

CHAPTER 1

The Path

It all started on the terrace of a bistro overlooking the extraordinary town of Chamonix, but located far below the even more extraordinary Mont Blanc in the Alps.

In front of the two most legendary buildings in the region, the Church and the Maison des Guides (the Guides' headquarters), three Novices, Peter, Paul and Mary, anxiously awaited the arrival of their legendary guide.

For these three had decided to follow the same path as thousands who each year joined the ranks of pilgrims paying homage to the "White Lady" on the Tour of Mont Blanc. And if luck was with them, if they handled the hardships with courage and wisdom, surviving the dangers and all kinds of other nasty things, their Guide, who was said to be 'as lofty as the mountains and as deep as the crevices', would safely guide them on their maiden voyage.

It was nothing less than their destiny to transition from "Novices" to "the Initiated" (meaning "those who have survived the Tour") that was more or less in the hands of their distinguished Guide. If only they could find him.

The meeting time had passed. They nervously glanced around waiting for the overdue arrival of their Chief. A guide is nothing if not a good leader. Although the Path

ahead on the Tour du Mont-Blanc was relatively well laid out and fairly obvious, there were many ways in which they could go wrong and get stuck forever.

Gazing at the massive glaciers and deep ravines above, the Novices secretly prayed to be able to trust their Guide and their God.

After a quarter of an hour on the cold terrace between the 'Maison des Guides' (where the Guides did half their business) and 'Chez Mélodie', the nearby bistro (where they did the rest), the Novices eventually opted for the light and warmth of the latter.

Once indoors, a drink in hand, the Novices surveyed the crowd. Seeing no obvious candidate as their Guide, they plunged again into dark thoughts of what might await them on the Path.

They could imagine themselves swept away in a blizzard or drowned in a storm. Although few people actually died on the Tour, and the trails and refuges are clearly marked, everything could change quickly. Good weather could go bad, the sun could set too fast and small blisters on the feet could become gigantic. Even though minibuses now transported the injured (especially those with advanced blisters or headaches from having drunk too much at lunch), you never knew if you would make it!

The fear of failure was therefore strong among the three.

While the Novices were considering their fear of the Mont-Blanc Massif, they did not notice a thin older man among the crowd, sitting at the back of the bar. He drank a beer and looked at them with curiosity from time to time.

It was a lack of intuition on their part, as he was dressed like an aging Irish elf in the legendary chartreuse green jacket of the Guides, a pack of tobacco stuck in one pocket

and the bulge of an old-model cell phone in the other.

His glacial blue eyes, hollowed out by what seemed to be centuries of studying peaks and crevasses in search of trouble, now aroused their curiosity.

As the bar slowly emptied for the evening meal, Peter, the First Novice, noticed the man's well-worn jacket, and timidly approached :

– Excuse me, sir, are you wearing a Guide's jacket ?

– You're very observant. Always a good sign.

– Thank you. We're looking for our Guide. He was supposed to meet us here, but he seems to be late.

– Did they give you a description ?

Mary, the Second Novice, always the most courteous and helpful of the three, chimed in :

– Yes, they said he was an older, very experienced Guide with piercing blue eyes and wild blonde hair streaked with gray, a Mr. Jean-Lou Payot.

– Hmm. To be a good Guide, you have to be on time, at least for the clients... And you haven't seen him ?

Paul, the Third Novice and the cockiest, intervened :

– That's what we were told. But it's late and he's late. We're not sure what to do.

– Have you asked around ? Maybe the bartender knows him ?

Peter mused :

– Good idea. Thank you, sir.

Peter went up to the bartender who was wiping glasses behind the counter :

– Excuse us, sir, did you happen to see a Guide named Jean-Lou Payot this evening ? We've been waiting for a while.

The bartender glanced around, and shrugged :

– Do you mean Jean-Lou Ravanel ? Or perhaps Jean-Lou Couttet ?

– Beg your pardon, but I think they said Payot.

– Well, yes, I think I saw the Guide in question.

– Ah. Could you tell us where he might be ?

– Well, I think he is probably wondering about his new Novices and what the future holds for them on the Tour of Mont Blanc.

Mary asked :

– How could he know that if he has never seen us ?

– I think he has surely already seen enough to know...

Paul interrupted :

– Is there a way you could call him ?

– I think so.

The bartender turned to the end of the bar and called out :

– Jean-Lou, there are some Novices here who would love to meet you.

The elderly man in green replied :

– Oh yeah ? Can you send them to me ?

The Three Novices hastened over to their Guide.

Peter shook his hand :

– Good evening, Mr. Guide, we are happy to meet you !

Mary followed suit :

– We are looking forward to a wonderful tour with you !

The Guide replied graciously to the Novices :

– Thank you, that is also my wish.

Paul looked at him skeptically :

– But why didn't you tell us it was you ?

The Guide returned his gaze :

– Because I didn't hear you ask.

Peter replied politely :

– Oh. Sorry !

Paul studied the guide from head to toe and asked :

– Are most Guides as small as you ?

The Guide in turn studied Paul and said in a measured voice :

– It is a funny phenomenon with Guides : experience makes us appear smaller, provided that it also happens as we age.

The Three Novices examined him head to toe, pondering his remark.

Paul was skeptical :

– So you were once a real giant ?

The Guide nodded :

– But I still am a giant. In a way...

Mary smiled :

– Brilliant answer !

The Guide added :

– The light blinds us, but also the sun, if we don't wear good sunglasses !

Peter looked at him, speechless. He gushed :

– So smart !

The Guide nodded :

– Precisely.

Mary exclaimed :

– Tell us how you became a Guide !

Paul interrupted :

– Just tell us the most important things we'll need to know.

The Guide sighed and emptied his glass without saying a word. The Novices looked at each other a little confused, then Peter motioned for the others to be silent

and addressed him with a little more respect :

– Dear Guide, tell us about our ‘Path’.

The Guide came to life again, drawing a well-worn map from his pocket. He nodded toward a nearby table. As they sat down, he spread it out before them :

– This is the map of our Path. If we can do all of this, you will no longer be what we call ‘Novices’, but true ‘Initiates’.

The Novices gazed at the Path in awe as the Guide continued :

– Every day, I will give you a piece of advice. Tonight, your First Tip : *Do not believe everything that is promised to you.*

The Novices looked at him doubtfully. The Guide warned :

– And I ask you to do the same with my stories. It is said that a Guide leads many lives hoping he will have others to lead. That is true. Even if he forgets which Path he’s on from time to time.

The Guide paused, lost in thought, then added :

– I don’t have any extraordinary stories to tell you. The Path can be a hard one or not. I have sometimes arrived in the places I had planned. But, I have also found myself in places I could have never imagined.

The Novice glanced at each other uncertainly.

– Even so, I managed to hang on to my guitar, to walk in circles without being sent in circles too often, and to return home to talk about it before it was too late.

He looked at their confused faces and continued :

– I know where I’m going, but it’s hard to come back once you’re there. To get to the finish, you have to start at the beginning. You have to find the thread.

As the Novices tried to make sense of his words, the Guide stood up :

– Good. Understood ? I'll see you here tomorrow at eight sharp in the morning.

The Guide quickly headed to the door, leaving the Novices seated, speechless, before the open map on the table.

Peter hastened to pick up the card to follow him :

– Mister Guide ! You forgot your map !

But the Guide raised his hand :

– Never mind. I know the Path well. But I warn you : I'm a bit of the Unknown.

And, like that, he departed into the night, leaving the door ajar. The Novices gathered their things and did the same, eyeing the map on the table as they left.

