**47 DON’T LOOK NOW**

The holiday began normally. My cousin Alison had invited me to go with her and her husband to Provence. And when we arrived that afternoon at the charming little walled city of Avignon there was no cloud in the sky. The three of us strolled up the sunny Rue de la Republique, where we had booked an apartment.

I sang to myself as I opened the slatted shutters and was delighted to find my room overlooked a quiet square.

I unpacked my things slowly, and then joined Alison and Michael in the shady courtyard. Our host had thoughtfully left a bottle of white wine in the apartment’s fridge and it was at the perfect temperature.

“A whole week,” Alison said dreamily, lifting her glass. “And nothing to do but eat, drink and wander round the sites.”

The following morning I showered, put on a cream shift dress and brushed my hair. In the square below people enjoyed breakfast, seated in wicker chairs at little tables, parasols already up against the sun.

“Today,” I told Alison and Michael over croissants on our balcony, “I will take things easy with a stroll along the famous Bridge.”

Alison turned to Michael. “That sounds good. Shall we go, too?”

She looked pale and at the corners of her mouth and eyes I could see the faint lines of worry. Over his coffee cup, Michael’s profile had appeared sullen, but he looked up and smiled so quickly that I thought I had imagined it.

“Why not?” he said.

By the time we set off, it was hot and the streets were almost empty. At the Palace of the Popes we turned west, out of the city gate and past stalls lining the side of the path where little muslin bags of dried lavender and lavender-scented soaps were arranged to appeal to tourists.

Then round a curve in the ancient wall, the Pont d’Avignon soared into view. The bridge’s four remaining arches stretched half-way across the sparkling Rhone.

“Sur le pont d’Avignon,” sang Alison and I in unison, and broke off and laughed.

“I’ll get the tickets,” said Michael and he disappeared into the office.

“Alison,” I began.

She raised an eyebrow.

“Is everything okay? I don’t mean to pry…”

“Of course, Emma,” she said. “Let’s not waste a moment of this lovely day.” She linked her arm through mine.

“Come on,” called Michael.

A pleasant breeze blew from the river. Only a few tourists were about. Between the second and third arches, we climbed down the stone steps into the cool of the tiny chapel of St Nicholas.

A guide was here with a handful of tourists gathered round. “This lower part of the chapel dates from the second half of the twelfth century,” he said, “and originally held the body of Saint Bénézet, who was responsible for the building of the bridge.”

We moved carefully past them and onto a small platform jutting out over the Rhone. The guide’s sing-song voice floated out to us. Before long the little party in the chapel climbed back up the steps and their voices faded away. The only sound was that of the distant traffic.

“I’m going to see the chapel now it’s empty,” I said.

My back was turned for only a minute.

“Em -!”

I spun round at her scream - and saw Alison topple forwards over the railing. She seemed to fall in slow motion. I felt paralysed for long seconds. Her head bobbed above the waves; her long hair spread out like seaweed. And then she simply disappeared.

I heard myself screaming. “Aidez-moi! Aidez-moi!”

“Oh God,” said Michael, his voice breaking. “She must have leaned too far.”

The emergency services did their best, but of course it was far too late. We never saw Alison again. Michael and I stayed on for the enquiry, necessary under French law because she died in a public place. I couldn’t bear to think about what it must have been like for Alison in her last moments.

It wasn’t until I was back home in England that Alison tried to contact me. Her first attempt came as I was brushing my teeth. I heard a voice say *stand by.*

My bedroom clock speaks the time when there’s a movement in front of it. It’s my little luxury; I simply wave my hand while lying in bed and don’t need to prise open my eyes. But the familiar electronic voice wasn’t speaking the time. And the bedroom was empty. Wasn’t it? Blood pounded in my head as I lay down the toothbrush, wiped my mouth with the towel and eased open the bathroom door. I heard it again*. Stand by*. Taking a deep breath, I peered into my bedroom. No-one. I released my breath, ran across the room and jerked the plug from its socket.

But I couldn’t stop thinking about it and later that day I told a friend.

“It’s nothing to worry about,” she said. “Those clocks give a ‘stand by’ message when the battery is running low.”

I was relieved – but only for a short while. The next day when preparing dinner, out of the corner of my eye I saw flutter from the worktop to the floor a picture postcard. I turned off the hob and picked up the card. The one Alison had bought me on our walk to the bridge before she died. It showed the Pont d’Avignon under a blazing southern sun.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose. The first incident – the clock - could be explained away by the battery, but the second … There was no draught in the kitchen.

I was no longer hungry, so I covered the pan with a lid and moved into the sitting-room to read until bed time.

But I couldn’t stop picturing Alison’s body bent over the railings, her arms already flailing, screaming my name.

Why had she called me? Surely it would be more natural to call for Michael? I went to bed early that night.

Drifting into an uneasy sleep, I felt a touch on my bare arm. My eyes flew open and I stared into the dark room. My heart raced, my mouth went dry. I put out a shaking hand and switched on the bedside lamp. Of course there was no-one there.

When I was at last able to switch off the light, I was too afraid to close my eyes and I lay there in the dark, waiting.

Again felt a light touch on my arm. Goose-pimples ran along my flesh.

“Alison?” I whispered.

Another light touch on my arm.

God, what was happening?

“Alison, what do you want to tell me?”

Again, the touch.

I felt no further movement, but I don’t know how I got through that night. I pulled the duvet up to my chin, eventually drifting off with exhaustion yet constantly forcing myself awake.

By morning I was emotionally and physically drained, but I had to get out of my flat. I wandered the streets, uncertain what to do.

When I returned home, Michael was waiting on the doorstep.

“They’ve found Alison’s body.”

She had been recovered just west of Marseilles. You are lucky, the official told him. Often the drowned are never found, their flesh eaten by fish.

“This means her death certificate can be issued,” Michael said.

I looked at his handsome face and made a decision.

“Now we can bury her.”

END