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# **An Absolute Deception**

Written by Lelsey Lokko

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An  
Absolute  
Deception

Lesley Lokko



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# Prologue

*Pointe Milou, St Barts, French West Indies, 2006*

Seen from a distance, their voluminous black dresses rucked up around their hips, the local women had the profile of wading birds as they bobbed up and down on the wet sand, kicking their legs in the spray as the tide yawned endlessly in and out. They were collecting the pale, pearly pink shells to make necklaces that the foreigners who lived in the villas on the island sometimes came to buy. Far above them and unseen, a tall, silver-haired woman with the graceful bearing of a dancer walked unsteadily down the path that led to the sea, arms outstretched in a childish balancing act, as though she were preparing for flight. The long white train of her sheer cotton kaftan billowed out behind her; a few strands of hair blew across her face, momentarily obscuring sun, sand and sea.

The woman paused for a moment and turned, looking back at the hill behind her. It was nearly seven a.m. The sun had been up for an hour. Up there, perched on the top of the hill, looking out across the bay towards the emerald, hump-backed islands of *Frégate* and *Toc Vers*, her guests would slowly be stirring. In the kitchen, *Hélène*, oblivious to everything that had gone on during the night, would have already begun preparing the gorgeous buffet breakfast for which *Scheherazade*, her villa on St Barts, was renowned. An invitation to spend a Christmas or usher in the New Year with *Anneliese Zander de Saint Phalle* was something to be cherished, sought after. In the thirty-odd years she'd owned *Scheherazade*, she hadn't missed a single winter, not once. Until now. She closed her eyes briefly, then continued resolutely on her way.

At last she reached the end of the path. Her feet sank into the warm, soft sand. She lifted a hand to shade her eyes and looked out across the tough, glittering skin of the sea. The air was warm and balmy, not yet hot. Back in London, in the tall, five-storey townhouse in St John's

Wood that had been home for almost the same length of time, another damp, cold winter's night would be drawing in. She could just see Mrs Betts, her housekeeper, moving around the vast open space of the first floor where she entertained guests and friends, switching on lamps, plumping the odd pillow, checking on her collection of rare and beautiful orchids in the silver planters that Callan had given her for one birthday or another, over the years. Another winter's evening, no different this year from any other. Except this one *was* different.

She kicked off her sandals, letting her bare soles slide and burrow into the pale, silky sand. She left the sandals there – they were from her S/S 09 collection, flat, a very slight wooden stacked heel with a simple leather T-bar disappearing discreetly into the sole. She looked down at the label. *AdSP. Anneliese de Saint Phalle*. A strip of chocolate brown linen with white lettering. Helvetica font, very plain, except for the 'd', in a flowery, cursive italic. It was a nice detail. Bruno had come up with it in 1967, the year they'd launched her label together. It was a tribute to his unerring sense of style that they'd never changed it. *AdSP*. It was her trademark, her signature, her *sign*. Every so often, she changed colours – grey on white; navy blue and lime green; oatmeal and plum – but never the basic style. There was no need. *Get the basics right and the rest will follow*. She could no longer remember where she'd first heard it but the simple philosophy had served her brilliantly in almost everything she did. It had won her legions of well-dressed, supremely confident and wealthy-in-their-own-right women who followed her collections with the slavish devotion of groupies. Her clientele.

Her showroom in London was booked out months ahead of her new collections. Her private viewings, scheduled almost a year in advance, were as sought after as her invitations to Mustique. And their new line, *A+*, her much-anticipated foray into the mass market, had done better than anyone expected. For a brief, fleeting second, the corners of her mouth tugged upwards. Wasn't it only last month that she'd had to reschedule one of her regular customers to accommodate a last-minute request from the White House? She could still hear his voice. Director of Communications. The White House. On the line from Washington. A smooth voice, like polished silk, cascading water, whisky over ice. The First Lady would very much like to visit *AdSP's* London store ahead of her upcoming trip to Japan. *It would be her husband's first*, he said, smooth, unctuous. *Mrs Obama thought AdSP's latest collection would go down particularly well in Osaka, given the parallels between spare Japanese modernism and the clean structural lines of AdSP's latest collection*. He'd

obviously done his homework. In spite of herself, Anneliese was impressed. But she didn't like being rushed, and she positively hated the impromptu. She'd turned the request down. Bruno had looked at her as though she were mad. 'Are you crazy?' he'd shouted as soon as she hung up the phone.

'Crazy? No. I don't need Michelle Obama's stamp of approval.'

'This isn't about approval, *mein Schatz*. You call them back *right now* and say "yes".'

Now it was her turn to look at him as though he were mad. 'So what's it about, then?' she shot back. 'Money? Power? I don't need either. You know that.'

He'd looked at her in that maddeningly cryptic way of his, raising his eyebrows. 'It's about influence, my darling,' he said, suddenly calm. '*Much* more interesting than power. You know that better than anyone. Call them back.'

A week later, Michelle Obama flew in from Washington to see her. She could not have been more charming. They had afternoon tea together in the studio. Models were brought in, fabrics and cut discussed, measurements taken by her assistants, but it was the conversation between them that was the real surprise. Anneliese had never met anyone like her. They covered everything from the recent oil spill off Florida's coast to the Huguenot lace-makers of Lille. Sitting opposite the tall, supremely confident woman whose long legs were elegantly crossed at the knee, Anneliese's memory gave one of those violent kicks that she'd spent the past forty years suppressing. For one brief, mad moment she'd allowed herself to consider the possibility – but she stopped herself just in time.

She reached the water's edge. It curled and lapped around her bare toes, drawing her in with its slack warmth. In spite of the dark fist of pain that had closed itself around her heart, she turned around to look up at the green-fringed land, bathed in such beauty – the splendid, gently swaying giant coco-de-mer palms; the glittering light blue sky, still tinged with night; the horizontal white slash of concrete that was the roof of Scheherazade, nestled discreetly amongst the trees. Impossible to think that only a few hours earlier she'd been sitting at her dressing table, brushing the neat, silver-blonde cap of hair that was as much her trademark as her elegant, understated clothes, preparing herself for another successful New Year's Eve party at her island home. That was last night. Before.

The water was up to her knees now. She looked down and the fabric

of her kaftan swirled around her in great, looping drifts. The sand was soft and clean, as weightless as the water. Air and water were the same element; she waded further in, up to her chest, then sank further still. She drifted in the pale, turquoise transparency, a medium that required no effort, bore no resistance. She floated, turning eyelids of dancing sunlight up to the sky. A peacock-shaded sea. Far down the beach, away from the pristine strips of white sand which were reserved for the very wealthy who wintered here, the local women were picking up the last of the shells and heading back up the path to the small township where most of them lived. They were the workers on the island – the maids, cooks, gardeners and drivers whose job it was to ensure the smooth running of the palaces to which the rich and famous like her escaped.

The tide was coming in; she could feel its muscular, insistent tug swirling beneath the surface. In a few minutes she'd be out beyond the first shelf of sand to where the water ran deep and blue. Beyond that, beyond the rocky outcrop that marked the edge of the headland, the water turned black. Something caught hold of her, a sudden swirl of water that took the edge of her kaftan and pulled it downwards, pulling her with it. She did not fight; she submerged herself and was submerged in turn, water filling her eyes and nose, rushing over her ears. Two or three seconds, then she was pushed upwards, breaking free. She took in a mouthful of air but before she could properly exhale, the current took hold of her again. Down, down . . . a sideways thrust . . . back up and then just as quickly down again. A giant hand, pushing and pulling, shoving and twisting, tossing her about, a plaything . . . rag doll in her sodden white dress. She bobbed for a second on the surface and then it caught her, more roughly this time. There was a last glimpse of the island and its canopy of thick, lush trees and then the water closed in. It happened so fast that she barely had time to think. No question now of changing her mind. For the second time in her life – all sixty-four years of it – it was too late. The words came floating back up to her through the foggy mists of time and memory. *Ondeku lyuulukwa*. I will miss you. The language she'd never forgotten.

# 1

## HANELLORE

*Bodenhausen, Okahau, South-West Africa, 1948*

‘Hannelore! Hannelore!’ The shout was taken up by the raggedy, pot-bellied servants’ children who lived in the single row of shacks at the edge of the farm, down there by the bore-hole where animals sometimes came to drink. In their mouths her name took on another consonant – *Hannab-lorah! Hannab-lorah!* Their repeated shouts became a jeer. *Hannab-lorah! Hannab-lorah!* Hannelore put her hands over her ears, blocking out the sound. It was Ella, her nanny, calling her. ‘Hannelore! Come now! Come . . . where are you? Your mama is calling you.’ No, she’s not, Hannelore thought to herself mutinously. *You’re calling me.* She lay on her back on the damp, smooth earth floor, looking up into the roof. She liked the way the beams made the pattern of a spider’s web as they fanned outwards from the peaked centre. She began to count them. One, two, three, four—

‘Hannelore! What are you doing there?’ The wooden door burst open. Ella was standing in the doorway, her large, soft body framed in light. Her hands were on her hips as she surveyed her charge. ‘Naughty, *naughty* girl . . . your dress will be dirty and then your mama will be annoyed with me. What’s wrong with you?’

‘What’s wrong with you! What’s wrong with you!’ Outside the door, the children took up the shout joyfully. They spoke no English; the words were repeated phonetically; they rolled them uncomprehendingly around in their mouths. Amongst each other and with Hannelore they spoke only oshiWambo, the language of the land. Ella did not speak oshiWambo. She spoke only Afrikaans, which Hildebrand, Hannelore’s mother, loathed. ‘*Das ist keine Sprache,*’ she said, her lovely, red-painted mouth turning down on itself in disdain. ‘That isn’t a language. It’s a disease.’ She spoke it reluctantly to Ella – she had no choice – but in the family, between the three of them, they spoke only *hoch Deutsch*, High German. The language of Schiller and Heine, not the bastardised,



vulgar-sounding *platte* German of their neighbours. On this point both Hannelore's parents were united. There would be no slipping, no relaxing of the rules. There were *standards* to be upheld, particularly in this godforsaken half-forgotten corner of Africa which, as far as Ludwig von Riedesal was concerned, would be for ever German. *Not* South African, most emphatically not, no matter what the League of Nations had decided. To have lost the First World War was a bitter enough blow but to have lost their prized African colonies as well was almost too much to bear. As soon as the League declared the end of German rule, those bastards to the south simply marched in, bringing that dreadful tongue, Afrikaans, with them, imposing it everywhere. Well, Hildebrand von Riedesal said firmly, the South Africans could do what they liked with road signs and the like but they weren't going to tell her what and how she should speak in her own home, on her own farm, *on her own land*. Language, the five-year-old Hannelore was beginning to grasp, was more than simply a collection of sounds.

Suddenly she was hauled roughly to her feet. Her dress was indeed dirty; red dust streaks ran from her back all the way down to the hem. Ella's hand came down, whacking off the dust, catching her bare legs and bottom in the process. The children who were standing wide-eyed at the door giggled as one. Her cheeks reddening, Hannelore was frog-marched out the door and back up the short grassy incline that led to the back of the house. She hated being shown up like that, especially in front of *them*.

Later that afternoon when the sun in the garden had burned the already-scorched grass to a crisp, she sat in the bath in a pool of tepid brown water, watching flies buzz themselves to death against the windowpanes. The house was quiet; from somewhere came the soft tinkle of the piano, caught on the breeze. Her mother was playing. She played every afternoon, all year long. In the winter when the grasses around the farm were yellow and blonde and the air was so cold and dry it crackled, her mother would don one of her stylish fur jackets and a pair of kid leather gloves and sit at the piano in the draughty room, and play. Mozart, Stravinsky, Bach and, her father's favourite, Beethoven. Germans, mostly, with the odd Austrian thrown in. Besides, as Ludwig was fond of saying, Austrians really were Germans. Once or twice a year, when there were visitors to the farm and the rooms were made beautiful with long candles that dripped thick, creamy ribbons of wax onto the floor, she would play for others, sitting in that majestically

upright way of hers, her fingers moving expressively over the keys. Those were evenings to remember and cherish. The whole house would have been scrubbed from top to bottom, inside out, swept, polished, dusted and swept again. Bed sheets were boiled and hung out to dry, flapping gustily in the wind; the kitchen and dining room were thick with the scent of baking and making. On the long wooden tables thick, floury loaves of German *Schwarzbrot* were set to cool. If it was summer and Christmas approached, there were plates of gingerbread biscuits and tiny round cakes that melted in your mouth. Christmas in Okahau was very different from the Christmases she'd heard her mother and father talk about back home.

*Home.* Hannelore often puzzled over that word. Home seemed to be *not* where they were, but in some mythical, magical place across the sea, across the whole of the vast continent of Africa, deserts, jungles, rivers and all. Somewhere in the shadow of the Schwarzwald, close to the town of Lörrach in Baden-Württemberg, was the von Riedesal zu Lörrach – to use their full aristocratic name – ancestral home. Hannelore had only seen pictures of it. She had never been to Europe. When she was four, a year or so earlier, her mother left the farm to go to Europe by ship to have the baby brother she had been waiting almost a year for. She left on a Thursday afternoon, with Papa, leaving a tearful Hannelore behind with Ella. It would take Mama and Papa almost the whole day to drive to Swakopmund, on the coast, where Mama would board the ship for Europe. Two weeks of sailing around the bulge of West Africa, then straight north towards the Canary Islands, Spain, Portugal, France, slipping in through the English Channel until she reached Hamburg. Together Hannelore and Papa traced her journey on the large globe that sat in the library. From there it would be another long train journey south through Germany and the Schwarzwald until she reached Lörrach. After the baby was born, she would wait another two months and then make the journey back to Okahau in return.

As soon as she was gone, Hannelore counted down the days to her departure, the days *of* her journey and the days to their return with a nervous joy that sometimes made her sick. Everything was ready for the baby boy on whom Papa's happiness seemed to depend. She was too young to understand why a male child was so important but anything that made Papa happy made her happy too.

But Mama's return wasn't what she had planned – or indeed what *anyone* had planned. She came back alone. The baby was dead. He'd died in the small hours of one of those inky black nights off the coast of

Senegal where the wind drops to a whisper and the stars are so bright you could read by them – or so she overheard Mama say to Papa one day. She'd just come out with it. '*Die Sterne . . . so hell, Ludi, so hell. Du kannst es dir gar nicht vorstellen. Nie. Warum sind sie so hell?*' Why are the stars so bright? A funny sort of question. She was given to questions like that, Hannelore saw, questions where no answer was expected, or given. Papa just stroked her hand or her hair, whichever was closest, and left the room. They never mentioned the baby by the name they'd all chosen before Mama left. Sebastian Christian von Riedesal zu Lörrach. He was always just 'he'. *He died. He cried. He. He. He.* Sebastian. Sebastian Christian. Like the farm children, she too rolled the words lovingly around in her mouth, like marbles. But only to herself, never to Mama. And certainly never to Papa.

Bodenhausen was their vast, sprawling farm, running from the tip of the low hills at one end of the horizon all the way to the hills at the other. In summer the grasses were green-tinged, the result of the night-time dew. In winter they were white-blonde, like Mama's hair. It rained perhaps once or twice a year, summer storms that came out of nowhere: silvery, flickering tongues of lightning and a low, thunderous rumbling that preceded the rain. There was just one road that led away from the farm, a reddish scar in the landscape that turned to smooth black just before the turning to the next farm, some twenty kilometres away. The government had tarred it, though no one quite knew why. The land was still and silent; animals lived in it as though they were inside a house. You never knew when a small burrow would open up in front of you and one of the slow, deadly rock vipers that slithered over the grass as though it were water would slink out. Or when a twitch in the elephant grasses meant an antelope was nearby. Or a kudu, a blackbuck, an impala, a gazelle. She knew the names of every animal, insect, reptile and bird to be found on the farm. That was Papa's doing; those were the lessons he taught her. The great outdoors was his domain.

The farmstead was neatly divided into a series of zones where the various people who lived and worked on it were housed. First, of course, there was the beautiful farmhouse, reserved for the family. Built out of the pale stone that came from the quarry over the hill, it had a deep veranda all along the north-facing side that protected the rooms from the fierce African sun in summer, but whose roof was high enough to allow the same sun to penetrate in winter, when the rooms were cold. A clever design, copied from the British. Papa explained it to her. He showed her how the sun moved around the earth at different times, how

what would be in shadow here – pointing with his finger to the spot on the globe that marked where they were – would be in full sunlight in winter. She nodded vigorously, even if she couldn't quite grasp how it worked. The house had two wings – one reserved for family, the other for guests. Not that they had many guests, mind you. Südwest Afrika was a long way away from those nearest and dearest to them.

Nevertheless, Mama kept the place spotless. In addition to Ella, who was only allowed in the house during the day, there was Witbooi who washed and scrubbed the floors twice a week, Getrude who did most of the cooking; Nadine who chopped and washed up and Bettina who did the laundry. Those were their German names, the ones Mama had given them. They had other names, too, in their own languages, which meant things like 'God has done well' or 'Born when the moon is rising', or even 'She will bring rain'. Hannelore liked those names much more than the boring German ones. The house was full of people, in the daytime at least. There were more servants than masters, she'd overheard Ella say once and she wasn't laughing when she said it either. The five house-servants were all Coloureds, of mixed-race descent. They lived with their families in a row of white-washed cottages a little distance from the house, screened from it by a row of magnificent blue-gums that whispered gently in the wind.

Further away from them, in a low dip in the landscape and hidden from view of the house, was a cluster of small houses made of a mixture of dung and brick where the black farm workers lived. She didn't know them all by name. Peter, Toivo, Samuel, Muyanga . . . they rode the horses that were stabled at the back of the farm and, occasionally, her father's truck. Their wives were shy, dark-skinned women who smiled at her distractedly when she came upon them washing clothes in large tin basins. They were pleased to hear her speak oshiWambo, but they would no more have talked to her than they'd have talked to Mama. Their children were different. Bold, and cheekily confident, they teased her about her hair, her clothes, her milky white skin, her blue eyes and her pink mouth and tongue. To them she was just another kid. Mwane, who was the chief herdsman's son, was her best friend. He was a year older than her and, on Mama's insistence, had begun taking lessons with Hannelore – reading, writing, spelling. He was bright, Mama noticed, possessed of an instinctive curiosity that surprised and pleased her. His German was already flawless, just like Hannelore's. The schoolteacher, Herr Brandt, came three times a week and, after some initial hesitation, simply taught them together. The clouds of dust that his old car kicked

up as he came stuttering up the hill hung in the air for hours after he'd gone.

There she was, five years old, chatelaine and princess of a domain that stretched as far as the eye could see, but was as empty as she imagined the moon to be. Her companions were few. A handful of cheeky African children; a boy who was a year older than her and who was her only friend; a mother who cried herself to sleep at night and a father who mostly wasn't there. That was it, the sum total of the world around her. There was nothing more.

She slid down further in the cooling water, alternately disgusted and fascinated by the sight of her own pearly pink body under the water, so different in colour, texture, feel from almost everyone around her. Mwane's body was a smooth black sheath that gleamed sleekly in the sun. Her skin grew blotchy and red; she broke out in a sweat that produced a rash, which in turn produced blisters that bled and wept. Mwane *belonged* here. Everything about him merged seamlessly into his surroundings – his language, the food he ate, the clothes he wore, the way he walked and talked. She on the other hand did not. Everything about her was foreign, alien to the land. She submerged herself in the dirty water, delighting in its cool touch on her face. She'd always had a strange longing for water, the result, Mama always said, of living in this land where there was none. At the bottom of the hill, next to the borehole, there was a tiny seasonal river. After the yearly day or two of rain, it ran for a few hundred metres, then sogged into the ground and stopped. For the rest of the year it was a grey, cracked trough through which lizards darted. One of the paintings in the dining room was of a winter's scene on Schauinsland, one of the mountains near Lörrach. She used to stand in front of it, staring at the whitened landscape – frozen water, Mama told her. Snow-laden beech branches bowed under its weight. A frozen, silent land, buried under water-turned-to-ice. She mimed a shiver in front of it. Brrr.