

# DISCARDED by Nancy M. Bell

## EXCERPT

The group halted by the river and milled around, held back by the ring of men accompanying the Hudson Bay officers. Guillaume elbowed his way to the front, heedless of the feet he trod on. Reaching the wall of onlookers, he gripped the nearest man's arm.

"What have they found? Do you know who it is?" He peered over the shorter man's shoulder. A bit of ragged shawl fluttered in the brisk breeze. "Marie-Anne!" Guillaume shoved the man aside and shook off the next man who sought to hold him back. Pushing his way through, he approached the small group of Hudson's Bay officers surrounding the bodies.

"Hold, you!" One of the clerks moved to block his vision. "Get back where you belong!"

"Lord Ashmore! I demand to speak with Lord Ashmore!" Guillaume stood his ground.

"Yes, what is it?" Miles Ashmore turned from his perusal of the scene at his feet. "Ah, Mister Mousseau, what brings you here? This isn't a place for you."

"Don't you recognize her?" Guillaume shook off the man still attempting to hold him back and knelt by the figures on the cold earth. He pushed back the hank of hair that had come unbound and covered the nearest victim's face. It was Marie-Anne, he was sure of it because of the colourful shawls, though her features were beaten beyond recognition. He glared up at Ashmore. "This is my sister, Marie-Anne." He rose and turned the other woman over. "And this is also my sister, Marguerite." He surged to his feet, taking two long strides closer to the Englishman. "How did this happen? They came to you for help, how did they end up like this?"

"I'm sure I don't know." Lord Ashmore held up his hands, silently signalling the men to step back for the moment. "I gave them a script to take to Doctor Schultz in order to obtain medicine for the boy. Other than that I have no idea where your women went afterward. It really is no concern of mine."

"No concern of yours?" Guillaume's voice dropped dangerously low. "Two women are murdered, one of them is the mother of your sons, and you claim it is no concern of yours?"

He ignored the surprised whispers from the enlisted men behind him, gaze pinning the man in his place. "Murders of innocent women are of no concern to you?" he repeated.

"I might quibble with the term innocent," Ashmore began before quickly changing tack when Guillaume's expression darkened, "but be that as it may, I think this is something that your community should handle. It's not really a matter for me to be concerned with." He stepped back, in effect washing his hands of the situation.

J.J. Hargreaves pushed his way through the line of soldiers. "What do we have here? Oh dear." He stopped at the sight of the battered women laying on the banks of the Red River. Hargreaves came to stand beside Mousseau. "Do you know who they are?" He pulled a note pad and graphite stick out of his pockets.

"Oui, my sisters," he said shortly.

“How did they come to be here so early in the morning, and in such condition?”

Hargreaves licked the end of his pencil.

“I do not know. They came into the village late last night to ask for medicine for my nephew. They went to the lord’s house and got a script for Doctor Schultz and somehow ended up here.” He glared at Ashmore. “I came looking for them when I arrived home this morning and was informed they hadn’t returned last night.”

“Really?” Hargreaves scribbled on his note pad. “Did they ever make it to the apothecary’s?”

“That I do not know, yet. I had only started my search when I heard the commotion and came here with no idea of what I would find. Certainly, not this.” He nodded at his sisters’ bodies.

“Of course.” Hargreaves nodded, turning to speak to Lord Ashmore. “When did you become aware something was wrong?”

“At the same time as everybody else.” The man’s reply was terse.

“Who found the bodies, who reported it to you?” Hargreaves persisted.

Guillaume refused to be moved, intent on hearing Ashmore’s response.

“A fur trader on his way to the Hudson’s Bay store.” He glanced at Guillaume. “One of your people.”

“Who was it?” Mousseau demanded.

“How am I to know that? It was a fur trader, dirty and stinking. How am I to tell one from the other of you?”

Guillaume clenched his jaw. He would find out, someone at the store would know. The clerks loved gossip and surely this would be top of their minds this morning. First, he needed to take care of his sisters. “I need to find someone to help me move my sisters. Are you willing to have a few of your men stay here until I return with a cart and some help.”

Ashmore’s expression was undecided, glancing at the nearest men who were muttering among themselves, hunched against the cold.

“She is the mother of your sons, surely you can give her that much respect,” Guillaume insisted.

The Englishman nodded, signalling for three of the Company men to stay with the bodies and ordering the others to move the group of onlookers away.

“Let no one touch them,” Guillaume ordered the three men who met his words with blank faces. “No one.”

“See that no one interferes with anything,” Ashmore directed the men before marching off with the others trailing behind.