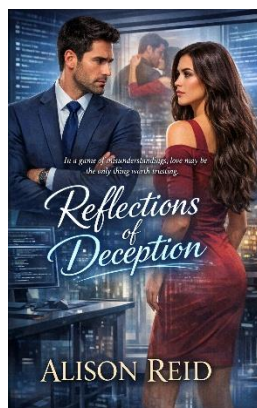


# Reflections of Deception

by Alison Reid



Jason pushed the door open, revealing a sleek, minimalist office with floor-to-ceiling windows that framed the Chicago skyline. Behind the massive desk sat Lucas Bennett, who looked up from a stack of papers as they entered.

The sight of him nearly made Penelope stop in her tracks. She had expected a distinguished man in his forties, but Lucas was younger than she'd imagined—early-thirties at most—and devastatingly handsome. His sharp features, chiseled jawline, and piercing green eyes held an intensity that made her stomach flip. His tailored suit fit perfectly, hinting at the athletic build beneath. For a moment, she forgot how to breathe.

“Lucas,” Jason said, breaking the silence, “this is Penelope Davidson, our new hire for the cybersecurity project.”

Lucas's eyes locked on Penelope, and a flicker of recognition flashed across his face. Kyle wasn't exaggerating—this woman was gorgeous. Even in her understated attire, it was clear she was trying to downplay her beauty, but it was the kind that couldn't be hidden, no matter how hard she might try. Her legs seemed to go on forever, and her confident stance only added to her allure.

As he sat back in his chair, his expression darkened. “Penelope Davidson,” he repeated, his tone sharp, laced with suspicion.

Then it hit him—her nickname was Pen. His memory sharpened, pulling him back to that night at the bar. The woman he'd met had introduced herself as Pen. It had to be her, didn't it?

His eyes narrowed as he studied her, piecing together the image of the vivacious, flirtatious woman he'd met that night with the poised and professional woman standing before him now. If it wasn't her, it was one hell of a coincidence.

Penelope hesitated, confused by the sudden shift in his demeanour. "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Bennett," she said, extending her hand.

Lucas ignored it, his gaze narrowing. "Jason, would you mind giving us a moment? I'd like to speak with Miss Davidson alone."

Jason looked surprised but nodded. "Of course. Penelope, I'll catch up with you later." He gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder before leaving the room.

As the door clicked shut, Lucas stood and crossed the room, his presence dominating the space. He leaned against the edge of his desk, arms crossed, his piercing gaze fixed on her.

Penelope shifted uncomfortably, unsure of what she had done to warrant this scrutiny. "Is something wrong, Mr. Bennett?"

"I'll cut to the chase," Lucas said, his voice cold. "I know who you are. We met once before, at a bar. You stole my watch and cash that night."

Penelope's mouth fell open. "Excuse me? I don't know what you're talking about. I've never seen you before today, let alone stolen anything from you."

Lucas studied her, his jaw tightening. She looked genuinely bewildered, her wide blue eyes staring back at him with a mix of confusion and indignation. The sincerity in her voice gave him pause, but he refused to let his guard down.

“Don’t play innocent,” he said, his voice hard. “That watch has sentimental value, and I distinctly remember you—on your knees in front me.”

Penelope’s heart raced as she tried to make sense of the accusations being hurled at her. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said firmly, though her voice wavered slightly. “I don’t go to bars, and I certainly don’t go to bars to pick up strange men. And I absolutely do not steal from anyone.”

Her words were resolute, but the tremor in her voice betrayed her discomfort. Lucas couldn’t ignore the vulnerability in her expression. Standing before him, she didn’t look like a thief or someone capable of deception. Instead, she looked blindsided—caught in the crossfire of a mistake she couldn’t fathom.

Lucas clenched his fists, his frustration mounting. His instincts, which had never failed him in business, were suddenly at odds. Everything about her—her tone, her stance, her wide eyes—screamed innocence. And yet, the memory of that night burned vividly in his mind: the woman who had introduced herself as Pen, seduced him, and stolen his father’s heirloom watch.

“Stop playing games,” he said sharply. “I want that watch back. Now. I don’t care about the money and credit cards.”

Penelope’s eyes widened in shock. “I have no idea what you’re talking about!” she exclaimed, her voice rising in frustration.

Lucas’s temper flared, his voice cutting through the room. “I don’t believe this. You came on to me, performed oral sex on me, stole from me—and now you’re standing here pretending to be innocent?”

Her cheeks flamed, bright with indignation and embarrassment. “I have never met you; Mr. Bennett and I have never performed oral sex on you,” she said, her tone firm despite the humiliation surging through her.

He leaned forward, his eyes blazing. “Stop playing dumb. You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Penelope took a step back, fear flickering briefly in her eyes as his anger filled the room. But she quickly straightened her spine, refusing to let him intimidate her. “I have no idea what in blazes you’re accusing me of, but I’m not going to stand here and be insulted.”

She paused, her voice cool and measured now. “I am going to get back to work. It was nice to meet you, Mr. Bennett.” With a curt nod, she turned on her heel and left the office, her head held high and her back straight as an arrow.

Lucas watched her go, his jaw tightening as frustration and doubt churned within him. She didn’t even flinch. She looked and sounded so sincere, so convincing. Had he gotten it wrong?

“No,” he muttered to himself, shaking his head as though to dispel the flicker of doubt. “It was her. I know it was her.”

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