

The community had been quiet and crime free until women were given the freedom their men had fought for...

The Mystique Woven in Our Land ***excerpt- Chapters 5 and 6***

Chapter 5

The swing creaked gently in the moonlight.

The girl in the Weaving Mistress robe appeared to be asleep as the moving bench swayed lightly.

Two robed women stood holding each other as they watched the swing.

Another robed woman also stood watching and debating what to do.

Mistress Superior. The responsibility fell on her.

"When I got here I thought she was asleep. Then I shook her."

The swinging girl was dead.

"I thought surely she is out on this pleasant night, waiting for a friend, passing time. She's fallen asleep."

"And you are sure that is not the case. A deep sleep. Done with herbs perhaps?" asked the senior woman.

"Reach and touch her."

A reaction of horrific recoil put the swing in motion.

After that moment of shock, the ranking mistress sprang into action abruptly. She grasped the dead woman by the shoulders and managed to pull her off swing and down the porch steps.

"Help me, she must not be found here. We must get her hidden before any others get here. And much more has to be done."

Between the three of them, they were able to get the body across the back of a horse. One had no choice but to mount with the corpse and hold her tight as the other led them away.

One remained behind to clean up and make sure no one else at the residence awoke and gave any type of alarm.

The two women on horseback with their burden were soon deep within the woods adjacent to the fort.

They scraped the earth with their hands until there was a shallow indentation in the earth, weeping as they laid the body in a quickly dug shallow grave.

They raked dirt, branches and small stones to form a coverlet.

One woman, working at the corpse's feet, appeared to finish first. But the Mistress Superior rose.

"Her face is uncovered," the kneeling woman protested.

"We must leave her thus," said the other, shaking the dirt off her clothing.

"We must leave her face uncovered?"

It was dark but there was moonlight. The two women could see each other's eyes.

The Mistress Superior pulled a long knife from her pocket.

"We must leave her face uncovered," she said. "So the coyotes tear at that part of her first."

Without waiting for the others reply, she quickly knelt back down and cut open the cheeks of the dead woman. Then she raked the knife over her forehead.

The other turned away, weeping again.

"We cannot have it known who she was," said the Mistress Superior. "She is buried too shallow not to be found. The animals will tear her face beyond recognition. It will be their service to us."

"We must then say the chant for her," the other said.

"Not aloud."

"Aloud!"

"This is not that far from where there are occupied cabins."

"Aloud! Or I will make enough noise to rouse them."

"Okay. Calm down. We will say the chant," said the Mistress Superior, already planning ahead. "What we need is a diversion in the next few days. I have a couple of ideas. Oh, don't look at me like that. I know you think I am cold hearted."

"No," the other whimpered. "But I loved her!"

"So did I." The more practical woman pulled the other up from her knees. She grabbed her by the waist and kissed her.

"Now don't cry. Come, stand on that side of her and I will stand on this side." They reached their hands across the half-buried corpse. "Now just the short version. Speak softly."

Then quietly, for they were cautious even when they knew they could not be overheard, when they were completely alone,

They began to slowly chant.

A funeral chant, slow and mournful.

Chapter 6

Major Spears Plate was astounded to see a woman robed in a rather provocative shade of red coming into his office, which was adjacent to the soldiers' barracks on the opposite side of the courtyard from General Leshoward's home.

"Pardon me, Mistress," he said, rising. "I don't think we've met."

The Mistress in red turned, eyebrows raised. "I was looking for General Leshoward. Some girl at his home sent me over here, saying he had not yet returned from a trip."

"That's right. The general isn't here. He's away right now and I'm in charge."

"I realize we haven't been introduced. Would you speak with me anyway? I am a widow. My husband served with the general in the war. He was killed at the height of the great victory."

"My sympathies," he said, with all the sincerity he could summon. He flushed and turned aside, his back partially to her.

Her expressive eyes surveyed him with suspicion.

"Who might you be? Please don't worry about formal introductions. I come from a Philadelphia area community. Proprieties are easily dispensed with now that the war is

over."

He said, "My name is Major Plate. I am second-in-command here at the Fort. What can I do for you?"

He still did not turn to face her.

"Major Plate? I am Ruthanne Webber. Well then, there should be no problem. You heard I was coming, I'm sure."

"No, ma'am," he said.

Ruthanne was silent for a moment. Then she said. "You have never heard my name spoken by the general?"

"No, ma'am," he said, wondering silently why she expected him to know her name. "I do apologize."

She turned away from him in a dismissive fashion. "The command at the fort handles law and order for the colony?"

"Yes, ma'am. Exactly what part of the colony are you concerned with?"

"I'm visiting friends. The Meltons. I'm here to see you because I'm concerned about their daughter, Hortense," said Ruthanne.

"Concerned? In what way?" asked Major Plate.

She cocked her head to one side. "I arrived at their home in the middle of the night last night to find myself greeted only by the elderly couple. While the Meltons tell me not to be troubled, I have to follow my conscience. I think she's missing."

Major Plate spun around, facing her. "Missing? What do her parents say?"

"They would like for me to believe she has gone to Philadelphia to visit friends. It makes no sense. She was expecting me to arrive to become her companion. Her parents are having a problem accepting the idea that something could've happened to her. So I rode back to consult with the general. I had been by the fort last night when I dropped the general's niece at his home. She was my traveling companion."

"I see. I didn't know anything about the general's niece coming."

"It was a surprise, I think. No matter about her. She is here safe and sound. It is my friend, Hortense Melton, I'm worried about. Can you possibly send someone back up the trail to inquire?"

"Certainly. We have couriers that leave almost every day and we receive communications at least five times a week. The postal system is just getting started in this part of the country but it's doing a good job. Can I offer you some tea?"

"Tea? I'm afraid I'll have to say no. I'm afraid I'm going to have to go. Those formalities will have to wait till later."

She gave him a sly look that he did not know what to make of.

He was disconcerted, looking away again.

"May I call on you as soon as I find out any information about your friend?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "I will be looking forward to hearing from you soon under any circumstances. By the way, not that she is a friend of mine but I have heard there is an herbalist living in the woods. Do you know anything about that? I have heard she is called Abigail Fichton?"

"I believe there is such a person. I have not met her personally. Fortunately, I enjoy excellent health. We don't have a doctor in Fort Leverage yet. I understand she does a good trade," said Major Plate.

"Mrs. Melton told me she is a witch."

"Nonsense. Benign herbalism is permitted in the colony."

"Then rumors are true about a colony free from any type of religious persecution."

"Although I don't think Abigail Fichton calls herself a witch."

"I was just curious that's all. Thinking perhaps she could help me find Hortense. I do have a miniature of her. I was going to take it to her but I will leave it with you instead."

"You have a miniature of your friend?"

Ruthanne hesitated. "I will leave it with you instead."

She handed Major Plate a small round portrait of a young blonde girl. The fair girl was contrasted against the background of the American flag and wore dark blue clothing with a rather strange hat.

Still, her face was clearly drawn.

"I will do everything I can to find your friend. You won't need a witch."

Their eyes connected strongly as he let her out the door. He followed to her horse and helped her mount. She looked down at him for several seconds before riding towards the gates.

Chapter 7

"You are telling me you lost her? She tricked you with a double?"

General Leshoward had returned late from his short trip and gone straight to Major Plate's office for a report.

The small separate building that Major Plate used as an office also functioned as his quarters.

General Leshoward respected the major's duty free hours and did not bother him there at those times unless it was important.

The general considered Major Plate's surveillance of Abigail Fichton important.

The junior officer had no idea why.

"Obviously. Or maybe there were three of them. I'm not sure I was ever following the real Abigail Fichton at all. Remember, I have never seen this woman up close or in daylight. And they are now wearing those veils," Major Plate said defensively.

"Veils? What kind of veils? That is something new."

"Veils actually covering parts of their face so they won't be recognized. Similar to the Catholic nuns but not quite the same. They're not all wearing them. The story I was told is- there's been some harassment of some of the women who have joined this group so some of the later members have decided to try to be anonymous."

"How long is that been going on? I gave them latitude but some things are going too far. I guess I can always say it is to promote the gala, but if there are more complaints..."

"Am I the only one that sees this Weaving Mistress group as a perfect cover for theft or smuggling?" asked Major Plate.

"The group is gaining more and more acceptance in the colony. Congressman Craig's wife has joined," Leshoward said.

"She is not a widow."

"From what the congressman told me, they are now accepting surrogates."

"Surrogates?" asked Major Plate.

"It's a trial program. Mrs. Craig has taken on the position of a proxy worker. Everything she earns is going to an unfortunate widow who is physically unable to do any work. If it works, think of the benefit to impoverished invalids. Society ladies could step in, have a social outlet, and do good for their fellow human beings."

"If that is true, I could reconsider my opinion of the group."

"Henri Mannstein is making an open accusation of witchcraft," General Leshoward said worriedly.

"He's worried about witches? Where does he think he is? Salem in the 1600s?" Major Plate asked, finding it hard to take the rumors seriously.

"He's just trying to cause trouble. Yet he knows if we didn't let these women form a group and do their work, we would also have to deny the Catholic nuns their rights to live together and do their work."

"At least the Mistresses do not live separately from their families of society," Major Plate allowed.

"It is just going to take time for them to be accepted. And all this talk of witches is not helping. That is why I want you to keep an eye on Abigail Fichton. She doesn't hide behind any veil. She is an open target for those with the phobias of witches."

"It is the way she lives," the major said, wondering exactly what the word phobia meant but not wanting to seem ignorant by asking.

"There is more talk about Abigail Fichton living in the woods doing miracles with her herbs and potions than about any activities associated with the Weaving Mistresses," Leshoward said.

"What does Mannstein say about Abigail Fichton?"

"Mannstein claims that she is one of the Mistresses. He claims she is practicing religious witchcraft and he's threatening to bring charges against her," Leshoward said.