Christmas Without a Filter

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sharp white glare of the ring light had turned the pupils of Renee’s eyes into two glowing halos. Outside, beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows of the fortieth floor, heavy snowflakes swirled in the Christmas Eve darkness and clung to the glass; yet the mist of my breath never settled on any windowpane, and the tall mirrors of the living room held no reflection of me. For centuries, on the last night of December, I have passed silently through walls. Once, I used to visit old men counting their gold coins by candlelight; tonight, however, I stood beside a modern fireplace whose flames were artificial, while its owner, dressed in a crimson silk gown, stared at a downpour of pink and red hearts cascading across her phone screen.

Renee tilted her chin up slightly to sharpen her jawline, stretched her lips just enough to make her row of pearly teeth gleam, and said in a soft, drawn-out voice, “Christmas is all about giving, guys! I hope tonight you’re all as happy as I am.”

Her thumb, tipped with a red acrylic nail, tapped the stop button. In a fraction of a second, the smile vanished from the corners of her mouth, and the lines of her face went cold and still like marble. Without turning her head fully, she glanced at the young woman standing beside the sofa in a plain gray uniform, holding the edge of a silver tray with red, chapped fingers.

Renee tapped the side of the cup with her fingertip and frowned. “Susan! This is ice-cold. There isn’t even any steam rising from it. Is making a simple cup of coffee really that complicated for ”?you

Susan’s thumb pressed tighter against the rim of the tray to hide the trembling of her hand. She lowered her gaze to the tips of her worn-out sneakers. “I’m sorry, ma’am, I’ll make another one right away. I just... wanted to ask if I could leave an hour early tonight. Richard’s leg spasms ”...started up again this afternoon. It’s Christmas Eve, and he’s all alone

Renee turned toward the mirror, adjusted her diamond earring, and blotted the gloss on her lipstick with her fingertip. “Your shift ends at midnight, Susan. My guests are here until midnight, and nobody is going to clear their own glasses. If your paycheck at the end of the month matters ”.to you, go turn on the coffee maker

Soft footsteps echoed across the parquet floor. Michael stepped forward from the hallway doorframe; his broad, athletic shoulders were unmistakable even beneath a dark blazer, and behind him, inside a glass display case at the far end of the room, glinted the Golden Ball trophy for Best Player of the Season. Without sparing Renee a glance, he walked straight over to .Susan, took the heavy tray from her with both hands, and bent slightly to meet her eyes

Put your coat on, Susan,” Michael said quietly. “There’s nothing left to do tonight. Give my best“ to Richard and wish him a Merry Christmas.” He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out two folded bills, slipped them into the pocket of Susan’s uniform, and closed the girl’s cold hands .warmly over the fabric so she couldn’t refuse

With brimming eyes, Susan mouthed a silent thank-you and hurried out the door. The sound of the latch had barely settled when Renee’s high heels clicked sharply across the parquet. “Mind telling me what that heroic display was about, Michael? Why do you always undermine me in ”?front of the help

Michael set the tray gently onto the marble table. His shoulders sagged as he looked at a spot between Renee’s eyebrows, as though searching for a familiar face that was no longer there. “She isn’t some random maid, Renee. That’s Susan—the same girl who sat next to you in sophomore year and lent you her lecture notes. Her husband has been paralyzed from the waist down for eight months after that motorcycle crash, and you haven’t once asked how he’s doing. Susan works herself to the bone to cover Richard’s medical bills. She does bookkeeping all day ”.until the afternoon, and then comes here to toil until late at night

He picked his coat up from the arm of the sofa and continued, “The people inside that phone

don’t know you, Renee, but I do… or at least, I knew the person you used to be. Smile alone for your photographers tonight.”

The front door shut firmly. Renee stared at the closed door for a moment, then let out a sharp breath, dusted her cheekbones with a blush brush, and went to answer the doorbell.

Until midnight, the penthouse filled with the heavy scent of French perfumes, the clinking of crystal glasses, and the incessant flashing of smartphones. Guests air-kissed each other’s cheeks without making contact, gathered around Renee’s silk gown, and recorded stories beneath the glow of the ring light. When the last guest finally left, the grand living room was littered with half-empty glasses and crumpled napkins. Renee drained the last sip of her drink, kicked off her heels, and curled up among the cushions of the white velvet couch.

As the hands of the wall clock aligned at twelve, the air in the room suddenly smelled of snow and old metal. Now it was my turn.

Act One: The Ghost of Forgotten Memories

Renee’s phone screen flickered with a violet light, and a chime like a wind-up music box echoed through the room. Shivering, Renee opened her eyes. Her breath turned to white vapor in the air. Perched on the armrest of the sofa was an elderly man in a faded wool coat and a frayed scarf, wiping the lens of an old metal camera with the corner of his sleeve. It was me.

Renee’s mouth opened to scream, but I raised the camera and pressed the shutter. Click.

The white burst of the flash melted away the glass walls of the penthouse. The chill of the living room gave way to the aroma of cinnamon, freshly brewed coffee, and snow-dampened coats. We were standing in the middle of a small, crowded café with wobbly wooden tables. At a corner table by the window, a twenty-three-year-old girl in an ordinary windbreaker, with damp, messy hair and short, unpainted nails, was laughing from the bottom of her heart—so hard that her coffee sloshed into the saucer. She was wrapping a lopsided hand-knitted scarf with dropped stitches around a young Michael’s neck, while Michael held her freezing hands between his palms, blowing warm breath onto them.

Renee took a step forward. Her fingers rose involuntarily to her own lips, as though her facial muscles no longer remembered that carefree laugh. In a hoarse voice, she whispered, “That…scarf… I stayed up for three weeks knitting it.”

I turned the focus ring of my camera and pressed the shutter again. “No price tag on it, and no

".designer label

The scene shifted like a film fast-forwarding: a lavish candlelit restaurant. Michael had placed a small box on the table and reached out to take Renee's hand, but Renee pulled hers back—the shadow of his hand had fallen across her plate of caviar, ruining the framing of her story. Michael slowly withdrew his hand while Renee buried her face in the bright glow of her phone, flashing a "!!rehearsed smile at the comments. "OMG, Michael, look at what they wrote

A hot tear slipped from the corner of Renee's eye, washing away a streak of her blush, as my .finger pressed the shutter once more

Act Two: The Ghost of Present Truth

The next flash hurled us into the middle of a narrow, frozen alley. I was wearing a worn leather jacket now, my hands shoved deep into my pockets like a weary cab driver at the end of a night shift. Renee's foot sank into the slush and mud along the curb, soaking and darkening the hem of .her red silk dress up to her ankles

I nodded toward a basement window whose cracked pane had been sealed with clear packing .tape. Renee bent down and peered inside through the steamed-up glass

The room was no larger than Renee's walk-in closet, its walls blistered with damp plaster. On a plastic stool sat a small cupcake with a crooked candle burning beside a blister pack of painkillers and a glass of water. Behind a small table, a thin man in a plaid shirt sat in a wheelchair. A blanket covered his motionless legs, and the scar of an old suture ran from his temple down to .the edge of his jaw

Richard stared at Susan's hands, red and peeling from dishwater and harsh detergents. He took them in his, closed his eyes, and pressed his forehead in silent agony against his wife's rough fingers. "I never should have let you go there, Susan... Every time you come home with your hands like this, I feel like I'm back under the wheels of that truck all over again. You don't deserve to scrub and clean only to be humiliated at the end of the night. You're a good ".accountant—you just need a firm that values your work

Susan stood up quietly, walked behind the wheelchair, and rested her chin on Richard's shoulder, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Don't be sad, my love. Her words don't get to me—honest to God, they don't. Tonight, when she was looking at herself in the mirror, I saw her eyes; she looked like someone trapped behind a thick glass wall. She thinks those numbers on her phone

are hugging her, that they love her, yet her room was colder than this alley. I just wish someone would hold her hand the way you hold mine, so she could feel even a fraction of this warmth.”

Renee’s knees buckled, and she collapsed onto the dirty snow of the alley. The wet cold seeped through her skin straight to her bones. She slapped her hands over her ears and cried out into the freezing night, “She’s lying! I haven’t built any walls... Millions of people call my name every single day! Millions!”

Her voice echoed down the alley, yet the fogged-up window didn’t even tremble.

Act Three: The Ghost of an Unmasked Tomorrow

Darkness rose like thick smoke and swallowed the snowy alley. The sharp stench of rubbing alcohol and disinfectant filled Renee’s nostrils. When the mist cleared, I was wearing a white hospital coat, standing expressionless beside a door, while the prolonged screech of tires on wet asphalt, the sickening crunch of crumpled steel, and the wailing siren of an ambulance still rang inside Renee’s head.

Renee braced her hand against the wall and pulled herself up. She was standing in a cramped bathroom lined with chipped yellow tiles. When her eyes met the cracked mirror, the breath caught in her chest.

With trembling fingers, she reached up and touched her right cheek. Beneath her fingertips, there was no smooth, velvety skin—only taut, glossy, uneven scar tissue from severe burns and deep sutures that pulled the corner of her mouth downward. Her phone, its screen shattered, lay beside the sink. She snatched it up and turned it on: beneath her latest photo, rows of mocking emojis stretched into the thousands, her follower chart plummeted to the bottom in a jagged red line, and three formal emails from jewelry and fashion houses glowed at the top of her inbox with the subject line: Unilateral Termination of Contract Due to Image Incompatibility. Behind her, visions of a court foreclosure notice for the penthouse and a row of empty metal hangers in Michael’s closet flashed before her eyes like rapid snapshots.

In the next instant, Renee was standing outside a luxury high-rise in a howling blizzard, wearing a thin, threadbare coat and clutching a small plastic suitcase. With fingers blue from the cold, she pressed the video intercom button. “Clara? Please open the door, it’s me, Renee! Just for tonight, it’s freezing out here...” On the small monitor appeared the manicured face of one of her closest influencer friends; she cast a cold glance at Renee’s scarred face and, without saying a word, pressed the disconnect button. The screen went black.

Renee huddled onto a flattened piece of cardboard beneath the dark shadow of a pedestrian overpass. Her teeth chattered violently, and there were no tears left in her eyes. She rested her .head on her knees, wishing only to fall asleep and never wake up

Then a shadow blocked the wind. A pair of worn, snow-soaked ankle boots stopped in front of her feet. A warm wool coat draped over Renee's trembling shoulders, and rough yet familiar .hands slipped silently beneath her arms and lifted her up. It was Susan

The scene dissolved gently. Renee was lying on a narrow bed between crisp white cotton sheets that smelled of laundry detergent and lavender. Through the half-open door of the tiny home's only bedroom, the orange glow of a space heater spilled inside. Renee peeked through the crack: in the cramped living room, Susan had spread two blankets across the floor, and Richard, clenching his jaw against the pain, was straining to lower himself from his wheelchair onto a thin .floor mattress so their guest could have the warmer room

Susan entered carrying a steaming bowl of barley soup, knelt beside the bed, and before picking up the spoon, dabbed a bit of cool ointment onto the tight, scarred skin of Renee's cheek with her fingertip; her gaze was so calm and natural it was as though she were still looking at the loveliest face in the world. From outside the door came Richard's voice, chuckling at the ticking coils of the electric heater as he called out, "Miss Renee, forgive us if the boiler in our palace is a bit !noisy—tonight we're staying warm with a tractor"

Renee's chin quivered. She didn't reach for the bowl of soup; instead, she buried her face in Susan's calloused hands, her shoulders heaving with heavy, muffled sobs. Her cry echoed through the small room: "Why aren't you throwing me out, Susan? I broke you... I humiliated you... God, I don't deserve to be here! If only I could go back... if only I could live last night over !just one more time"

.I stepped forward and laid my invisible palm gently upon her hot, damp forehead

With a sudden jolt and a deep gasp that burned her lungs, Renee bolted upright on the white .velvet sofa

Pale golden sunlight from Christmas morning spilled across the white rug through the tall windows. Renee clutched at her face with both hands; her cheek was soft, smooth, and warm. There were no burns, no stitches. Panting, she looked around. The first thing her eyes landed on was the tall stand of the ring light, looming like a lifeless skeleton in the center of the room. Barefoot, she leaped off the couch, yanked the ring light's cord out of the wall socket, and turned her buzzing smartphone—flashing with dozens of promotional alerts and holiday greetings—face

.down on the table

The sound of a key turning echoed in the front lock. The door opened, and Michael stepped .inside with hollow eyes and an empty gym bag tucked under his arm to pack his clothes

Before he could take a second step, Renee ran across the cold parquet and threw herself into his arms. Her fingers dug into the thick wool of his coat as she buried her face against his neck. The gym bag slipped from Michael's hand to the floor. Renee's shoulders shook beneath his palms, the heat of her tears soaking through his shirt collar. "Don't leave, Michael... You were right, you were right the whole time. I got lost inside that damn glass screen. Don't say a word, just stay ".today... let me show you

Michael's hands, frozen mid-air, slowly wrapped around Renee's waist. He leaned back to look at her face; black mascara was smudged beneath her eyes and her hair was tangled, yet for the .first time in years, her pupils were trembling and alive

An hour later, a black SUV pulled up on the packed snow of the downtown alley. Michael lifted two boxes of fresh, warm pastries steaming in the crisp morning air along with large shopping bags from the trunk, while Renee held tightly to her chest a thick cream-colored envelope bearing the gold emblem of an advanced neurosurgery and rehabilitation clinic, tucked beside the .management folder of her charitable foundation

.They walked down the narrow basement steps. Renee knocked on the door

The iron door creaked open. Susan stood in the doorway in a knit cardigan, her hair pinned back with a clip. Her gaze slid from Renee's bare face and swollen eyes to Michael and the boxes in his arms; her mouth fell slightly open and the color drained from her cheeks, afraid she was being "?fired for leaving early the night before. "M-Miss Renee? Has something happened

Renee handed the folders over to Michael all at once, took a long stride forward, and wrapped her old classmate—still in her plain house sweater—in a tight embrace. Susan froze, her hands hovering in the air, until Renee rested her head on her shoulder and whispered into her ear in a trembling voice, "Merry Christmas, Susan... Thank you for not leaving me alone under that ".bridge. Thank you for not giving up on me

Susan's eyebrows knitted in confusion—she had no idea what bridge Renee was talking about—yet a quiet, wavering smile settled onto her lips, and her calloused hands gently patted the silk back of Renee's coat. From inside the room came the squeak of Richard's wheelchair rolling curiously toward the door, and the aroma of fresh coffee mingled with warm pastries down .the chilly corridor

Across the street, beneath the shadow of a pine tree whose boughs bent under the weight of snow, I turned up the collar of my invisible coat. The Christmas morning sun broke through the clouds and passed straight through me without casting a shadow upon the snow. My work here was done; the city was full of closed windows and glowing ring lights waiting for next December.