

Chapter 1: The Contract

(1612)

“Are you interested in carpentry?” Michael Delaval asked fifteen-year-old Nicolas Pelletier as they sat at the table in the house where Nicolas lived with his family.

“Yes,” Nicolas answered. “I used to help my Papa build and repair lots of things around our farm, but I’d like to learn more.”

“I can teach you,” Michael told him, looking him directly in the eye so Nicolas would know he was serious, “but it won’t be easy. I’m going to demand a lot from you.”

“Are you sure this is what you want to do?” Simone interrupted and asked her son. “I believe it’s an opportunity that you may never get again, but I’m not forcing you to go. You know you’ll have to leave home if you agree.”

“I know Maman,” Nicholas replied. “You know I’ve always liked building things. Do you think Papa would be disappointed that I don’t want to take over the farm?”

“No,” Simone reassured him. “Your Papa would have wanted you to go do something with your life that will make you happy.”

“Would you rather have me stay?” he asked her. “With Papa gone there is so much to do around here.”

“Truthfully Nicolas, I hate to see you go. You’re my oldest son, but I’d much rather see you in an apprenticeship than being a farmer and hating it,” Simone truthfully answered.

“Your Papa knew you didn’t want to be a farmer. He’d be happy with your decision, whatever you decide to do.”

“I want to be a carpenter,” Nicolas told her. “I know as Papa’s oldest son the farm should become mine, but I don’t want to be a farmer if there’s another choice. I’m sure Eloi or Pierre will be glad to take it over when they’re older.”

“I’m sure they will son,” Simone answered, nodding approvingly at her son’s decision. Times had been hard in the village of Gallardon for so many years, between the religious wars that had finally ended, disease and too many failed crops, she would be thankful to see one of her children have a chance at a better life away from the farm. She then turned back to Michel and said, “then it’s decided Mr. Delaval, explain this contract to me and my son.”

“As you already know I am a master carpenter. The contract will state that Nicolas will be signed over into an apprenticeship with me for the next four years. During that time he will live with me, travel with me, and I will be totally responsible for him. I will agree to teach him everything I know. I will feed him and clothe him; I’ll make sure he has a warm place to sleep at night and good boots upon his feet. In return, he will not be allowed to take any jobs with anyone else, and he will work his four years for no pay what so ever,” Michael explained to Nicolas and his mother.

“Would he be able to come home and visit at times?” Simone asked. “That will be important to his brothers; they’ve always looked up to him.”

“I travel a lot, and he’ll need to go with me,” Michael explained to Simone, then he smiled and added, “but my home is less than a day’s travel away. When we’re in the area, I’m

sure I can spare him for a day or two once in awhile, to visit with you and his brothers and sisters.”

“What do you think Nicolas?” Simone asked her son one last time.

“I want to do it Maman,” Nicolas answered excitedly. “I know it’ll be difficult on the farm without me, but you can manage, right?”

“Eloi and Pierre are plenty old enough to help out more now,” Simone told her son, “we will manage without you. Philippe will be getting married in a few months. Her future husband has agreed to move to the farm and help until the boys are older. It will all work out. I would never want you to give up an opportunity like this. So what do we do next Michel?”

“I’ll get the contract drawn up. I can be back in two weeks, around March 1st, you and Nicolas will both sign, and then he can leave with me that day,” Michel said. “Although I live in Epernon, I have a few jobs in Paris that I’ve signed contracts to complete. I need to be there by the middle of March. We’ll be gone most likely till right before winter.”

“What am I allowed to take with me?” Nicolas asked.

“One trunk,” Michel answered. “Just clothes and an extra pair of boots if you have them. I only have one cart I use to travel, most of the room will be taken up by the tools I need to complete my work, so there isn’t much space left for personal items.”

“I’ll be ready,” Nicolas told him, he was excited to start learning something new.

“Carpentry is hard work Nicolas,” Michael told him, again becoming very serious, “be prepared. It will take you a long time to learn to do what I do.”

“I’ll work hard,” Nicolas said. “I promise not to let you down.”

Michel looked at him for a moment, making sure his response was genuine, then nodded before getting up from the table. “I’ll see you in two weeks then,” Michael said, shaking hands with both Simone and Nicolas before leaving the Pelletier home.

“Well?” asked Nicolas’ sister, Jeanne, as she and his other sister Philippe came back into the house, each carrying one of the youngest children. The rest had stayed out in the yard to play. Simone was grateful to her two oldest daughters who had taken the other children outside, so their mother and brother had some quiet to talk to Michel Delaval. “What did Mr. Delaval say?”

“I’m going to become a master carpenter Jeanne,” Nicolas told her excitedly, as he got up and hugged both of them. “He’ll be back in two weeks with a contract; then I’ll leave with him that day after Maman and I sign it.”

“I’m happy for you Nicolas,” his sister Philippe told him smiling. Being the oldest and having had more schooling than many of the other children, she then turned to Simone, adding, “what were the terms of the contract?”

“He will be contracted for the next four years,” her mother explained. “Mr. Delaval will provide everything he needs during that time. Although Nicolas won’t be getting paid, he will learn a valuable skill. We should be honored that he is getting this opportunity.”

“And he seemed like an honest and good man?” Philippe asked.

“Very,” her Maman replied. “He even goes to mass on Sunday’s. Nicolas will be going with him.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Jeanne said. Turning back to Nicolas she asked, “How far will you be going? Will you be allowed to visit?” Jeanne and Nicolas had always been close; they were the closest in age of all the children, they had created a tight bond as young children that had lasted till the present time. Since their Papa, Francois, had passed the year before, Simone had relied more heavily on her two oldest daughters and oldest son to keep things on the farm running smoothly.

“Yes Jeanne,” Nicolas answered. “Although Mr. Delaval said that we will be in Paris from March until close to winter, when we are back in this area I will be able to visit. Isn’t it exciting?”

“Very,” she honestly replied, happy for the opportunity her brother was being given. “What do we need to do to get you ready?”

“I can only take one trunk. Maman will you help me?” Nicolas asked, turning back to his mother.

“Of course I will,” she told him. She then asked her oldest daughter, “do you think I should buy some linen and make him some new shirts? We don’t want him showing up in Paris looking like a poor peasant farm boy.”

“Didn’t Mr. Delaval said he will take care of Nicolas’ clothing needs? I’m not even sure what a carpenter’s clothing needs are,” Philippe said, after thinking about it for a minute she added, “I think what he has now will have to be sufficient. Since Papa died, there isn’t much money to buy any new

clothing.” Simone nodded in agreement; money had been tight for the family since Francois had passed in the winter. Although she would miss her son, it was almost a relief to have one less mouth to have to worry about feeding every day.

The next two weeks were a flurry of activity in the Pelletier home. Simone worked on sewing any tears in clothes, and packing both warm and cool clothing for Nicolas to get through the next few months. Although her boy was going away, she was excited for the grand opportunity he was being given. Not everyone was granted an apprenticeship, especially one that could lead to such a good living.

“Welcome Mr. Delaval,” Simone welcomed the man back two weeks later. “Nicolas is ready as soon as the contract is signed.”

“Please, just call me Michel. Whenever you and Nicolas are ready, I have it here with me. Do you read ma’am?” Michel Delaval asked her.

“I’m sorry to say that’s a skill I never learned,” Simone answered. “My oldest daughter reads quite well though. Do I need to get her?”

“There’s no need unless you feel you would like her to look over what has been written. Nicolas will have to learn while he is with me,” Michel answered. “A good master carpenter needs to be able to read and write contracts before signing them. It’s easy to be taken advantage of if you don’t know how to read what you’re putting your signature on.”

“I’d love to learn to read and write better,” Nicolas told him. “I’ve learned some at the church school, but with the work on the farm there was always something needing to be done to

keep me home, when my Papa died I had to stop going to be here to do even more of the work.”

“Good, then you have the basics,” Michel said. “That’s something we can work on in the evenings. Would you like me to read this to you?”

“Please,” Simone answered, and Nicolas nodded. Michel unrolled the document, laying it on the table where both he and Nicolas could see it and began reading;

“On 1 March, Nicolas Pelletier will during the next four years be apprentice and student of master carpenter Michel Delaval. Michel Delaval agrees to show, teach and instruct Nicolas in the art of carpentry, supply his drink and food, keep him warm and clean and provide him with clothes, linens, and shoes, all at his own expense. In return for this, Nicolas Pelletier will be obliged to serve the said Delaval and to perform all honest and licit things that he be commanded to do, without elsewhere serving and without paying him anything.”

“Do you have any questions?” Michel asked them when he had finished.

Both Nicolas and Simone shook their heads as Simone answered, “it’s exactly as you explained when you were here last time.”

“If we are all in agreement, then it just needs our signatures,” Michel told them.

“Where do I sign?” Nicolas asked.

“You sign here,” Michel said pointing, he watched as Nicolas signed his name. “Simone you sign here,” he said to Nicolas’ mother, who was only able to mark the document with her ‘X’. “Now I just need to sign,” Michel finished, signing his

own name at the bottom, Nicolas watched as he then drew a symbol underneath his signature.

“What is that?” Nicolas asked curiously.

“That’s a broadax,” Michel told him. “It’s one of the tools that you’ll be learning to use; many carpenters use it as a symbol of their profession. We are done with this then,” Michel said as he began to roll the contract back up.

“That’s all that needs to be done?” Nicolas asked.

“That’s all,” Michel told him. “I take it that’s your trunk by the door?” he asked, and Nicolas nodded. “Why don’t you take a few minutes and say your goodbyes, then load it on the back of the cart and we’ll be on our way to Paris.” Michel shook hands with Simone, then nodded at Philippe who had entered the room and stood silently watching, “I’ll take care of him,” he told them both before exiting the small home.

“You be careful,” his mother told Nicolas as she hugged him good-bye. “Do what you’re told, and learn everything you can.”

“I will Maman,” he said hugging her back. “I’ll be back before winter to visit if I can.”

“I’ll miss you, son,” his mother told him, hugging him one last time. “We’ll be fine here though, so don’t worry about us. I’m very proud of you.”

“Thank you Maman,” Nicolas said. “I’ll miss you too.” Nicolas then said a quick goodbye to his sisters before stopping in front of his younger brothers, Eloi and Pierre, telling them, “you make sure you help Maman and Philippe, they’re going to need you while I’m gone.”

“We will,” said nine-year-old Pierre. “Will you show me how to be a carpenter after you learn?”

“One day I’ll teach you everything I know,” Nicolas told him, “but first I have to learn it all myself.” With those final words, Nicolas picked up his trunk and hauled it out to the cart that Michel Delaval was now sitting in, waiting for Nicolas to join him. He loaded it onto the back before climbing up into the seat next to his new teacher.

“Ready?” Michel asked him.

Nicolas looked around one last time at the home he had lived in all his life. He loved Gallardon, the way the village sat on top of a hill made it possible to see into the valleys below no matter where you were on their small farm. The land was beginning to come alive again after the winter; he could see various shades of greens in the valley just on the other side of the small house where his family had always lived. He took a deep breath and nodded at Michel before turning to give one last wave to his family. Michel flicked the reins, and the ox began moving forward, heading towards Paris, and hopefully, a brighter future.