

Chapter 1: The Hotel Dieu

(1659)

‘I can’t believe I am finally here,’ thought Rene’ Cuillerier as he stepped onto solid ground for the first time in two months. He looked around at the land he would now call home. It was incredible. There were trees everywhere covering beautiful rolling hills. On top of one of those hills, towards the back of the settlement, he could see a large church. The sight of the church made him smile since Rene’ never missed mass on Sunday. There were farms lined up on both sides of the settlement, outside the stockade fence, which encircled the whole village. Each farm backed up to the St. Lawrence River, which of course, they would need the water from, to keep the crops alive and growing. He could even see what looked like bigger mountains off in the distance. It was nothing like the land back in France where he had lived his entire life until now.

“Well Rene’ what do you think?” Jeanne Mance asked as she walked up behind him. “This is the very first settlement the French built here, as I told you on the ship, it’s called Quebec. We’ll only stay here for a night, maybe two if I can’t secure the transport and additional men we’ll need before we head to Montreal.”

“I think it’s some of the most beautiful lands I’ve ever seen,” he answered. “Is Montreal like this?”

“The landscape, yes. The settlement is much smaller though. We’ve had a very rough time with the Iroquois indians in this entire area. Many of the settlers that have lived in Montreal and Quebec have either left to go back to France or were killed in the many attacks by the Iroquois we’ve had over

the years since the settlement began,” she told him. “Quebec is now much safer because of its size and the number of people who live here. Montreal is the furthest settlement to the west, the people living there have had to adjust to constant attacks for many years. The settlement is just beginning to grow again, it’s safer than it used to be, but there’s still trouble.”

“You told me about the Iroquois on the ship,” he said. Then he grinned at her and added, “I know, you said that they aren’t as bad a threat as they used to be, but I must still be careful. I was listening.”

“Just remember, never leave the settlement alone. If you leave with a group, you should always have your musket or pistol within reach. Even if you just go outside the hospital stockade,” she explained.

“I’ll remember,” he answered.

“Ok everyone,” Jeanne spoke loudly to the group as the last load of passengers was brought from the ship to the shore, they were all now assembled on the bank of the River. “Tonight we’ll stay in Quebec. Tomorrow or the next day we’ll head to Montreal. Please do not leave the settlement for any reason. As I told you on the ship, it is not safe to do so till you know the area and the dangers around it. Once we get settled for the night, you are free to go out and walk around and go to the shops inside the stockade walls.”

Eleven men and one woman had left France together under contract to the Hotel Dieu. Two of the men had died during the voyage out on the ocean, they had been given last rites and then were buried at sea. It most certainly was not an easy voyage. Traveling down below deck with livestock, chamber pots, and fellow passengers suffering from seasickness, made anywhere below smell worse than anything Rene had ever experienced before. Most of the passengers spent

as much time up on deck as possible, as long as the weather was good, at least the air was fresh up there. There were many others besides those in their party that had made the voyage and didn't survive. Disease ran rampant through the ship; even Jeanne had become seriously ill, she had been one of the lucky people to recover.

Rene' looked at the crowd as they listened to Jeanne and remembered how he had met her. His life had sure changed because of it. He had been living in France and wanting to come to New France for the last year. In May, the priest at his church had told him about an offer being made by a patron of the church.

"Rene'," Father Remy called to him after mass as he stood outside the church.

"Is there something I can do for your Father?" he asked the longtime Priest of his village parish.

"You've talked to me about your dream of going over to New France before. I've just found out that the church is looking to sponsor some workers if you're still interested," Father Remy told him.

"What is the offer they're making?" Rene' asked. "I can't afford the passage yet, but I am saving for it."

"The church is willing to pay your passage. They'll also give you a place to live, feed you and pay you seventy-five livres a year," Father Remy said.

"That's more than some of the people who have come back said they were paid. I was told to expect one hundred livres after three years, and I wouldn't see any of it until my three years were up," Rene said. "I wasn't sure if I wanted to

go over indentured, that's why I've been saving to pay for the passage myself. Why is the pay more?"

"You would actually be contracted for five years. You would be working for the Hotel Dieu in Montreal, which from my understanding is a small hospital being run by a woman named Jeanne Mance and the Hospitaller nuns," the priest explained.

"What exactly would I be doing over there for them?" Rene asked him.

"I'm not sure. All I know is you would need a letter of recommendation from me, which I would gladly write for you, and then they are interviewing people in LaRochelle," Father Remy answered. "You'd have to travel there if you're interested. They're interviewing now, so you would have to go soon."

"I'd like to go talk to them, Father," Rene said. "If you wouldn't mind writing the letter I can leave as soon as it's ready."

"I'll have it ready for you tomorrow morning," Father Remy answered.

That was the start of a great journey. Rene' had traveled to LaRochelle and met with a nun by the name of Judith Moreau. There he had signed his contract to work for the Hotel Dieu for the next five years. He was happy with the arrangement. The idea of serving God while working off his contract appealed to him more than working as help on a farm for someone else. Saying goodbye to his family and then the journey across the ocean had not been easy. He was grateful to have finally arrived in this new land first claimed by Jacques Cartier so many years before, and named New France.

He followed Jeanne and his fellow travelers into the settlement he now knew was called Quebec. They were taken to the church he had seen while standing by the river. It was there they would sleep that night, although first they were given the first decent meal they had seen since leaving France. Rene' took his plate of food and sat down next to his friend from the ship, Jean Cellier.

"I haven't seen or smelled anything this good in a long time," Rene' said, as he smelled the aroma coming up out of the bowl he held.

"Sure beats what we've been eating lately," Jean answered, grinning at Rene'.

"Done talking now. Eating," Rene' said to him laughing as he took a huge bite. "Mmmm, that's good."

Jean just nodded and dug into his own bowl of food. They had been given a hearty beef stew. Not only did the stew have meat but hunks of potatoes, carrots and beans. It tasted heavenly. Meat had been a rare treat for the passengers on the ship; mostly they had the broth from boiled meat with some rice or vegetables thrown in. After so many weeks at sea, the vegetables weren't so fresh anymore and did nothing to flavor their meals. Occasionally they would stop and fish for a day, then the cook on the ship would prepare whatever had been caught for their meals. Those meals were a treat for the passengers.

Rene' next took a bite of the soft piece of bread he had been given, "this is the best bread I've ever had."

Jean laughed at him, "after eating what they considered bread on the ship anything would taste good. I swear the last week I thought I was going to break a tooth on those seabiscuits."

“I know what you mean. The food was pretty lousy, but at least we made it,” Rene’ said nodding.

“I’m a baker Rene’, eating lousy bread is something I’m not used to,” Jean said to him.

The serious look on Jean’s face made Rene’ laugh once more. “Well now that we’re here, hopefully, you’ll never have to eat lousy bread again.”

After eating their meal, Rene’ and Jean decided against walking around the settlement. Their weeks of travel and sea rations had left them weaker than normal. Now with their bellies full for the first time in weeks, they retired to the room the men had been assigned to sleep in. They had all been given blankets, and they found a spot on the floor where they each made a pallet. Rene’ laid down and was asleep in minutes. Even though the floor was hard, at least it wasn’t moving as the ship did upon the waves out in the ocean.

The next day the large party of newly indentured workers headed back onto the water, to travel to Montreal. They traveled in canoes down the river, and were accompanied by some of the locals who worked in the fur trade, and had been in the settlement to drop off their furs. They were known as Coureur du Bois, and worked by trading metal and cloth goods to the Indians in exchange for the furs they brought back to Quebec.

The church had paid these Coureur du Bois to provide escort and defense against any Iroquois who may have been in the area. Since the men had been heading back out to the rivers in that direction anyway, they took the pay and had agreed to help the new settlers get to their destination. Each of the new men had been given a pistol and a musket this morning after leaving the church. The weapons had been supplied by the

French government. Every new settler received them as they were expected to help defend the settlements that would become their new home.

Most in the group had never heard of or seen a canoe before. They were curious about the design and different sizes of them and asked many questions about how they were built. Rene sat down in the middle of the one he was directed to and was handed a paddle. When he looked around, he noticed that all the men and many of the women who were seated were also given paddles. The men hired to guide them to Montreal pushed off the bank of the river, and they began their journey up the St. Lawrence River.

Rene' enjoyed the three-day journey to their destination. He was surprised at how easy the canoe was to navigate, even going upriver. He liked to listen to the men as they sang and paddled along to the rhythm of their songs. Although there wasn't much time to talk to the men that accompanied them during the day, he enjoyed talking with them around the fire at night. He asked many questions about the area he would now call home.

Tonight Rene' was sitting next to Francois. "You seem to know the area well, how long have you been in New France?" Rene' asked the man.

"Actually I was born here," Francois answered him. "My Papa and Maman came here over twenty years ago. I grew up in Quebec."

"Wow, I didn't realize some of the families had been here that long," Rene' said.

"Very few have. My father came here as a servant and eventually began working on the rivers in the fur trade, and now I do," Francois explained. "There's a lot of money to be made

if you have good relations with the native tribes along the rivers. My father learned and taught me how to speak many of the native languages. It's something I think every settler should do, although very few bother to learn. Many of the traders are now going further out and trading with tribes along the big lakes to the north and southwest of here."

"Don't you worry about the Indians attacking?" Rene' asked. "I've heard some scary stories."

"The only Indians we have trouble with are the Iroquois. They aren't exactly a tribe, more like a nation made up of many different tribes like the Mohawk, Seneca and Oneida. The rest of the tribes are friendly, they set up their villages and live along the rivers and lakes. Their tribe names are Huron, Potawatomi, and Ottawa just to name a few. Although the Iroquois have just about eliminated the Huron in this area. Those are the ones I trade with." Francois told him.

"So how do you know if the Indians are friendly or not?" Rene' asked him.

"Well, a friendly Indian you will see coming towards you, and they will usually wave as they approach. Maybe call out a greeting," Francois said. He then smiled and added, "the Iroquois will hide and ambush your group. You won't even know they are there until they're ready to begin their attack. If you see an Indian running towards you with a club or tomahawk raised, shoot him, odds are he isn't friendly."

"I don't want to kill anyone," Rene answered him, shocked that Francois would joke about killing another person.

"You shoot him, or he will kill you. I know what choice I'll make," Francois said becoming more serious.

With those final words, Rene' sat back quietly and thought about this new land he would now be living in. He wasn't sure if he could take the life of another man. After all, it was one of God's commandments not to kill, and if there were rules that Rene' lived by, it was definitely God's commandments. He fell asleep that night by the fire, still thinking about what Francois had said to him.

The next day they arrived in Montreal and Rene' had his first look at the settlement. Just as Jeanne had told him it was smaller than Quebec, but still there seemed to be a good number of people living there. He could see a church, although it was much smaller and simpler than the one he had seen on top of the hill in Quebec. Some houses were built near and around the church. There was also the type of structures he recognized because they were built like the ones back home, he assumed they housed various businesses like the tailor, blacksmith, tinsmith, and baker. He also noticed a building not far from the river that looked different than most of the others.

"What is that building?" Rene' asked Francois who was standing next to him on shore.

"That's the new trading post. Jacques LeBer owns it. He's just getting it set up and will be moving here with his family soon to run it," Francois explained to him. "This is as far as you can go up the river before you have to portage past the rapids for the next nine miles. I can't wait till it's open, then I can drop my goods here and not have to go all the way up to Quebec any longer."

"I guess I don't fully understand what a trading post is," Rene' told him.

"This area is full of animals that are wanted for their thick fur or pelts. I'm not just talking about the animals you have back in France like deer, wolves, fox or bear. Here, there

are many water animals like beaver, muskrat, mink and otter. Their pelts are in great demand back in France because they are thick and very soft. There are also large hide animals like moose and elk. The natives in the area will trap, kill and skin the animals. Then when we, the Coureur du Bois, come to their villages, they trade us for them. We carry pots, pans, tools, knives and even guns sometimes that are made by tradesmen that work for the trading post. The Indians want these things made of metal because they have never had them before. Then we bring the furs back to the trading post where they're stored. Come spring, when the ships return, they'll be taken back across the ocean and be sold to merchants in France," Francois explained.

"Huh," Rene' said, "that's interesting. So you trade guns to the Indians?"

"We're only allowed to trade guns to those who have converted to Christianity. The Jesuit priests have spent years out living with many of the area tribes. Many have converted," Francois told him. Rene' watched as Jeanne gave directions to the rest of the group that was getting out of the canoes on shore. The personal belongings of each were unloaded and stacked on the bank of the river to be collected later that day when carts could be sent to carry them.

"She's an amazing lady," Francois said nodding towards Jeanne.

"I only met her on the ship, but yes, from what I've seen of her I'd agree," Rene' answered.

"Did you know she's one of the founders of this settlement?" Francois asked Rene', as he again nodded towards Jeanne. "She's seen both good and terrible things happen here."

“No, I didn’t know. I was told she ran the Hotel Dieu and needed some labor for the next few years to expand it. I was able to talk to her a lot on the ship; she said they were talking about building a new church and I might be needed for that also,” Rene’ told him. “I’m no mason, but I can follow directions well enough.”

“She’s an incredible lady,” Francois told him what he knew about her. “She came here with Governor Maisonneuve; they were part of a small group to travel to this area to work with the Jesuits. That group became the first French people to settle and live here. My Papa and Maman could’ve come and settled here, but it was just too dangerous at that time. She helped build this settlement and used to tend the sick and injured in a small building inside the walls. When she petitioned to have the Hotel Dieu built, she insisted that it was built outside the stockade walls. From the stories I’ve been told, that building has withstood many Iroquois attacks over the years.”

“She just told me she was a nurse and took care of both settlers and Indians that need her care. She mentioned to me on the ship that she learned nursing while taking care of some of the soldiers back home, during the Thirty Years War,” Rene’ said.

“Jeanne is much more than just a nurse in Quebec and Montreal. She’s worked hard, right alongside the rest of those who were first to settle here, they were determined to make this a good place to live. My Maman knows her and always describes her as being very pious and kind. The settlers and the Indians in the area think very highly of her,” Francois explained to him.

“I traveled with Jeanne for many weeks, and she never said anything about helping establish the settlement. Just talked about the Hotel Dieu and the church. I will agree with

you, from our conversations I've come to think of her as a wonderful and kind person. I noticed she always thinks about others before herself. Even when she became ill on the ship she wanted to be up helping the others that were sick. The nuns had to almost force her to stay abed," Rene' said.

Jean Cellier walked up as Francois and Rene' were finishing their conversation. "Are you ready Rene? Jeanne says we're heading into the settlement for the night."

"Yes. I have everything that I need," Rene' replied. He turned back to Francois. "Thank you for getting us all here safely," he said, shaking Francois' hand. "I hope we meet again."

"I will definitely see you around," Francois answered. "Once the trading post opens here, it'll be a regular stop for me."

He then turned and once again followed the group led by Jeanne Mance through the stockade fence and into the settlement.

Many of the inhabitants of Montreal stopped to look at the new arrivals. Most nodded or smiled at them as they passed. Even though most of the passengers that had arrived on the ship had stayed in Quebec, it was still a large group to travel and arrive in Montreal all at once. The settlement leaders knew Jeanne had been in France recruiting workers for the Hotel Dieu, and hopefully more settlers for Montreal. They realized long ago the city would never survive the relentless attacks from the Iroquois if the population didn't grow.

Jeanne took the group to the chapel of Notre Dame. "This is where you men will be staying tonight," she told the group. "Ladies will be going to the house next door to stay with

my friend Sister Marguerite. Tomorrow we'll get everyone into permanent quarters."

Rene' slept well that night. Even though he had been told about the frequent Iroquois attacks that occurred, he felt secure behind the walls of the chapel. In the morning Rene, Jean, the three nuns and the rest of those who had contracted with the church followed Jeanne as she led them outside of the stockade fence that surrounded the settlement. They followed a well-traveled path a short distance before crossing a bridge over a small stream, arriving at a group of buildings that had been newly completed, not far from the settlement. The buildings had their own wall that surrounded them for protection. "Welcome to the Hotel Dieu," she told them as the gates opened and they entered.

"Why is it located outside the walls of the settlement?" Jean asked. "With everything you've told us about the Iroquois, wouldn't it be safer on the inside?"

"It may be safer inside, but we help anyone in need," Jeanne explained, "including the Indians in the area. Many of our diseases have passed through the tribes, and they need care just like the French do. Plus, it's better to keep the sick away from those that are healthy inside the wall."

"So what will we all be doing here?" Rene' asked.

"You have all signed contracts. Jean will be our cook and baker. He will cook for the patients and all of us. Rene', you will be in charge of the livestock and outside chores around here," she turned to the three nuns, "you, of course, will be nurses for the sick. Marie, you will help me with whatever needs to be done, cleaning, washing, and other chores. Noel is a master stonecutter and Mason. We will be enlarging the hospital and hopefully, building a new chapel soon, so he will be in charge of that. Pierre will be in charge of expanding our

crops. The rest of you will be assigned to work with them. If you have no work to do on a given day, there will always be something to do helping Noel with the building,” Jeanne explained to them. “We work every day here except Sunday’s. On Sunday you’ll only do the chores that must be done, such as tending to the livestock, cooking, and cleaning up afterward. We still tend to the sick then also.”

Jeanne then took them on a tour around the whole walled in area. The first and biggest building they stopped at, made of stone, was the hospital. It was a well-stocked area with beds set side by side. Here’s where they cared for the sick or wounded. Attached to one side was a small chapel for patients who felt the need to pray. Jeanne then led them out the door to a small cabin type home. “This is where I live,” she told them. “If you need me for anything and you can’t find me at the hospital, I’m probably here.”

Next, she led them over to a large wooden structure towards the back corner wall. The lower floor was set up for the nuns to stay. There was room for more than the three they had with them at the moment. The upstairs was set up similarly but for the men. At the back of the building was a large chapel where the occupants could pray or hold mass daily.

The last area she took them to was the barn structure out back. Two of the walls helped make part of the fence that surrounded the entire area. There weren’t a lot of animals there, the barn held, a milk cow, two sheep, two goats, four sows and a hog, a dozen chickens, and three oxen. In a small room built off to one side were the tools that would be needed for farming, a plow, shovels, hoes, axes and much more. “The butchering has been done for the winter already; Father Vignal wasn’t sure when the ship would return and had some of the people from the settlement help with it. The number of animals is smaller than it was in the summer,” Jean told them.

“One of the first things that will need to be done is the digging of a well. As of now, we haul water from the river, but that’s not always possible with the Iroquois attacks, and during the winter months when there is a lot of snow. It gets much colder and we get more snow in Montreal than you’re used to. Rene’, I would like for you and a couple of the other men to do that job first. After you have attended to the stock of course,” Jeanne told him. “It’s already starting to get cold at night, and we need to have the well done before the snow storms start.”

“Jean you will be busy much of the time cooking and baking, but you’ll have the nuns to help you on most days. When you’re able, I would like you to help the other men with the tasks around here. You are not stuck in the kitchen. We need to work on getting a bigger chapel built for the settlement soon. Marie, I know I told you this inside, but you will be working with me,” she was speaking to Marie Paulo, the only woman in their group. She smiled at Marie and added, “I don’t expect you to work the hours I do. Truly I don’t think you will be with us for long, I’m sure the men of the settlement will be trying to court you soon, and we’ll be having a wedding.”

“Today I’d like all of you to get settled and unpacked. The work can wait until tomorrow, except for the tending of the stock,” Jeanne finished speaking. “I am so happy you all are here. Let’s get everyone settled.”