Helena.

HELENA: My understanding was that you were playing piano at one of the casinos . . . one of the bigger ones.

ALEXANDER: Well, I don't know how you heard that, because I was playing guitar on the street. I think perhaps you enhanced the story in your head since that's what you'd like me to be doing.

HELENA: Why do you do such things, Alex?

ALEXANDER: What are you talking about? Do what things?

HELENA: Things so beneath you. Playing guitar on the street.

I know your mother has set no example whatsoever.

ALEXANDER: I don't know what you're talking about.

HELENA: Running a worm store for one.

ALEXANDER: It's not just worms or bait. It's tackle and rods too. She makes decent money. And she has time to go hiking and be outdoors. It's much better than half the jobs in the big cities. Sitting in an office at a computer, looking out the window at rusting fire escapes all day.

HELENA: Yes, but she was a lovely actress.

ALEXANDER: She hated doing that. You just made her.

HELENA: I did not. Anyway, I'm just saying that she has never encouraged you—

ALEXANDER: Oh God, no. Are you doing this again? Don't blame, Mom. She doesn't discourage me about anything. She says I should do what I want.

HELENA: See, that's exactly what I mean. You shouldn't be doing what you want. You're special. You have a gift. You're an extremely talented and accomplished pianist.

ALEXANDER: No, I'm not. I'm just slightly better than the average Joe. I know that now. I've been out of Vermont.

HELENA: This is simply false. I was just telling the new artistic director of the Grande Ole Theater about you. I gave some guidance to him recently over in Burlington so they can re-open. They have an incredible season planned. We'll go to every opening night.

ALEXANDER: I know. Mom told me about that.

HELENA: She told you about the season?

ALEXANDER: No, that you gave them \$25,000 dollars.

HELENA: I don't know the exact amount. What is money anyhow?

ALEXANDER: A lot. I think money is a lot now. Now that I've been out in the world. It's power.

HELENA: Well, being in Las Vegas *would* make you think that. The point is that I didn't want the theater to close. It's a fabulous theater. My father invested in that building.

ALEXANDER: I know. You've been giving them money for years. The theater's not even that big. It's not like they have that much overhead. And yet they never seem to break even.

HELENA: It's not the money that's important. They needed more guidance, which I was more than happy to give to them. They agreed to do one Shakespeare, one O'Neill, one Miller, and one grand musical—probably Rodgers and Hammerstein. Doesn't that sound fabulous? Doesn't it?

ALEXANDER: Yes. How much money do you have left?

HELENA: That's a rude question. I believe I'll ignore it. Now, what I was going to say is that I told the artistic director of the theater that my grandson, Alexander, an enormously talented musician, is coming home for a visit this summer. It's a rare treat. We'll convince him to stay. And he'll play for your musical. He agreed.

ALEXANDER: You shouldn't have told him that. I don't want to play.

HELENA: What? You don't want to play?

ALEXANDER: No. I don't want to play. I don't like to. I actually hate it sometimes.

HELENA: I don't believe you. I've never seen a child who sat down and produced such an amazing sound as you do. You're a natural. You learned Chopin in less than a week. Now, the problem is that we never had a teacher who could keep up to speed with your immense talent.

ALEXANDER: That's not true. Mr. Hall was a great teacher. He played professionally in Boston. He wasn't a virtuoso, no, but he made money playing professionally. I was lucky to have him every summer.

HELENA: He was an idiot who didn't know how to foster your talent.

ALEXANDER: I don't want to be a musician, Helena! I don't know why you always push me to do that!

HELENA: Because you're gifted. You could have gotten into Juilliard instead of—

ALEXANDER: No, I couldn't!

HELENA: Well how would you know? Despite the many times I encouraged you to audition—

ALEXANDER: I know.

HELENA: How?!

ALEXANDER: *(Pause.)* I tried.

HELENA: You did? *(Beat.)* When?

ALEXANDER: Two times. The first audition was three years ago. Right after I graduated from high school. I looked like an idiot. I was so cocky at that first audition because you always told me how good I was. How talented. You pumped me up and exaggerated my true talents.

HELENA: You are good.

ALEXANDER: Maybe. Good. But not good enough. The second audition I did last year. They told me I needed more work, or maybe I should consider something else.

HELENA: That's ridiculous. You just need a better teacher.

ALEXANDER: No. I don't want to keep trying to live out some fantasy that I'm not even sure is mine.

HELENA: Many great talents are not recognized immediately. Van Gogh's genius wasn't recognized until he was dead.

ALEXANDER: Well, I don't want to wait until I'm dead. Besides, he's a painter in case you didn't notice. Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin were all child prodigies. Their talent wasn't just recognized by their grandmother. They were playing salons and for large audiences at a very young age. There was no question.

HELENA: You played for the Summer Festival.

ALEXANDER: I know.

HELENA: *Moonlight Sonata* was perfect for the affair. It was wonderful. Everyone was so impressed.

ALEXANDER: Of course they told you that. I was your grandson.

HELENA: I don't think they just told me that.

ALEXANDER: Look, I came back here because I heard about your tests.

HELENA: I don't think one would audition twice if one didn't

enjoy it. I remember how you'd play for me for hours. And then remember when you and I did that interpretive reading of *The Raven*? You were thrilled.

ALEXANDER: Did you hear what I said?

HELENA: Yes, I heard you. You're just like your mother.

ALEXANDER: She says I'm just like you.

HELENA: How's that?

ALEXANDER: Stubborn.

HELENA: I am not stubborn! (*Beat.*) I'm not! Absolutely not! She is!

ALEXANDER: I've come to take care of you.

HELENA: As if I need taking care of. I have a whole summer at the theater planned. I'll take care of you.

ALEXANDER: Mom's afraid that you're giving away all your money to that theater. When Grandpa was alive, he'd put a stop to it. She doesn't trust that artistic director there now.

HELENA: Your mother is very stingy. And so was Grandpa. And there's no reason for it. I come from money. I shared it freely with them. I don't know why they gave it a moment's worry. They had no need. (*Beat.*) I wonder if we could get in and watch a rehearsal.

ALEXANDER: Why do you ignore reality, Helena? Why do you have to embellish everything?

HELENA: Why not? Do you think anything great was ever accomplished by being realistic, Alex?

ALEXANDER: I don't think anything great was accomplished by lying.

HELENA: I never lied. Maybe stretched a little. Maybe. You are brilliant.

ALEXANDER: Lies, lies. Would you stop? God, I wanted to do anything to get away from music once I realized I wasn't good enough. I was a delivery man, a receptionist, a dog walker. But sometimes it would overcome me, and I'd end up in some high school music room somewhere practicing.

I wound up playing guitar on the street because I needed to play to fill the void. But it's all stupid because I'm not

good enough. It's all idiotic because I'll never get anywhere. It's all because of your lies, your insistent lies. You puffed me up so much, and now I've fallen so low. I feel like nothing.

HELENA: You want to blame me for natural disappointment? That's life. If you're never disappointed, you've never lived.

ALEXANDER: I don't want to live like that.

HELENA: I never intended to hurt you, Alex. Never. Whether you believe me or not, I meant what I said. I was proud of you. I still am. And you know, there's nothing wrong with having passion for music. It's the sound of God on earth. At least that's what I think.

ALEXANDER: It may be the sound of God on earth, but if you're not a virtuoso, and you know you're not, there's no point in doing anything with it. You even said so yourself. Being a street player is beneath me. Only Juilliard is grand enough.

HELENA: You're right. I have said those things, but it's because I worry about you. I wouldn't want you to live on the streets. It's dangerous. It's not that I don't find street performers wonderful. I was enchanted beyond belief by a violin in a subway once. I guess I just wanted to know you'd be safe. I wanted the best for you. And I never doubted you could do it. I'm sorry if I put so much pressure on you. I got carried away I guess.

ALEXANDER: I was so ashamed when I didn't get in. I thought I failed you. I thought that's why you always loved me so much . . . because of my playing.

HELENA: Oh Alex. It was the other way around. I loved your playing because I love you so much and I saw how happy it made you. That's what I really wanted for you—that joy. (*She hugs him close.*)

ALEXANDER: I was happy, wasn't I?

(*She nods.*)

HELENA: Mr. Hall noticed that all the time. He used to comment on that along with praising your abilities

ALEXANDER: He did? Really?

HELENA: *(Nods.)* I heard he's coming back this summer.

ALEXANDER: Oh yeah. Maybe we could take a second look at "the idiot." Give him a second chance. See if he's improved. See if he can really "foster my talent."

HELENA: Alexander darling, if you're going to quote my words back to me. Choose the smarter things I've said. *(He smiles. Beat.)* Well, maybe something can be arranged. I think my piano has been getting a little dusty. But there are two conditions. Firstly, they'll be no moping or moaning about my physical state. And secondly, no lecturing me on how I spend my own money. My spirit is a very happy one, and it remains so when I am giving to those who create. Those who give me wondrous music, fabulous performances, and booming voices quoting the words of William Shakespeare.

ALEXANDER: Okay, okay. You can give to the theater, but not—

HELENA: *(Putting her hand up to stop him.)* Mmm.

ALEXANDER: Sorry. But you'll at least tell me what the doctor said?

HELENA: It's all very boring. The cancer has returned. We'll do a lot of wiggling our fingers, and crossing our toes and eating fresh fruit and vegetables, and getting under the evil giant iron again. It would be nice though to have someone to hold my hand.

ALEXANDER: I have a hand.

HELENA: I know. And it's a good hand. I think it will do. And you'll play when I'm feeling a little sick and low?

ALEXANDER: Of course. I don't think I could find a better audience.

HELENA: If I do die, Alex, and I don't plan on it, but if I do, I want you to remember that I always loved you. And I too, like your mother, want you to do whatever you want with your life. But never forget how music makes you feel. That I insist upon. Do you understand?

ALEXANDER: Yes. I understand.

HELENA: Right. All right then. Let's go over and watch a rehearsal of *MacBeth*. I love the witches. And Lady MacBeth. Always reminds me a bit of myself. Very inspirational. Very dramatic.

*(Holding a hand out to her. She takes it.)*

ALEXANDER: And very stubborn.

HELENA: Hush. I'll get my coat.