

ALLURE
OF DECEIT

ALSO BY
SUSAN FROETSCHER

Fear of Beauty

A Novel

ALLURE OF DECEIT

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For my sisters—Terri, Laurie, and Joyce

PART 1

This is the hell which the guilty called a lie.

—Koran 55:43

CHAPTER 1

Lime, peacock, moss, sea mist, forest, and fern—gowns in every shade of green swirled about the ballroom floor. Aromas of mint and rosemary drifted from all-green centerpieces. Leading policymakers, academics, corporate executives, journalists, and celebrities gathered in small groups, their voices low and earnest, discussing extremists massacring students in Africa, indiscriminate dumping of toxins into waterways and cancer spikes for Asia, the lack of schools and work for refugees scattered throughout the Middle East, and the countless cruelties exacted on impoverished children everywhere.

Everyone in the ballroom had a worthy cause and hoped to attract the attention of the evening's hostess, Lydia Sendry, the woman who controlled GlobalConnect, the world's largest charitable foundation.

Pearl Hanson was nervous, still in disbelief that her tiny organization, based in rural Texas, had received a cherished invitation to the spring event. Conservatives from Texas were not the typical guests of such events hosted by major foundations, designed to match the nation's leading opinion makers with new applicants like Pearl. She pinched her arm once more.

Her group had a track record for training women in rigorous natural family planning. For women with willing partners, the program was about 80 percent effective in providing birth control. For the inevitable mishaps, the group provided a year or two of support for families that could not afford to feed and clothe a newborn. Or adoptions could be arranged.

Pearl Hanson wanted to go global and submitted her proposal to GlobalConnect. The plan—head to Afghanistan and provide training in natural family planning while organizing orphanages as backup.

In the end, GlobalConnect would choose only a fraction of the applicants. The invitation alone marked applicants as global players.

“Be yourself,” Annie Johnson, GlobalConnect’s executive director, had advised. “Lydia is warm and easy to talk with. You don’t need to say a lot, and she will have loads of questions. Be candid and be prepared.” Annie also confided that Pearl’s group was a frontrunner for the first phase of funding, including travel grants for finding local partners.

Pearl waited her turn. Taller than most of the other guests, she observed the woman who controlled the world’s most powerful foundation. Lydia Sendry was reserved, sitting in the corner and studying the ballroom. Her soft silvery hair was swept to one side, and a walker was tucked out of the way. From all appearances, Lydia was the gentle grandmother type beloved by family and friends.

But the woman’s eyes were neither old nor distracted. Her gaze was intense as applicants and their escorts filed by her table for brief chats. She did not delegate responsibility in distributing hundreds of millions of dollars each year. Only a fraction of the proposals could be funded, and all were approved by the small board led by Lydia.

And when Lydia sat alone, waiting for the next applicant to step forward, her dark eyes darted about, studying the room’s occupants in a keen, even wrathful way.

Lydia Sendry wanted to leave behind a better world.



Paul Reichart wandered the ballroom, thinking about the foundation’s ridiculous rules. Board members and executive staff had to attend at least one event annually, cheering on the desperate requests for money. Like others, he was uncomfortable, and not because of the formality. Paul was unusual among foundation staff, constantly reminded that he lacked big foundation experience. Snide murmurs followed that the global development director had obtained the job only because of his long ties with the Sendry family.

The grumbling was unfair. Every employee lacked experience

because GlobalConnect was so massive, with more assets than any other private foundation in the world. Annie Johnson and the other executives insisted the work of making connections was crucial, that elaborate displays demonstrated powerful connections.

Yet they envied Paul's connections with Lydia.

He couldn't wait for the evening to end and to get on a plane back to Asia. The board approved Paul's working from offices in India and Afghanistan, target nations for the foundation. As development director, he constantly traveled, training new staff and overseeing GlobalConnect programs.

Paul liked to think that Lydia trusted him. He felt lucky to work far from the bureaucracy in New York.

The New York events were phony and conceited. Staff planned every detail, always on the lookout for symbols that reflected high-minded ideals and Lydia's preferences. For example, the staff knew how much Lydia abhorred waste. The meal was vegetarian, with ridiculously delicate portion sizes for the salads, fruit, and grilled vegetables. Top-shelf brands of alcohol flowed freely, one of Lydia's little tests. Decisions about money were constantly being made, despite the celebratory atmosphere, and the smart guests avoided alcoholic beverages. Donors and recipients had to stay sharp, assessing attitudes and the nuances of need, excess, and hurt feelings.

Such attention to detail did not prevent the wrong people from making decisions or the wrong groups from receiving awards.

Paul kept his criticism to himself. Best he stayed far from the States. The executive staff quickly marginalized employees who posed too many questions or suggestions. Paul owed Lydia and her only son everything, and he had no other plans but to dedicate his life to a foundation that almost failed to materialize. More than once, Annie reminded staff that plans for the foundation had not been finalized before the premature death of Michael Sendry, the founder of Photizonet, who was Lydia's son and Paul's best friend. A select few understood Michael's vision, or so she intimated.

If she only knew... For Annie, the foundation was wealthy,

influential, and adored, and she was a stubborn bulldozer against all criticism.

The evening's speeches had ended, and guests maneuvered about the room. A young man, college-aged and blond, trim in an expensive tuxedo made to fit an athletic build, zigzagged through the crowd, affable as he approached Lydia's table, where a security perimeter protected her from unwanted, unreasonable pleas. The man was too young, too unknown. A member of Lydia's security team, also in tuxedo, leaped forward, issuing a reminder that guests needed an appointment and designated escort to approach Lydia's table.

Like a magician, the intruder waved his hand and released what appeared to be a yellow scarf flowing from his sleeve. A petite woman in a turquoise silk sheath stepped forward and stretched the banner wide, the words in blood red: FAMILY PLANNING SAVES LIVES; DO MORE AT HOME, GLOBALCONNECT.

Security ripped the banner away and escorted the young couple from the ballroom, but not before photographers captured the image—Lydia with her head turned, reading the message.

Hiding her fury, Annie excused herself from a small group of executives and headed back to the podium. First, a brisk apology for the interruption from what she described as “the foundation's young and enthusiastic supporters” and then the well-practiced summary of statistics on the millions donated by GlobalConnect to worthy causes over the past year.

Then she paused, ensuring that she had the crowd's attention. “We represent civil society, but our organization is not a democracy,” she said. “Our role has been approved by voters in our democratic society time and time again. They have placed their trust in visionaries of our society to set priorities on needs and provide funding. The late Michael Sendry was among the greatest of these visionaries. His life, cut short, was so full. He innovated tirelessly without complaint and set goals for us. It's his vision we honor every day.”

The audience cheered wildly.

Annie moved close to the microphone and spoke over the

applause, her voice strong and firm, to point out how the protests were self-defeating. "As many of you know, GlobalConnect has a unique set of governing policies. Michael emphasized tolerance, compromise. He believed that opponents can work together, and many paths can lead to the same goal. Unseemly demands for funding in one area only prompt GlobalConnect to locate and fund organizations with opposite goals."

Leaving the podium, Annie cast a sheepish look in Lydia's direction. The board's chair would not want to hear excuses. The security team would be disciplined the next day. Some members would lose their jobs.

Paul was nauseated and could not hide his disgust. He left the ballroom, ready to return to Asia. He could not bear to hear others talking about Michael, especially Annie. She had never even met the tech wizard.

GlobalConnect was not a democracy. Rather than define, identify, and emphasize global problems and leading solutions, the board relied on a scattershot approach, spreading resources too far and forcing programs to compete. Grant applicants and policymakers played games, and staff wasted Michael's money, all weakening GlobalConnect's sense of purpose. Paul didn't blame Lydia. She cared, but she wasn't tough enough to see how people manipulated the grant process. He hated to admit it, but Michael's wife might have been right. The executive staff was too controlling, yet too timid to make decisive, radical plans to overhaul all of society.

Lydia had lost her way.



The hostess of the charitable ball, Lydia Sendry, observed the crowd with a mix of pleasure, calculation, and regret. Mostly regret. Ever lurking in the back of her mind was escape, the desire to return home to Michigan and her memories of Michael. She kept a low profile at such public events. Her simple dress in forest green was indistinguishable among the black tuxedos. Near seventy years of age, she pretended to

be feeble, using a walker in public, even though it was shoved into a closet at home. She encouraged vague rumors about ill health.

Her table was positioned so she could survey the entire room and guest exchanges. In turn, guests constantly glanced Lydia's way, checking for reactions from the woman who controlled the board, the policies, and the huge and unending flow of funding.

Annie's blunt reminders about democracy were true but troubling.

The foundation honoring her son was vast. Although relatively new, it operated in more than thirty developing nations and could be counted on to distribute at least \$400 million annually for a mix of organizations. GlobalConnect was influential, yet it limited support to some fifty groups per year. Competition was intense.

Lydia's thoughts could not help but drift to Michael. He would have enjoyed the party, but not judging the passions of others. She certainly did not relish the role. She despised controlling the money inherited after the death of her only son.

Such an inheritance was unnatural. The young man had started his own tech company in his early twenties, piggybacking on German research and developing an affordable system that allowed Internet data to travel with light waves. The system, low-cost and fast, required no elaborate infrastructure. For the first time, communities could set up their own intranet around a chain of solar-powered lighting.

As with any revolutionary innovation, the system destroyed entire industries, upending the world's most powerful cable, satellite, and telecommunications companies. The traditionalists resisted the new technology. So, Michael had bypassed American and European markets, sending startup teams to the least developed countries in the world. His firm, Photizonet, went public six years later, and he became the richest man in the world.

Michael married his college sweetheart. No one had known that Rose, his young wife, was pregnant as the couple set off for a honeymoon in India, a brief stay at the Oberoi Amarvilas in Agra before heading off to hike in Nagarkot. A prep meeting was organized for Rose to discuss preferences on hiking routes and guides. At the last minute,

Michael decided to skip a company conference call and accompany his wife to the luncheon meeting.

As the couple headed into the restaurant, a young man in neat Western attire shouted a greeting before he tossed a small package their way. Michael stepped in front of his wife and caught the explosive device.

Indian news media had quickly identified the victims, and Lydia learned about the deaths from news shows the next morning. The corporation contacted her, explaining how they had already dispatched her son's longtime friend, employee, and best man to Agra. Paul Reichart was not a tech wizard. Instead, he had worked for Photizonet's cultural development department, organizing teams that profiled and prepared communities throughout Asia before arranging installations. Lydia would never forget the distraught call from Paul—his voice broken, as he prepared to accompany the remains home. Representing the family, Paul had acted as an intermediary with the Indian police.

Police quickly tracked the attacker, who had distinctive scars from burns on one side of his face. A large, ornate dagger was tucked inside the man's belt, and police killed him on the spot. Later, the officers determined that the troubled man was from northern Helmand Province, Afghanistan, and had been living in India illegally. The drifter had little education and no work experience. All that was known was that he had described himself as an orphan, the son of house servants who had died years earlier in a horrific fire.

The thirty-year-old inventor, his wife, and their unborn child had died less than a week after the marriage. Only their attorney knew about the inkling plan for a foundation.

The day after the couple's funeral, Michael's attorney had met with Lydia. Her son had reached out to Henry Strohn while in graduate school. The gruff man had advised Michael throughout the tech startup and then served as his personal attorney. Reading from neat notes, Henry quickly described his last meeting with the couple and the numerous documents signed, including the couple's wills and a living trust. Toward the end of the meeting, Michael mentioned an intention

to start a charitable trust or foundation. He asked Henry to investigate several key areas—family planning, education, environmental protection, human rights, and citizenship as related to curtailing poverty.

“The discussion was brief,” Henry had admitted. He turned to a pile of folders and extracted a piece of notebook paper. “This was the last instruction I received from your son.”

Lydia had held the paper, dazed, as Henry continued. As far as he knew, no one else had known about the couple’s plans. The primary beneficiaries of their living trust, Michael and Rose, were dead. “Children, yet unnamed, of Michael and Rose Sendry” were listed as a secondary beneficiary along with Lydia.

She was sole heir to her son’s majority share in the corporation and his wealth, as well as the notion of a foundation—with little guidance other than a handwritten mission statement scrawled on what looked like a piece of scrap paper.

“As far as we can determine, that paper is all that exists regarding the foundation,” Henry had explained. No board of directors had been appointed, no funds designated or distributed. Official forms had not been signed or filed. “We began research and were waiting for a final review from your son. From the company’s point of view, the statement and plans are vague.” Henry paused. He asked if Lydia had known anything about Michael’s plans to start a foundation with his share of Photonet profits.

She shook her head. “Not a clue. Though I’m not surprised. He was so generous.”

“And frugal,” Henry added. He didn’t have to tell Lydia. Michael had adored Rose for sharing his enthusiasm to live far below their means. The two had shopped at thrift stores and farmers’ markets. He took pride at the high mileage on his 2005 Corolla, and she enjoyed growing vegetables and cooking for friends at home. “Too frugal. Their bungalow in Redwood City? No security. Three bedrooms, one and half baths.”

“They were so happy there.” Tears burned her eyes. “There are no other beneficiaries on the trust? And what about Rose’s parents?”

“Unlike the foundation, the intentions for the living trust are clear. As you know, Michael rejected a prenuptial agreement, refusing to accept my advice or Rose’s, for that matter. He also wanted to list her parents as a beneficiary, but Rose was firm. She asked that he leave her parents out of the trust for the time being until the two sides of the family got to know each other better.”

Every sentence pointed to the couple’s desire to live simply and practice generosity with their wealth.

“Lydia, I must say something before we go on.” Henry took the scrap from her hands and placed it on the desk between them. “As far as I can tell, you and perhaps Rose’s parents are the only candidates with reason to resist this last-minute addition in their estate plans.”

Lydia had felt like a fool for not immediately understanding. Of course, a proposed foundation locked up Michael’s vast fortune.

“But you’re his mother,” he had continued in his soft, businesslike way. “He could make colleagues laugh with his stories about thrifty parents, but he trusted your good sense implicitly. He would trust your instincts.” He pointed to the note. “It’s your decision whether we proceed on a foundation.”

He advised there was no need for her to hurry. “I suspect that no one else knows about this piece of paper. And even if they do, you don’t need to act. The courts would agree. The foundation was proposed, not finalized. Or, we can file the paperwork for a foundation.”

Lydia remembered staring at the paper with its ragged edge and re-reading the words. The writing was tight, unevenly spaced, like a young boy’s work in elementary school. There was no doubt that the crooked writing belonged to her son. She asked if Michael had been alone when he handed over the paper. Henry shook his head.

“Rose was in the room. He drafted it himself and handed it over to me.” The attorney looked down at his hands. “I can only guess, but I would presume they had talked about this plan beforehand.”

Lydia had no more questions. Ignoring a final wish from her son was unthinkable. She told Henry to continue work on the foundation, relying on the mission statement supplied by her son.

He nodded. "You are the best judge of Michael's wishes. You can shape the foundation and its rules to guide future leaders."

A hands-off approach was so tempting and would have been the healthiest option for her. She could live her life, trust others to make decisions, and walk away from the headaches associated with so much money.

Instead, Lydia took active control from the start. She based the foundation in Michigan. She wanted a small board of directors and a long list of strict rules. She asked that the announcement be delayed until absolutely necessary. When news of GlobalConnect was released, the reaction was unanimous surprise. Apparently, Michael and Rose had not confided in any friends or colleagues at work.

Lydia had her reasons for tight control. She was sure, even months later, that Michael's death was not a random act of terrorism. She spent a small fortune on investigations of hotel staff in India, Photizonet staff and competitors, the tourist agency, and the guides. Early on, the investigation covered Rose's family as well as the couple's closest friends, including Henry Strohn and Paul Reichart. Photizonet work had required frequent travel by employees to Asia, but the investigators unearthed no connections with the killer. Young people in the region could be easily tricked into carrying such packages for a small fee. Anyone might have co-opted the man to toss the package at the couple.

The list of those with reason to envy Michael was endless. His innovations had disrupted the tech world. But leads dwindled. Investigators could not determine whether a stranger had instigated the attack or the young man had acted on his own.

The investigators warned that her son may not have been the target.

Her desire for answers was stronger than ever, but Lydia kept the obsession to herself. She used the foundation to observe and test interactions of staff, critics, Photizonet colleagues, and grant recipients. GlobalConnect was her best tool for asking questions, maybe learning the reasons behind the senseless deaths of her son and daughter-in-law.

Lydia could not rest. She no longer trusted her judgment about others' motivations. She constantly pored over possible reasons why anyone might want to harm Michael.

A hand touched her shoulder, interrupting the memories. Annie gently asked about resuming the parade of grant applicants, and Lydia nodded. Annie was a strict organizer, scheduling every minute of Lydia's time at such events. Conversations with the potential grant recipients typically lasted about ten minutes. If Lydia fingered the pearl clip holding her hair back, she needed more time. If she sipped her drink, grapefruit juice with a touch of salt, an aide stepped in to halt the meeting.

More often than not, Lydia cut the meetings short.

"It's been the most delightful evening," said the director of a powerful health nonprofit, as he bowed and kissed her hand. One of Annie's assistants hovered nearby, timing the conversation. The executive thanked her for a recent check and outlined new initiatives as she sipped the grapefruit juice.

Next was the director of a small group that ran natural-family-planning programs in rural Texas. Pearl Hanson was a Texas conservative, practical and stubborn. Despite limited tools and her brash ways, her program had raised awareness about the economic benefits of small families. The link between wealth and family planning prompted even devout women to pursue methods of contraception on their own. Pearl understood and didn't cast blame.

She was ambitious, seeking to leapfrog national expansion by expanding the program to developing nations, starting with Afghanistan. She was eager to work with Islamist groups. One of her goals was to change attitudes in Islamic nations about long-term guardianships for children.

"Not adoption?" Lydia asked.

Hanson shook her head. "Islamic family law does not allow adoption there. There are provisions for guardianship, but many children are treated poorly and forced to work." She went on to suggest the need for regulating guardianships—while convincing Afghans to think the plans were their idea all the while.

"It would be like adoption with more regulation," Hanson explained. She hoped to run a pilot study, encouraging the value of

smaller families, increasing appreciation of unwanted children, and involving men in family planning.

The board typically valued programs that aimed for big social change, and Lydia, ever on the lookout for the possibility of new details about her son's death, preferred programs that put people on the ground in Afghanistan and India. She asked Hanson the usual questions and liked the answers. "Your next step is finding local Afghan partners."

The tall woman was worried and pointed out how few shared her group's approach.

"Better to find a group not at all like yours." Lydia explained how GlobalConnect tended to fund innovative programs, and diverse teams produced more innovation. GlobalConnect went one step further, forcing opposite groups to work together. To attract funding, the groups had to resist polarization and hate. This meant approaching men on women's rights, collecting the opinions of elders on education for children, finding small businesses that protected the environment, and encouraging environmental groups to support business startups. The process was time-consuming, but it produced sustainable results.

"It's why your proposal stood out," Lydia noted.

She promised Pearl that GlobalConnect could help with contacts in Afghanistan. Hanson leaned forward and interrupted, asking to meet Paul Reichart. "He's a legend among the aid groups in Afghanistan."

Typically grant applicants praised her son's foresight. Few mentioned staff members like Paul. Lydia straightened the hair clip and asked what the woman knew about Paul.

Pearl hurried on about developing close ties to small villages, delivering supplies, organizing health groups. "He developed quite the network among villages. The leaders trust him." She then talked about a particular village, how more than one organization referred to Laashekoh as a role model for managing relationships. "It's a small village, but Paul Reichart worked magic in Laashekoh."

GlobalConnect staff members were not supposed to take credit for program successes. The policy directed that all focus remain on grant recipients. Annie did not trust self-evaluations from staff, and

any boasting could jeopardize Paul's position at GlobalConnect. Lydia advised Pearl to seek an Islamic group as a partner. "That will strengthen your application."

An assistant hovered nearby. Pearl Hanson thanked Lydia and vowed to do whatever was necessary to contribute to the GlobalConnect mission.

Lydia then asked to borrow another assistant's cell phone to call Henry. He was a member of the GlobalConnect board, but Lydia still regarded him as her son's attorney. He answered after the first ring. "Nice to know I'm needed."

"Always." She asked him to pull research on a village named Laashekoh and Paul's activities. "But don't tell Paul."

"For a specific grant?"

"Pending," she said.

"Historical or current?"

"Since Michael's death."

He went silent. "What did you hear?" She relayed the scrap of information.

Henry warned her that information on a remote village in a country of thirty million people would be limited.

It was her turn for silence and a reminder that she would never give up on finding out why Michael had died.