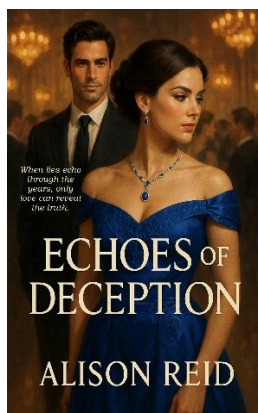


Echoes of Deception

by Alison Reid



“Care to explain?” Beau demanded, shoving his phone into her hands.

Ashley’s heart dropped as she saw the photo. Her breath caught, and she swallowed hard, trying to steady herself. “It’s not what it looks like,” she said, her voice trembling despite her effort to sound firm.

“It looks pretty clear to me,” Beau shot back, his anger palpable, his eyes narrowing.

She opened her mouth to speak, to show him the truth, but he cut her off. “How could you, Ash?” His voice cracked, the raw hurt in it slicing her open.

Shock quickly flared into fury. Her hands shook around the envelope, the evidence of his betrayal burning like ice in her grip. “Did you sleep with him?” Beau’s words were sharp, accusatory, slicing through her like a knife.

Ashley recoiled, disbelief and anger lighting her eyes. “Are you joking?” she snapped, her voice fierce with outrage and hurt.

“Do I look like I’m joking?” Beau shot back, his stare unflinching, cold, unrelenting.

Her chest tightened, her voice trembling but defiant. “Would it even matter if I had?” she said, the words dripping with sorrow and scorn. “You’ve already made up your mind about me.”

“Of course it would!” he exploded, his jealousy and pain pouring from every syllable.

The words stung, but Ashley, crushed and hollow, refused to argue. She couldn't. There was no defence that could bridge the chasm his actions had carved. His betrayal had already destroyed the trust between them.

Her silence was louder than any words, and Beau's expression hardened. “We're done, Ashley. I can't forgive this.”

“Just like that?” Her voice cracked, disbelief and pain cracking through every word.

“What did you expect, Ashley?” His tone was cold, dismissive, final.

Tears stung her eyes, her voice raw with bitter truth. “I expected the man I love to trust me,” she said, her jaw tight, the ache in her chest like a living thing. “I expected him to be faithful.”

The weight of it all—his betrayal, his accusation, his finality—pressed on her chest like a boulder. Hands trembling, she yanked the engagement ring from her finger and held it out to him. “Here,” she said, her voice thick with emotion, raw and heavy.

Beau's eyes flickered to the ring, but he didn't reach for it. “What would I want it for?” he said coldly, a bitter edge cutting through the air. Then, with a cruel smirk, he added, “Maybe you should keep it, Ashley. After all... you've earned it.”

Ashley didn't respond. She turned, leaving with the unopened envelope and the shattered remnants of what they had built behind her. The ring weighed heavy in her hand, her grip trembling. In that moment, she made a choice—not to defend herself, not to plead for the trust she had never lost. She realised the man she had loved, the man she had given everything to, didn't trust her—

not now, not ever. And it was he who had proven himself unworthy of the love she had offered.

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