

The Algorithm of Power

Part 1

The Julia Koch Story

Chapter 1

*New Shangri-La Region
Hendrix Valley
September 2307*

Shoot down a drone with a slingshot.

The idea came from the Daring Club, a bunch of young scatterbrains that meets regularly to get up to mischief.

Used to meet, that is. Not anymore.

And who had volunteered to be ‘daring’ this time?

Who else was it going to be? My sister Carol, of course. Revelling in the glory of her fine head of curly hair, her slim athletic build, she was envied by all the girls in the valley. My younger sister also revelled in her own complete lack of judgement, maturity, common sense, or any other such workaday attribute that normal, rational human beings tend to possess.

Believe me, I’m not exaggerating: at 19 my sister still behaved like a child. I can see her now, arm outstretched, frantically waving her hand and yelling: ‘Me! Me!’ Ready, as always, to prove she was the coolest and most fearless queen bitch in the Hendrix Valley.

Perhaps this is unfair of me: I don’t know for sure if she volunteered or if perhaps she was nominated. Afterwards I heard

conflicting accounts and didn't reach any firm conclusion. Either way, Carol had accepted the challenge.

'Shoot down a drone?' I repeated when she told me about the plan.

My expression must have reflected exactly what I was feeling because Carol instantly began to defend herself by attacking first, as was her way.

'If you're just going to start blaming me maybe I shouldn't have bothered saying anything. In fact, I don't know why I did. *I'm* the one who's going to shoot down the drone, not you. You couldn't do it in a million years!' Then she added, scornfully: 'You can watch me, Julia. If you want to, of course. You don't have to.'

I wondered whether this was a genuine invitation or a gesture of condescension, but I accepted anyway. After all, I was the elder sister, the pain-in-the-ass big girl of the family with a duty to keep an eye on whatever foolish antics my sibling got up to. And I felt it would be better if an adult were present to... I'm not sure exactly what difference I imagined I might make, but at the time the idea seemed sensible to me. I would come to discover, in the worst possible way, how misguided that was, and now live with the burden of knowing I was there and couldn't lift a finger to help. Spilled milk or not, the tears I have cried, and still cry, when I remember that.

The plan was simple: Carol intended to hide in the scrub and shoot down a drone when it was about to hook and carry off one of our father's hashish containers. I never had any doubt that she could do it; she could hit whatever she wanted to with a slingshot: rabbits, sparrows, even small lizards partly concealed in the grass. Compared to that, hitting a target as big as a drone would be like hitting a wall. The problem did not lie in the difficulty of the act so much as the stupidity of it. I tried hard to dissuade her.

'If you shoot down a drone, it won't take away the order and then Dad won't be paid. You're going to risk the only crop that brings us any money!'

'Don't be silly, sis, I'll shoot down the one that's going to pick up the last box. The Network will then send another to replace the faulty machine. It won't make any difference in the end. The containers will all be delivered.'

'The Network will charge you for the damage. Maybe with an added fine, I don't know! And who's going to pay that? Dad doesn't

have money to burn on your mock-heroic deeds just because you want to show off to your Daring Club friends.'

'I'm not stupid, I've thought it all out,' Carol countered. 'I'm going to wear one of those robes that Mum makes. I won't wear the clothes or the glasses that communicate with the Network. And you, if you want to watch, better do the same. That way we'll both be anonymous.'

I just mumbled for reply. I'm not sure what exactly I meant to say, but Carol interpreted it as reluctant agreement. And probably got that right.

What else could I have done? Appeal to her finer feelings? *Dad slogs all year long to support you and Mum, you should have more respect.* It wouldn't have worked. Like all selfish people, my little sister was immune to any kind of emotional blackmail.

I could have opposed her, I suppose. Could have conjured up from the hidden depths of my usually retiring personality an implacable glare, held up my hand in warning and shouted 'Don't even think about it', or 'If I hear any of this nonsense again, I'm telling Dad'. Should have done, of course.

Carol would have reacted with a chuckle, a shrug, or more than likely countered with: 'You don't boss *me* around.'

I gave up on remonstrating and chose to stay vigilant, a plan that seemed reasonable at the time. Perhaps it would have been with another Carol, but *this* Carol could not be easily controlled.

After she closed the discussion and left the room, I continued to ponder the matter, my gaze still fixed on the sofa, as if my sister had never got up and our conversation were still going on. I must have remained like that for a long time. Luckily no one saw: if Carol had noticed, or even our mum, they'd have unleashed a nasty crack, such as: 'Are you having a senior moment now you're 24?' I admit my mind wandered, straying back to the time when we were both kids and had slept in this same room. Later, Dad built a double annex and we ended up with a room each. One just for me, another just for Carol: real luxury.

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Memories of our shared past heaved and swelled within me like waves, topped with the wind-whipped foam of my present concern

for my sister. Walks, games, pillow fights with Carol... despite being five years younger than I was, she always used to win. Or maybe I let her win on purpose, I'm not sure anymore. But had I done the right thing, allowing her to carry out this crazy scheme?

I remembered the time she decided to investigate the mystery of the magic Network, that seemed to know everything. I was about 13 and she 8. We were both naked, jumping on the bed together, throwing stupid questions into the air that remained unanswered. We had realised from a young age that with no clothes on we were not connected to the Network. Carol hummed:

'I'm naked, I'm naked, the Network can't hear me... It can't hear me!'

Then I put on a T-shirt and asked:

'Network On. Are there any girls prettier than me?'

My clothes picked up these words and the reaction was swift if laconic:

'Network: Subjective question, answer unavailable.'

At age 13 the Network's vibration still left me confused, reverberating through my bones and up into my ears, where it sounded like a voice without actually being one. I would get used to that. In cities, children are connected from birth and don't have this problem, but in the middle of the countryside, traditional looms are common and kids are only connected when they start wearing store-bought clothing, made with officially approved fabrics.

Carol had heard nothing but gave a tug on my T-shirt and wanted to know the result.

'The Network said it was me, didn't it?' she said. 'It answered that *I'm* the most beautiful girl in the world!'

We began a pillow fight, jumping up and falling over on the ever more tangled cover. Carol then grabbed a piece of clothing, picked at random, and asked the Network something I couldn't hear.

'Did you get an answer?' I wanted to know.

'Of course I did. You're really dumb. Can't you see I'm holding some socks?'

What she did next was typical of her and foreshadowed personality traits that would emerge full force over the years ahead: she grabbed the socks and tucked them between her skinny childish thighs.

'Network On. I want to talk to Diego, who lives at Hilltop Farm,

and I want Julia to listen.’

What a stupid idea, I thought. Diego was a kid who lived on the smallholding next to ours, one year older than my sister, and taller, but who ran away at top speed whenever he saw her. I’m not criticising him for that – sometimes even *I* would run away from my sister. At light speed, if need be!

After a few seconds a child’s hesitant voice could be heard through the Network.

‘Hello... Is it you, Carol?’

For her the words must have been no more than a distant murmur, transmitted to her body through the small area of fabric touching her skin, but I heard clearly through the T-shirt. She didn’t reply to Diego, merely hummed an invented melody as she rocked her hips forwards and backwards while gripping the socks between her thighs.

‘My little thing is talking to Diego... My little thing is talking to Diego...’

She only shut her trap when I hit her with a pillow, causing her to topple over onto the bed.

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The sound of a door banging startled me: my sister had gone out. I breathed a sigh of relief and decided to take advantage of this moment of privacy to clarify a nagging doubt. I looked around, scouring the room, until I found what I was looking for: a pair of glasses lying on a table. They were not prescription since we all had perfect vision – their only purpose was for communicating with the Network. Personally, I always prefer to use glasses rather than clothes. The part of the frame that fits over the ear lets you hear the answers more clearly than when the vibration comes from elsewhere on the body.

‘Network On. What is the consequence for someone who shoots down a drone?’

‘Network: Causing damage to public property entails various penalties, depending on whether the act was intentional or inadvertent.’

I assumed that the destruction of a single appliance would have a good chance of being accepted as an accident.

‘Network On. What is the penalty for inadvertently shooting one down?’

In front of me appeared several images of airborne devices – projected directly onto my retina by the rims of the glasses – accompanied by a table of costs.

‘Network: In the absence of criminal intent, the account of the citizen responsible will be charged in accordance with this table. Some drone models are not listed because they are classified. In such cases, additional penalties may be incurred.’

I shrugged my shoulders in resignation and thought to myself, ‘As long as the hash isn’t ready the drones won’t come and there is still some time left... she’ll probably forget. Why make a fuss now?’

Dad was actually still busy attending to the drying and curing of the plants, but even so my argument made no sense. Although it was not ready, the hashish had already been auctioned off and sold on – to unknown buyers, inevitably, because the Network does not deign to identify them to producers. When the curing was over, all that was left to do was to turn the material into bars and pack them according to each order.

I put the glasses back on the table and went looking for Dad. I assumed he was in the warehouse and would appreciate a helping hand from his daughter. And her company, too, as this would be my last day for a while in the Hendrix Valley. The next morning I would return to the city to resume my job at the hospital. I decided not to discuss Carol’s crazy plans with anyone.

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I returned to Janis Joplin the next day. It was a testing journey, as always: 130 kilometres to be covered by the only road that existed. And what a road: narrow, bumpy and full of switchbacks, in some sections it is more track than road. At the beginning, when passing Hendrix Valley’s farms, it’s even pleasant: the traveller is presented with a verdant landscape, full of streams and meadows. And trees, lots of them. Judging by the height and diameter of their trunks, some seem to have been in existence longer than any living person.

The worst part comes later, while crossing the mountains: the arid and rocky terrain, the ravines that have to be bypassed with detours up and down the hills and valleys. Finally, when you are so tired of

being rattled around you can't take it any more, you come to a long stretch of flat land, sandwiched between the mountain ridge and the ocean. It is here, at the water's edge, that the low, terracotta-rendered houses of Janis Joplin appear.

I generally don't have a bad word to say about this city where I have always been well received, or about its atmosphere, which is relaxed and cheerful, but I do not think I will ever get used to that name. I remember being a little girl and hearing my mum saying it. 'Who is Janis Joplin?' I asked, receiving condescending smiles from the adults present. My dad took me by the arms and lifted me up until our heads were level. At the same time he rubbed his nose on mine, making me laugh with delight.

'Janis Joplin is a city, my little munchkin, not a person.'

'But it's a girly name,' I insisted, as I grabbed his ears and pulled them towards me, forcing our noses to squash against each other.

'It really does have someone's name. I'd never thought about that...'

commented my mum, on one of the rare occasions when she agreed with me.

After all those years, I still didn't know the explanation for that name, or for any of the many names, apparently once those of people, with which the villages, valleys, mountains, streams, and whatever else in the region of New Shangri-La, were blessed.

I once asked the Network:

'Network On. What is the origin of the name Janis Joplin?'

But the Network has an uncanny ability to oscillate between being very useful or totally obtuse, though its impartial tone remains always the same.

'Network: The biographies of figures prior to the fall of the Parliamentary Regime are not included in the database.'

I rejoiced, euphoric to have obtained even this tiny sliver of information.

'Network On. So there really was someone named Janis Joplin? And the city was baptised in honour of this lady?'

My show of enthusiasm was deemed unworthy of response. Apparently, the Network had exhausted everything it had to say on the subject, leaving me with curiosity largely unsatisfied. I wondered what this Janis Joplin could have done to have a whole city named after her.

Not that it had any relevance for me. After all, these were very old

stories: Parliamentarianism had fallen almost 300 years ago and, apparently, that woman had lived even before then. In school, it was taught that in the historic year of 2061, people were freed from the tyranny of elections. Society had ceased to depend on politics in favour of being managed by the Network, a fair and impartial operating system that had replaced other outdated forms of governance. Unfortunately, no information on events prior to that date was now accessible.

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After returning from the farm, I spent the next three weeks immersed in the routine of my work as a hospital nurse, with nothing to report worthy of mention here: only the usual procession of fractures, drug overdoses, children with fevers, childbirths, and every other medical emergency encountered in that building.

From time to time I would call home via the Network, catching up on family news and trying to figure out when the containers with the hashish orders would be ready. After three weeks, on just another Wednesday, a sequence of events began that would profoundly alter my life.

Dad told me that the hash bars were ready and the following Saturday he would place the containers in the clearing leading to the brook: a flat space with unimpeded access for the drones, but conveniently in the shade of some towering oaks.

‘This must be the third time you’ve asked me about the sale of the harvest,’ commented Dad. ‘You’re very interested in the subject all of a sudden.’

I played dumb.

‘Not really. It’s just that time of year, isn’t it?’

The sound of a distant commotion put me on the alert: paramedics ran to the entrance of the hospital, orders were being shouted and a gurney rolled over the linoleum-covered floor. Someone hovered between life and death and the nursing staff were working flat out. Muffled by the commotion, a voice called, ‘Where’s Julia? It’s still her shift, she can’t disappear like this.’

‘I have to hang up, Dad, they’re looking for me.’

Without waiting for a response, I uttered a hurried ‘Network On. End conversation with Dad’, and ran in the direction of the crash

team.

Dr Abboud, a tall, slim surgeon with a dark complexion and short curly hair as black as squid ink, did not allow me time to utter excuses – fortunately, because I had none to give. With a rapid stream of instructions, she directed me and my colleagues in the task of stabilising the patient, while the gurney was rushed to the medical examination area.

The man who lay on it looked pitiful: skinny, covered with bruises, with an infected ankle fracture that did not appear to be recent, his breathing little more than shallow gasps. The shaggy beard and chapped skin, burned by the sun, told a story of prolonged suffering. And that was only what could be seen by the naked eye; we'd need more time for a full diagnosis.

Following routine procedure, I contacted the Network:

'Network On. Medical emergency. I need to identify the unconscious patient lying on the stretcher next to me.'

Whenever I had asked this question before – and I did it frequently in the course of my work – an image immediately appeared, projected onto my eyes through the rims of the glasses, with the complete file of the person concerned. But this time no such image appeared: instead I received a verbal response only, short and to the point.

'Network: The citizen in question entered New Shangri-La illegally. All information is blocked. The right to carry out financial transactions is also blocked, with the exception of payment for return transportation to Integralia, his region of origin.'

I confess that I was confused: nothing in that sentence made sense. To my knowledge, it was not possible to travel illegally from one region to another because all were enveloped in an energy field that could not be crossed. There was no one who didn't know this: you learned it as soon as you went to school. Anyone who wished to change region must submit a request to the Network and follow the proper protocol. And what kind of talk was that, to say that the man had no right to make purchases? In the state he was in, it would be utterly irresponsible to send him back to his own land, and obviously, without money, he would never be able to survive long enough in New Shangri-La to recover and be fit to travel again.

A sharp voice pierced my confusion.

'Hey! You look like you're asleep... Who is he? Contact any

family members, we have to know what happened to him.’

I looked at Dr Abboud, who had asked the question while busily disinfecting the wound, and at the other figures leaning intently over the patient. I contacted the Network again.

‘Network On. Share with everyone within a three-metre radius the last information given to me.’

The message was given again, this time not just in my ears, as was confirmed by the half dozen glances that swiftly intersected, accompanied by surprised expressions. A trainee grimaced in my direction and shrugged slightly, as if to ask, ‘What does all that mean?’ But the pause lasted only a few moments, and then everyone went back to the previous hustle and bustle. Only Dr Abboud remained motionless. Static and thoughtful, she seemed suddenly oblivious to the patient. After a moment, she turned to me.

‘Julia, go to the arrivals area and find out everything you can: who brought the patient in, what they think happened to him... Everything! Go on, move, what are you waiting for?’

She was brusque in her manner but good deep down, and I respected her. I smiled at her and headed briskly for the reception area.

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In the admin office, they pointed out the man who had brought in the patient. He was about 30, of average height but built with it, thick legs and arms like pillars. His features were rough-hewn, hair short and spiky. Leaning against a wall, he shared a joint with a girl who seemed to be a lot younger than him. She was dressed in a T-shirt that exposed her belly and some shorts that looked more like panties. His voice could easily be heard: he spoke loudly, not caring if the people around him listened in.

‘It’s karma, man, no kidding. I came here to bring a cat I don’t know from Adam, because the man was bad and the Network told me he couldn’t afford an ambulance. See, I’m a cat who likes to make myself useful – I’m even willing to pay, if it will help a fellow human being. And there I found you – a girl as cute as hell, with eyes that shine like stars, waiting for the brother who accidentally cut himself on a knife. It must have been the universe at work, man, planning all this just so we could get to know each other...’

It was the most tacky and worn-out chat-up line that I had ever heard, but it seemed to be working. The girl laughed, in a titillated way, and seemed not at all disturbed by the large hand the man rested casually on her shoulder.

But who was I to criticise? That line would surely have worked with my sister. Carol was always up for the thrill of a romantic escapade, which would be considered all the more appealing if it were unexpected. It might even have worked with Jameelah, our mother, who did not shy away from regularly inviting neighbours to parties that started with music, hashish and home-distilled alcohol, and invariably ended up as orgies. Our father rarely participated: he was not a great fan of such occasions and I understood that perfectly. However, for Jameelah, his reserved character was one of the many defects she never tired of pointing out.

I broke in on the conversation, trying to be as pleasant as possible.

‘Good afternoon, my name is Julia. I’m sorry to interrupt but I’m a nurse and they told me that you brought in the patient who was just admitted. He’s in a very bad condition.’

‘It was my duty and my pleasure. Rastko Traore, nurse, an adventure-thirsty traveller on this journey we call life.’

I confess I was somewhat bewildered by that introduction and I suppose Rastko was slightly miffed I did not immediately simper and flutter my eyelashes at him, like the teenager he was clinging to. His eyebrows arched slightly, and after a couple of seconds he added:

‘Just trying to be nice, in case you didn’t notice...’

‘Sorry. I tend to be single-minded while I’m trying to gain information that could save the life of someone at death’s door.’

Drained of breath and forgetting to be diplomatic, I gave Rastko a reproachful look. His self-satisfied smile was replaced by a sullen expression.

‘I suppose you’re talking about Lionel. Yes, I’m the one who brought him in.’

‘The patient’s name is Lionel? How do you know that? The Network...’

I didn’t have time to finish. Rastko interrupted me.

‘The Network says his data is blocked, I know, but the guy had a few moments of lucidity and spoke to me.’

Without my needing to ask, Rastko described his meeting with

Lionel.

‘This was one hell of a scene... nothing like it has ever happened to me before. Some friends and I went to do a job in a small house on the beach, about ten kilometres south of the city. We’ve been at it for a week. Today we got there early in the morning, ready to slog away, and found a fishing boat stranded on the rocks. It was holed, lying on its side and taking in water. Since we had a small skiff with us, we decided to go take a peek.’

The girl made a move to walk away, uninterested in the conversation, but Rastko took her by the hand and pulled her back, enfolding her in a stealthy one-armed hug.

‘Are you thinking of going somewhere? Don’t run away, sugar, we still have a lot to talk about.’

She smiled and let herself be persuaded. I didn’t know why but the girl put me on edge, and as a matter of fact so did Rastko. On second thoughts, I could explain it: they reminded me of my sister and her friends. If Rastko were a bit younger, I’m sure he’d have been welcome at the Daring Club (even though the girl seemed to be too much of a slacker to dare anything).

What Rastko told me next was worthy of an adventure novel. Apparently there were five corpses in the wrecked ship and evidence that the original crew had been larger. Perhaps the missing people had been thrown overboard, already dead, while the survivors still had the strength to do so. The sixth body they found was still breathing. Rastko and his friends took him to the beach house, laid him on a bed and asked the Network to call an ambulance. To their surprise, they received the same response as I had done: Lionel was a pariah, a man who had crossed the border between regions by his own actions, something that showed a fundamental lack of respect for democratic process and had led to the suspension of his rights. Faced with the Network’s refusal to bear the cost of the ambulance, Rastko’s colleagues had decided to tend the man themselves.

‘We still had work on that job for another 15 days. My friends planned to feed him, wash and take care of him while we were working. We would do our part. Whether he recovered or died would all depend on the karma he’d built up over the years.’

Rastko touched his chest with one palm and looked steadily into the girl’s eyes as he concluded:

‘But I would never be able to do such a cruel thing. I bore the

expense of the ambulance *all by myself* and accompanied Lionel to this hospital... where fate brought me to you,' he declared to the girl with a broad smile.

She laughed but did not utter a word. Could she speak? I began to have my doubts.

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Rastko's revelations and the pariah status imposed on Lionel dictated his destiny. The hospital would not bear the expense of surgery, not to mention that of a stay, for someone who could not afford to pay for treatment. I tried to protest to Dr Abboud, but to no avail.

'That's not fair! Everyone is entitled to medical care.'

'Not when they're in Lionel's situation, a man who has committed a serious violation of the rules. Imagine if everyone acted like him: the system would collapse. It would be the end of freedom. We would go back to the Dark Ages, with elections, governments and parliaments.'

The last sentence sounded familiar. Dr Abboud had merely repeated what you learned at school. Everyone knows those words but I doubt if anyone can explain the meaning of 'elections', 'governments', or 'parliaments'. Not that I doubt they are bad things, but sometimes I think I would like the Network to provide more information about what the world was like before 2061.

'Maybe we could make an exception in this case. After all, we don't know what his story is,' I insisted. 'He may have had a reason for crossing the border...'

'That is possible, yes indeed. If you are willing to bear his hospital costs in the meantime, I'm sure you will be reimbursed once the Network agrees.'

Even if I were willing, I couldn't have afforded it. The remark was rhetorical, its only effect to put an end to our conversation. I lowered my gaze and asked, 'Does he have any chance of surviving?'

'Not without a miracle,' the doctor replied. 'It would surprise me greatly if he lasted more than two days, and it'll probably be even less. But he's awake now, and he can talk.'

When I had a break I decided to visit Lionel. It troubled me to think that this man was going to spend his last hours far from his family, alone in a strange land. The least I could offer him was a

friendly face.

When I approached the bed, he turned his eyes towards me, leaving me in no doubt that he was conscious. I pulled out a chair and sat down beside him. A very weak voice enquired:

‘Are you a nun, miss?’

I flashed a smile. There were no nuns in New Shangri-La, but I knew what he meant. He was referring to women who devoted their lives to religion.

‘My name is Julia. No, I’m not a nun, I’m a nurse. I work at this hospital and I came to keep you company, see how you are feeling. And I already got your name: Lionel, right?’

Tears brimmed in his eyes. It was an effort not to cry myself.

‘Thank you, miss. That is a beautiful gesture, but you won’t have to keep me company for long. I know I’m dying. God is calling and I won’t make him wait.’

‘Now, now, don’t go saying that! With good care and the nice food here at the hospital it won’t be long at all until you’re fit and ready to leave,’ I said, despising myself for the deception.

Lionel closed his eyes, as if the effort of keeping them open was too much for him, and answered in such a low voice that I had to lean over to hear him.

‘I guess you don’t know how to lie, miss, not even in a noble cause... but that only shows how kind-hearted you are. Decent people are always bad liars.’

Then there was silence for such a long time that I thought he had died. I took his hand. I didn’t know whether it was to comfort him or to check his vital signs. Lionel reacted to the touch, opened his eyes once more, turned his head in my direction. With a visible effort he began to speak again.

‘I want to ask you a big favour, miss. I don’t know you at all, but I don’t have anyone else I can ask...’

I gave the only possible answer you can give to a dying man who begs for help.

‘Go ahead, you can count on me.’

‘Don’t leave my family not knowing what happened to me. Please find a way to tell them. The Network has cancelled my rights and won’t inform anyone of my death. Tell them that my boat was caught in a storm and we couldn’t keep ourselves within the perimeter of Integralia. Then the mast broke and we were drifting for months. For

the love of God, miss, take note of what I'm going to tell you, I can ask no one else... They live in VeraIglesia, the capital of Integralia. My son is called Cosmo Apotheker Gonçalves Won and my wife is called Esther...'

His voice faded and I was afraid that Lionel didn't have the strength to complete the message. After a prolonged bout of coughing, he uttered an address.

'... 27 Carmelites Street, Floor 2, Apartment 4. You won't forget now, will you, miss?'

'Network On. Save following note: Cosmo Apotheker Gonçalves Won and Esther, residents of 27 Carmelites Street, Floor 2, Apartment 4, VeraIglesia, Integralia.'

I stroked Lionel's hand and tried to reassure him.

'It's all written down, Lionel, but it won't be necessary. You'll be better in no time and then you'll return to your family.'

It was a white lie. This man was living his last moments and I was sure he was aware of it.

Lionel ignored what I had said. Slowly, he put up his hand to the gold chain around his neck from which hung a small gold cross. With a Herculean effort, he lifted his head slightly and opened his eyes wide while he removed the cross and chain. Then he grabbed my hand with a strength I wouldn't have thought he possessed, and forced me to take the items.

'Go and visit them, miss, and give them this. Then they will know you have been with me and that you are telling the truth.'

The dying man added, with a smile:

'Look, my son would make an excellent husband for you. He's a good boy and around your age. Think about it...'

I must have flushed at the unexpected suggestion, because I felt heat flood my face, but Lionel didn't notice. Exhausted from the effort he had made, he closed his eyes, dropped his head back on the pillow and didn't speak again. After a few minutes, I put the bedside chair back in its place by the wall and walked away, taking every care not to make a noise that might wake him.

Despite being accustomed to witnessing suffering and death, I returned to work with a heavy heart, remembering Dr Abboud's diagnosis. To my great sorrow, it proved to be correct. When I went back to work at dusk the next day, there was a new patient in the bed Lionel had occupied.