

SIDE ELEVEN

LUCRETIA

(Lucretia enters and pushes Fairmont aside.)

It's all right, Mr. Fythe. I'll speak with her....

(To Gwendolyn.)

Who are you and why are you here?

GWENDOLYN

My name is Gwendolyn Gage, Judge Gwendolyn Gage, and I'm here to discuss your plans to build a quarry on Maple Avenue.

LUCRETIA

I'm not looking for any investment partners, if that's what you're after. I prefer to run a one-woman show.

GWENDOLYN

And I'd prefer that you ran your one-woman show someplace else.

LUCRETIA

You're not one of those so-called environmental persons, are you?

GWENDOLYN

I want to talk with you about the trees growing on the vacant lot.

LUCRETIA

Don't you worry about them. They'll get their due.

GWENDOLYN

It's a particular poplar tree that I'm concerned about, a tree that means an awful lot to our family...our community....If you knew how many hours I spent under that tree as a girl. Nothing romantic, you understand—just innocent fun....There used to be a swing attached to one of the branches....and I would swing, swing, swing....I used to dream I could swing my way up to the clouds....Instead, I lost my grip and swung myself clear across Maple Avenue into Mrs. Fernwood's wisteria....Old Mrs. Fernwood gave me such a talking to—but then Judge Fernwood, her husband, tucked a chocolate bar into my pocket when she wasn't looking. That's when I decided I wanted to be a judge.

LUCRETIA

I have no patience for sentimentality. You act as though this land has always been a vacant lot.

GWENDOLYN

It has been a vacant lot since I was born—and that's more than fifty years ago.

LUCRETIA

Well when *I* was growing up, it was a thimble factory.

GWENDOLYN

You grew up in our neighborhood?

LUCRETIA

Just around the corner. And one day when I was fourteen, my father won an achievement award from his company—the Greater Amalgamated Thimble and Twine Corporation—and they invited him on a tour of the factory....What you call your vacant lot used to be the site of the nation’s leading manufacturer of sewing paraphernalia.

GWENDOLYN

That explains all those pins and needles we used to find when we were kids...

LUCRETIA

I say it *used* to be the site of the nation’s leading manufacturer of sewing paraphernalia. Because one afternoon someone lit a cigar during a gas leak—and blew the entire building across the avenue.

GWENDOLYN

Oh my lord!

LUCRETIA

That happened to be the day of my father’s tour.

GWENDOLYN

I’m sorry.

LUCRETIA

Don’t be sorry. It wasn’t your fault. It was the fault of the Greater Amalgamated Thimble and Twine Corporation...The other families all reached a financial settlement with the company. I insisted that my mother sue the Greater Amalgamated Thimble and Twine Corporation for their very last strand of thread....We won everything. Even the crater where the building once stood.

GWENDOLYN

I had no idea.

LUCRETIA

It’s a memorial tree. If you look closely, there’s a plaque at the base. The plaque reads: “Just sew you’ll remember.” Sew. S-E-W.

GWENDOLYN

And now you want to tear it down?

LUCRETIA

I let the tree stand during my mother's lifetime. To her, it was important. But she died last month at the age of one hundred six. And now I ask myself: What do I need with a poplar tree?

GWENDOLYN

But you can't do this. I know this may sound a bit strange, but my daughter is in love with that tree, Mrs. Vandervelt.

LUCRETIA

Symbolically?

GWENDOLYN

No, actually. She has real romantic feelings for the tree....She feels about the tree the way you feel about money....

LUCRETIA

(Genuinely moved for a moment.)

The way I feel about money....That's rough....But no matter. Progress and misery are preferable to happiness and stagnation.

GWENDOLYN

Please be reasonable, Mrs. Vandervelt. You can't just show up like this after all these years and start chopping down trees....

LUCRETIA

Oh, but I can, Mrs. Gage. First come, first serve. That's the law of real property. You're a judge—you're supposed to know these things.

GWENDOLYN

Maybe we could raise funds....Buy the land off you....

LUCRETIA

It's not for sale.

GWENDOLYN

You're going to break my daughter's heart, Mrs. Vandervelt. Have you no compassion? You understand what it's like to lose someone you love at a young age....

LUCRETIA

I have a substantial reserve of compassion, Mrs. Gage. That's because I make a point of never drawing from it....Which reminds me, I believe I saw your daughter the other morning. Hugging my tree.

GWENDOLYN

That's possible. She does that a lot.

LUCRETIA

Well, I expect you to remove her at once. I can't have children gallivanting about on my property....She's liable to fall into the quarry....Or get blown to kingdom come. My rule is blast first, look later. It serves me well.

GWENDOLYN

I'll talk to Laurel this evening.

LUCRETIA

You'll talk to her *this afternoon*. If she's still there this evening, I might have to bring on a drought.

(Lucretia exits, followed by Fairmont. Gwendolyn returns to the brownstone.)