

Chapter 1

Philip Cassidy was certain he wouldn't be late but he knew it would be a near thing. He had agreed to meet Donald on his way to Gatwick and the diversion had taken him longer than expected. All he needed was the address in France for him to pick up the package, but Donald was reluctant to have any sort of conversation about that on the phone. It was now 7 am exactly, he had his instructions, and the APH coach was close to the South Terminal drop-off point. It didn't take him long to reach the departure lounge and from that point on everything went smoothly. He felt relaxed, confident and looking forward to a few days away.

The EasyJet flight was on time, the landing good and the passage through passport control went smoothly. Even the usual problems at the car hire desk were minimal by their standards and Philip was soon being shuttled to the area where he picked up the car and then on his way – heading for France.

He turned sharp left at the first main crossroads and then filtered into the right-hand lane, moving smoothly ahead and taking the slip road to the right. He was soon on the approach to the A40 and making

towards the tunnels just ahead. He began filtering through the Swiss border control point when he saw two young women obviously thumbing a lift as he was moving slowly through the crossover sections. He thought he recognised them from his flight, but wasn't sure. "You going my way?" he called out across the passenger seat.

"Depends where you're going mate," the blonde one called back.

"Meribel," he replied.

"Yes, that's great – we're off to Annecy."

They were close by now and the blonde one had her hand on the passenger door handle. "Jump in quick then." They settled in quickly and he pulled away to keep up with the slow-moving traffic.

"Just arrived," Philip said, turning his head just a little towards the blonde one in the front with him. "Yes – the early Manchester flight – it's Tracy and Pippa by the way."

"Philip" he responded.

There was small talk and then they all fell quiet for a while. Philip had glanced across at Tracy from time to time noticing the generous swell of her breasts and the high cut hemline of the shorts she was wearing. She had nice legs he thought and her knees kept moving apart in rhythm with the movement of the car. "Another time perhaps," he thought to himself, he might have acted differently but now he was happy to keep his mind and his eyes mainly on the road ahead. He dropped them just past Annecy, by a campsite next

to the lake and they thanked him profusely. The traffic was remarkably quiet for a change and very soon he had skirted the lake and was approaching Albertville. He reached the end of the dual carriageway just before the roundabout on the outskirts of the town and then took the second exit avoiding the town centre. The traffic began to build as he approached the western end of the town and most of the traffic was coming away from the centre and heading towards Moûtiers. Philip was heading in the opposite direction to the address he had been given, a route he had followed once before. He turned back towards the town centre and then first left up a steep slope, past a children's playground and a few boarded-up shops. The area had the look and feel of decay, peeling paintwork, crumbling plaster and rubbish up and down the road. There were only a few people about, most of whom seemed to be wandering about aimlessly. It wasn't long before Philip reached his destination. He parked outside one of the few shops that seemed to be open and made his way quickly inside. The man behind the counter looked at him suspiciously. "Do you have any old cassette tapes?" Philip asked in English, repeating the words Donald had instructed.

"Probably got some out back," came the reply.

"I came in two months ago. Do you remember?"

"Of course. And we were very pleased to do business."

"I'm just collecting this time. Everything has been arranged, I'm told."

“Come through. We can talk out the back.”

The man gestured to Philip to follow him behind the counter. A young man appeared from a side door and there was a brief exchange in French between them. Philip could speak a little French but he wasn't able to understand what had been said. He assumed that the young man would be minding the shop for a while.

“Just a collection then,” the man said as soon as they were in the back room and before Philip had adjusted his eyes to the gloomy interior of a small room.

“Yes, been asked to pick up a package for a friend.”

“That would be Mr Denman, wouldn't it?”

“Yes, Denman. Have you got a package for him?”

The man did not reply at once but instead he turned and moved towards the back of the room and Philip began to follow.

“No, no. You stay there,” the man said emphatically.

Philip blinked a few times as the man disappeared into the gloom and out of the back door. Philip waited patiently and the darkness around him seemed to close in and made him shudder slightly, partly because it was cold but also because he was apprehensive. Time seemed to stand still and the oppressiveness of the room to grow in intensity with each passing second. He had agreed to collect and deliver packages from various addresses in this part of France partly because he passed this way from time to time when he went skiing but he was never happy about it. He was aware of the contents of the packages but had no idea what happened to them in France.

His thoughts were interrupted by a cheery voice coming out of the gloom. “Good morning my English friend. And how are you today?”

“I’m well enough,” Philip responded, not really wanting to prolong his stay.

As the man approached Philip recognised him from his previous visit. He was short, more than a little overweight, and balding rapidly. His eyes were large and unblinking and were framed from above by the bushiest eyebrows Philip had ever seen.

“Package for Mr Denman. And tell him always a pleasure to do business.”

Philip reached out and took hold of the package.

“And keep it safe. Don’t want it getting into the wrong hands do we?” the man said as he released his grip somewhat reluctantly.

“Don’t worry – I know the drill.”

“Ah – you English always using words that don’t seem to fit properly,” he said and the beginning of an unconvincing smile deepened the creases around his eyes just enough to be noticeable. But Philip wasn’t paying that much attention and didn’t notice. He was keen to leave as soon as possible and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other feeling nervous and swaying slightly in the process.

“Perhaps we will see you again soon. Just tell Mr Denman to keep in touch.”

Philip nodded in response “I’ll be on my way then – thanks,” he said as he walked back through the shop and out of the front door. He was pleased

to feel the fresh cold air in his nostrils and his mood lifted. It wasn't long before he had returned to his car, started the engine and was pulling away. He did a three-point turn in the road and made his way back towards the roundabout heading for Moûtiers.

The traffic on the outskirts of Albertville was light for a change and after he made one more stop to pick up his skis from the local hire shop, he made good time on the dual carriageway up and through the valley. He saw the sign for Méribel for the first time as he approached Moûtiers and he took the slip road indicated and turned sharp right at the roundabout taking care to check for oncoming traffic from his left. After Moûtiers the climb began in earnest. He took a series of left and right turns smoothly just past the garage and supermarket to his right. Then he saw a black Audi approaching fast behind him and it soon swept past even though his own speed was more than reasonable – “Must be a local, someone who knows the road well,” he thought to himself without any resentment rising within him. Most of the climb was wooded each side of the road but occasionally, mainly to his left, the road seemed to fall away into the distance and a panoramic view opened up momentarily. Vivid shades of green rose haphazardly from the valleys below, rising gently and reaching out towards the snow-capped peaks in the near and far distance. “I keep forgetting how beautiful it is here,” he thought to himself as he approached the first of the hairpin bends which swung around crazily to

his right. The next few hairpin bends were not so unexpected and soon he passed Les Allues on his right-hand side and proceeded up the mountain, sweeping first left and then right, changing down for each corner and accelerating smoothly away. He came to the tight right-hand bend he knew so well just before Méribel town. The lovely little church soon appeared on his right-hand side, but his glance was soon upwards to Mont-Sourire. He thought to himself that he would be on the slopes by early afternoon, and looked forward eagerly to the rush of cold wind through his hair and the sound of the crisp snow beneath his skis. He had already changed his watch to French time, and a quick glance showed him that he just had time to book into his hotel room and get changed.

Philip greeted the hotel receptionist in English. He knew full well that French was hardly ever spoken in the ski resort and he thought with a wry smile on his face how upset the French population must be, but that didn't worry him the slightest.

“Your reservation is for Room 289 and everything is ready for you.” The receptionist was in her late twenties, about five foot six and with a very pleasant smile. She turned to take the key from the shelf behind her and he noticed how well she fitted her tight jeans and crisp white blouse. “Is there anything else we can help you with?” the receptionist said with a smile. Philip reassured her that he had everything he needed and he was soon walking with his usual

confident strides across the reception area towards the lift which would take him up to the second floor. Philip used the key to open the door and was soon inside where he placed his small case on the bed. He took everything out, pushed hard in the corner of the base and watched as the opposite corner lifted a little. He was just able to insert a finger and lift the whole bottom section away revealing a space between the base supporting the wheels. He took the package he had collected in Albertville and put it carefully in the space next to a manilla envelope containing the excessively expensive false passport which he had placed there that morning. He had not used the passport before but he felt more comfortable knowing it was there for use in an emergency. Then he replaced the base section he had removed.

He changed quickly into his salopettes and ski top. He chose the thin blue top he had bought recently in Fat Face. It was mid-March and the afternoon sun would keep temperatures high enough to go without any other garments, but he chose a dark red fleece which he tied around his waist just to be sure. Looking at his watch once more Philip could see that the time was heading towards 1.15 pm and he needed to move quickly. With a quick glance around the room to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything he swung the door closed and he put the room key safely in the zip pocket of his salopettes. He left the hotel with a spring in his step and not a care in the world.

Philip took the chair lift to the top of Altiport for his first run just to get his ski legs going. Only a few people were waiting and he soon took his place beside a very pretty teenager as the chairlift swept them up and started the short journey to the top of the nursery slope. When they had settled, skis dangling loosely in front of them the girl turned her head towards him slightly but she didn't say anything and Philip wasn't in the mood then to make conversation.

The afternoon went by in a flash. A mixture of fairly sedate skiing interspersed with delightful refreshment breaks – hot chocolate and fresh raspberry tarts proved the perfect choice on a warm and sunny afternoon. He didn't see the girl from the ski lift again but he had kept an eye out for her, remembering that she wore a lovely combination of grey and pink which was quite distinctive. Philip looked at his watch and was surprised to see that it showed a few minutes before 4 pm. He knew from experience that he should soon make his way back. The snow was beginning to turn slushy and the crowds would soon make it difficult to negotiate some of the narrow stretches towards the lower part of the ski area. There was a short steep section just ahead and Philip took the turn and gathered speed.

He plotted his route back to Rond Point in his head and started to move onto the stages that led him in that direction. From time to time he looked up into the clear blue sky – the depth of colour seemed unreal, almost merging into black and the brightness

of the sun enhanced the whole effect. He decided to be lazy and took a taxi back to his hotel and as he sat watching the scenery slip by all he thought about was a pleasant evening ahead and how he could enjoy himself. Now the parcel had been collected and hidden safely he could relax and that's what he intended to do over the next few days; relax and just think about himself.