

## **Beneath the Frozen Moon**

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His gaze flicked toward the boy.

“You think you’re too good for this food?” he asked, his voice low and mocking. “Sitting there, barely touching it. You think you’re better than me?”

“No, sir,” the boy said quickly, his throat tight.

“Then eat,” the man snapped. “And don’t make me tell you again.”

The boy forced himself to take a bite, the dry meat sticking in his throat. His little sister glanced at him, her wide eyes filled with worry. The older sister kept her head down, her hands moving mechanically as she cleared another plate.

The man leaned back in his chair, his eyes still on the boy. “You think you’re a man now, huh?” he said. “Talking back to me out there? You think you’re tough?”

“I didn’t mean to—” the boy began, but the man cut him off.

“Shut up,” he said, his voice sharp. “Finish your food and meet me outside. Now.”

The yard was darker now, the faint glow of the moon obscured by thick clouds. The boy stepped out into the cold, his breath visible in the icy air. He didn’t look back at the house as he walked to the center of the yard, his boots crunching against the snow. He stopped and waited, his heart pounding in his chest.

The man followed a moment later, the shotgun resting against his shoulder. He took his time, his heavy boots leaving deep impressions in the snow. When he reached the boy, he lowered the gun,

pointing it straight at the boy, making him look through the very barrel of it. Two shells sat there, smirking at him.

“You think you can talk to me like that?” the man said, his voice low and venomous. “In my house? After all I do for you?”

The boy didn’t answer. He kept his eyes on the ground, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

“Look at me,” the man said. When the boy didn’t move, the man stepped closer, raising the barrel of the gun to point at his chest. “I said, look at me.”

The boy raised his head slowly, his breath coming in shallow bursts. The barrel of the gun seemed impossibly large, a black void that swallowed the faint light around it.

“You think you’re tough,” the man said, sneering. “You think you’re a man? Let’s see how tough you really are.”

The boy’s chest tightened, his heart slamming against his ribs. He glanced toward the house, where he knew his sisters were watching, their faces pale and pressed against the frost-rimmed window.

“I’m waiting,” the man said, his voice louder now. “Say something.”

The boy closed his eyes. He thought of the summer sun on his back, the sound of his mother’s laughter, the warmth of a life he could barely remember. He thought of his sisters, their wide eyes and trembling hands. He thought of the cold snow beneath his feet, waiting to catch him.

The blast shattered the night.