

BRUNO

by

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The shadow appeared briefly on the wall near the window, then slipped quickly down the rough stucco and melted into the deeper pool of darkness formed by the large shrub that grew in the planter. Flashes from distant lightning flickered on the panes of Sharon's bedroom window as it danced across the sky. A few seconds later the rumble of thunder reached the house. It sounded like the gods playing a giant base drum. Sharon stirred slightly in the king-size bed as her mind struggled toward consciousness. Outside, the gods turned the night to midday. For an instant, silence quiet as death filled the room, then the crash of thunder shook the house, rattling the windows. Heart pounding wildly, Sharon bolted straight up in bed, hugging the thin sheet to her body. The room was dark as hades. Sharon shivered. Then the sky

lighted up again and the house shook.

Sharon hated storms. Hated them! Had been scared to death of them since she was a little girl. Especially violent summer storms.

Wide awake now, she lay back down in the big bed, pulled the sheet over her head, and waited for the next flash, wishing with all her might that Gregg was here with her. She hated storms and she hated being alone, and she *really* hated being alone when it stormed. And she hated Gregg's job for taking him away so often. She knew he had been lucky to land this job, and that he loved selling, but why couldn't he get a job that didn't have him out of town three nights a week? They had argued over it for three months now, ever since he'd taken this job, and every quarrel ended the same way. "All right!", he'd yell. "If you want to live on half the income, I'll quit my job and get a job selling shoes, or paper clips, or magazines, or something." They might have been able to get by on half the income before they'd moved to this upscale neighborhood with its fancy houses and expensive cars, but not now. And to make it worse, five months after they'd moved here Gregg had lost his old job. He'd been out of work for six weeks, and they were just now getting back on their feet. So he kept his job, and she dreaded the nights alone, and the summer storms.

A dull thud jarred the front door. Sharon jerked upright in bed. It had sounded like someone had hit the door, trying to force it open. She held her breath, listening. All she could hear was the pounding of her heart. Then the door rattled against the jamb. Sharon's heart jumped into her throat. It sounded like someone was trying to get

in the house.

Gregg had put double safety latches on both the front and back doors three weeks ago after poor old Mr. Eddy, who live three houses up the street from them, had been beaten almost to death by the cat burglar. Gregg had installed them himself. "Don't worry, Honey," he had said. "No one can get through those doors unless they knock them down." It had sounded reassuring at the time, but right now it wasn't much help.

The door rattled against the jamb again. Sharon swallowed hard, hugging herself and rocking back and forth in the bed. Could a man actually knock a door down? Of course he could. They did it all the time in the movies. But that was usually the cops, not cat burglars. Cat burglars employed stealth and cunning, not brute strength. When he saw how solid the door was, he would give up and go away. "P . . p . . pl . ease," she whimpered.

The cat burglar had been roaming the area for three months now. So far the police hadn't come up with a single clue. People in the neighborhood were afraid to go out at night. Gregg had come up with the idea of forming a vigilante group and patrolling the area after dark, but the police had gotten wind of it and the captain of the local precinct had called a neighborhood watch meeting. He had explained that the citizens could do the most good by keeping their eyes open and reporting any unusual activities. Dealing with violent criminals was a job for professionals. It was just a matter of time until the cat burglar slipped up and was caught. In the meantime, the

police had posted a 10:00 p.m. curfew. Anyone caught on the streets after 10:00 p.m. would be arrested. The curfew had been effective at stopping the vigilantes, but it hadn't slowed the cat burglar down. So far, eleven houses had been robbed, a teenage girl had been raped in her own bed, and poor old Mr. Eddy had been beaten nearly to death when he surprised the thief in his living room. The police had tripled their patrols, but the cat burglar was still out there doing his thing.

The noise Sharon had heard at the front door had stopped, and she had almost quit shaking. She hugged herself tight. No one had gotten in. The lock Gregg had installed had held. The cat burglar had given up and gone away. But then her curiosity got the better of her, or maybe it was her civic duty. She had to know if whoever had been trying to get in her front door was still out there. If she got a glimpse of the cat burglar, she would call the police and maybe they would catch him. Gregg would be so proud of her.

Sharon slipped quietly out of bed, pulled her gown tightly around her, and tip-toed across the room to the window. She pulled the thin drapes back an inch and peeked out. It was pitch black. Heavy clouds covered the moon, and the streetlight on the corner had stopped working a few days ago. A breeze rustled the trees. Something scraped against the house. Sharon cringed. The door rattled. Sharon froze, rooted to the floor, unable to move. Unable to breathe. Something thudded against the door. A distant flash of lightning brightened the yard.

The black and white ball bounced off the wall and swung back against the tree.

A limb brushed against the roof. Sharon let out the breath she'd been holding. A limb brushing against the roof. Derrick's tether ball swinging in the wind, bouncing against the wall. He'd gotten it hung in the tree a couple of days ago and Gregg hadn't had time to get it loose before he left. Sharon shook her head. Her cat burglar had just been the wind and her over active imagination.

Feeling a little foolish, she closed the drapes and started back across the room. Halfway to the bed, the room was illuminated like someone had turned on all the lights. Sharon muffled a scream and dived into bed just as the thunder shook the house. Oh Christ! Now she was shaking again. She hated, hated, hated thunder and lightning. She yanked the sheet up under her chin. She hated, hated, hated the cat burglar. Trembling, she rolled up into a ball, and pulled the pillow over her head. And she hated, hated, hated being alone.

Normally, when Gregg was gone on business, Derrick was home. Her son was only six, but at least she wasn't alone. On a night like this, she would have to be brave in front of him. He got terribly upset when he saw his mommy cry.

When she'd found out that Derrick's plans had changed, she had wanted to keep her son home, but Gregg had insisted that they let him go. They had made plans for Derrick to spend the night with one of his friends two weeks ago when they thought Gregg would be home that night. True, Derrick would have been disappointed if he hadn't been able to spend the night away from home. He thought it made him big like his Dad. Right now Sharon didn't care how disappointed he would have been. She

wished her son were here with her. Tears filled her eyes. She wasn't sure which was worse, the storm or the loneliness.

She sobbed quietly until she'd washed away her self pity. Finally, she rolled over and wiped the tears from her eyes. She had never been one to allow herself to wallow in depression. It was a foolish, counter productive emotion. So she was alone on a stormy night. She'd live through it. She'd never known anyone who had actually died of fear, or loneliness. The cat burglar had turned out to be the wind and her imagination. She was perfectly safe. Besides, not even a burglar would work on a night like this. He was obviously smart, otherwise he would have been caught by now. And if he was smart enough to elude the police, surely he was smart enough to stay inside out of the weather.

Lightning crackled across a distant mountain top and light danced dimly across the bedroom windows. The shadow of a man darkened the drapes. Sharon jerked upright in bed. Someone was outside her window! She sat in bed, eyes riveted to the drapes, clutching the sheet tightly under her chin. Afraid to move. Afraid to breathe. Afraid of what she might see. The sky lighted up again. She jumped and almost screamed. But this time the window had no shadow. She rubbed her eyes, squinting at the drapes. A distant flash lighted it for an instant. No shadow of a man. Had one been there before? Or was her imagination playing tricks on her again?

Sharon shuddered. If someone was in her front yard, she had to know, and she knew only one way to be sure. She got out of bed again, crept to the drapes, and

opened then just a crack. The night was cloaked in darkness. She rubbed her eyes trying to see into the gloom. Finally her eyes adjusted enough that she could make out the tree and the shrubs. Another flash of lightning, closer this time, blinded her. She screamed when the thunder rattled the windows. White spots danced before her eyes. When she'd blinked them away, she saw a dark shadow slip around the corner of the garage. It had come from behind the tree, then silently darted around the corner. It had happened so quickly that she couldn't be sure if it was a man or not. She stood transfixed, watching the corner of the garage. She was trembling so badly her teeth chattered. Had she really seen a man slip around the corner of the house? Or was it her imagination again? Or maybe the shadow of a tree limb swaying in the wind? It had happened so fast she couldn't be sure. Whatever it was had darted around the corner, faster than a man would move, more like an animal. Could it have been a large animal? Like Bruno? Bruno could have gotten out of his yard and been roaming the neighborhood. He did that every once in awhile. Scared the daylights out of some folks. Bruno was big, but he could move quickly, like the shadow she'd seen. Yes, that made sense. She'd seen Bruno out for a midnight stroll.

Having solved the puzzle, she pulled the drapes closed and climbed back into bed, hoping Bruno would go back home before a police patrol saw him and called animal control. She didn't want Bruno to get busted.

Bruno belonged to the people who lived behind them. Or to the side if you preferred since their's was a corner lot. Feelings in the neighborhood ran about 50/50

with Bruno. Half the people loved him and the other half were scared to death of him. Sharon thought he was just a big pussy cat. When she'd go out in the back yard he'd jump up on the five-foot redwood fence that separated their yard from their neighbors and hang his giant head over the fence so she could pet him. She never ceased to be amazed by the size of his head. His neck was bigger around than her waist, and his front feet were as big as her hands! When Gregg wasn't at home she'd hold Derrick up to the fence and let him pet Bruno. Every now and then she'd get him too close and Bruno would take a swipe at him with his giant tongue, washing his whole face in one lick. Derrick would push himself away roaring with laughter.

Sharon and Derrick loved the big Saint Bernard, Gregg however; thought the huge dog was a killer and should be destroyed. One Sunday afternoon, Sharon had tried to get Gregg to come over to the fence and pet Bruno. As Gregg cautiously reached out his hand, she heard the rumble of a growl start deep in Bruno's chest and move up until it became a low woof. There was an intense look in those big brown eyes as the head pulled back away from the fence. Sharon had tried to explain that Bruno had sensed Gregg's fear and responded to it. All dogs did that. But Gregg was having none of it. He had absolutely forbid Sharon and Derrick ever to go near the animal again. Then he had gone next door and told the Swift's that if he ever found Bruno in his yard he would have him destroyed. That had ended their friendship with the neighbors, and from then on, Sharon and Derrick only petted Bruno when Gregg was away from home. It was their little secret.

It was probably a good thing Derrick wasn't home tonight. If he had seen Bruno roaming around outside, he would have called the police. The Swifts would have had to pay animal control to get Bruno back, and there would have been a big fight. Sharon sighed. She really like Debra Swift. They used to get together for coffee a couple of times a week. Sharon really missed having someone to talk to. Gregg expected her to stay home all the time, be a housewife and a mother. That was her job. Sharon loved her husband and son, but sometimes she felt like a prisoner. She *needed* to be around other people. Especially after a night like this. Tomorrow morning she would call Debra and invite her over for coffee. Just because Gregg and Bill Swift didn't speak to one another was no reason she and Debra couldn't still be friends. And just to be on the safe side, in the morning, she would go outside and make sure she erased any evidence of Bruno having been in the yard. No point adding fuel to the fire.

The storm had moved further away and Sharon had stopped trembling. She rolled over on her side, pulled the sheet up under her chin, and closed her eyes. She was just about to drop off to sleep when she heard Bruno's deep "woof, woof." The sound had come from Bruno's backyard. That was good. Bruno had gone back home. She let out a deep breath and her eyes closed again. Another "woof" came from next door. Louder this time. Then another. Louder still, and a tone Sharon rarely heard. Bruno's, *I mean business*, bark. Sharon sat up in bed. Something was out there. And whatever it was, wasn't in the Swift's yard or Bruno would have chased it off. Whatever it was that had the big dog's attention had to be in the Tucker's backyard or Sharon's.

Sharon's pulse began to race. Maybe the dark form she'd seen dart around the corner hadn't been Bruno after all. Maybe the shadow she'd seen on the window really had been a man. Maybe someone was outside in her backyard. Maybe the cat burglar! Cold chills danced up and down Sharon's spine. She was too frightened now to cry or even scream. Hand trembling, she reached for the phone on the night stand. She would call 911. The police would respond quickly. If someone was in her backyard, the police would arrest them. She snatched the phone up and held it to her ear as she punched in the numbers. But something was wrong. It took a moment for her to make the connection. No dial tone! The storm had knocked out the phone lines. Now she was *really* alone, and with a madman prowling around in her back yard.

Lightning made the room bright as day. Sharon screamed. The storm had returned. Thunder shook the house. Eyes scrunched tight, Sharon hugged herself. A loud "woof" came from next door. Sharon couldn't move. But she knew if she didn't do something, the cat burglar might break into the house and find her. Then, oh God! She hugged herself tighter. She wasn't sure which would be worse, being raped or murdered.

Even scared out of her mind, Sharon knew she couldn't just sit there and wait for the inevitable. She had to do something. She had to know if someone was in her backyard. The next flash of lightning and its accompanying loud claps of thunder scared her into action. She got out of bed, and silently crept out of the bedroom. She felt her way along the hallway until she came to the family room. It had windows that opened

onto the backyard. It was pitch black in the house, and every moment Sharon expected the burglar to pounce on her. She could barely breathe, but she was sure they could hear her heart pounding two blocks away. She finally made her way to the back wall, tiptoed silently along until she came to the windows, took a shaky breath, and pulled the drapes back just enough to be able to see into the yard. It was pitch black outside. She couldn't see a thing. Not even the big tree that grew there. Nothing. She rubbed her eyes and tried to blink away the darkness. It didn't help, but nature did. A distant flash of lightning turned the backyard to twilight. A scream caught in Sharon's throat. A man dressed all in black was in the backyard. The cat burglar! Mr. Eddy had described him as medium height, medium build, and dressed all in black. Black pants, a black shirt, black gloves, even a black ski mask that covered everything but his eyes. Black as Satan and just a scary. And he was in Sharon's backyard, slinking across the yard toward her back door. She let the drapes drop back into place. She had to get help. But how? She couldn't call the police. The phone was dead. They didn't have a second car, Gregg thought it was an unnecessary expense. If she ran into the street to try and find help, the burglar would catch her and, and, and. . . Oh, God, she'd never felt so helpless in her life. She fell to her knees, sobbing hysterically. "Oh God, help me. Help me! Gregg, why did you leave me alone? Help me! I don't want to die!"

Then she remembered. The gun! Gregg had bought it right after the robberies had started. He'd put it in the night stand so it would be easy to get at. Sobbing, Sharon stumbled toward the bedroom. Halfway there, something scraped against the

back door. In the darkness, she panicked, lunged forward, and fell over a chair. Her shin banged painfully against the chair's arm. She lay on the floor blubbering silently. The cat burglar would probably kill her before she could even get to the gun.

The house was quiet, except for Sharon's labored breathing. She got to her hands and knees and crawled the rest of the way to the bedroom. The back door rattled. Sharon scooted across the dark room until she came to the bed. Sobbing hysterically, she fumbled her way to the night stand. She imagined heavy steps coming toward her. She could feel the cat burglar grab her and throw her back across the room, then pounce on her, beat her, rape her, kill her. But before her imagination turned to reality, she managed to yank the drawer open and grab the gun. She sat hunched back against the wall, holding the pistol out in front of her, pointing into the darkness.

The feel of the cold steel in her hand calmed her slightly. She stopped crying and wiped the tears from her face, but she was still trembling so badly she could barely hold the gun.

The back door rattled again. The cat burglar was still outside, trying to get in. Sharon gripped the gun in both hands. Maybe the lock would hold. Maybe he would leave. The door creaked. Sharon almost dropped the gun. The cat burglar was trying to break the door down. "Please, God," she prayed. "Let the lock hold. Make him go away. Find someone else to rob." She knew that was not a very Christian attitude, but she couldn't help it.

She huddled against the wall, gun gripped in both hands, aimed at the bedroom door. If he came through the doorway, into her bedroom, she would pull the trigger. Sharon shuddered at the thought of shooting someone. Could she actually do it? Shoot the cat burglar? Maybe kill him. She'd never even held a gun before, much less shot one. But if she didn't shoot him, he might kill her. The back door was rattling on its hinges. Sharon tried to steady the gun, but it continued to shake. If he broke the door down, maybe he wouldn't come in the bedroom. Maybe he'd find whatever he was looking for somewhere else in the house and take it and leave.

A low "woof" came from the Swift's yard, then the sound of wood being torn from its moorings. Sharon's breath caught in her throat. The lock hadn't held. The cat burglar had broken the door down. Sharon began to shake so violently the gun nearly fell from her hands. She couldn't move. Couldn't breathe.

She heard a deep throated growl, followed by a blood curdling scream, then silence. Sharon sat perfectly still, too terrified to move.

Sometime later, it could have been seconds or minutes, time for her had slowed to a crawl, Sharon got slowly to her feet and inched her way out of the bedroom, down the hall, and toward the back of the house. In the darkness she couldn't tell if the door had been knocked down or not. She came to the back wall and eased along it until she felt the drapes that covered the windows. She heard another deep throated growl. This time it sounded like it came from *her* backyard. She ran her hand along the wall until she found the light switch. With the gun in one hand, she flicked the switch, and

holding her breath, pushed the drapes aside so she could see. The porch light blinded her. She closed her eyes, then opened them just a slit until they adjusted to the light. Then she opened them wide, unable to believe what she saw.

Bruno had a black clothed figure face down on the lawn. The huge dog stood over him, and every time the man so much as twitched a muscle, Bruno growled. A large bloody patch of white skin showed through a tear in the black trousers. A six-foot section of redwood fence lay on the ground where Bruno had flattened it in his charge to reach the intruder.

Pulling her gown tightly around her Sharon opened the back door and stepped outside. Bruno turned to look at her and wagged his tail. The burglar moved. Bruno let out a deep growl and planted a giant paw on the man's back. The movement stopped. Sharon couldn't believe it. Bruno had done what the police had been unable to do. He had captured the cat burglar.

"Good boy Bruno," she said, "and don't move mister. I have a gun, and I'll use it if I have too." Then her predicament dawned on her. Bruno had captured the burglar, but now what? She couldn't stand guard all night, and with the phone out she couldn't call the police. Maybe if she screamed as loud as she could she would get someone's attention and they would come to investigate. But she had no idea how Bruno would react to her screaming. He might think the cat burglar was hurting her and rip the man to shreds. Or he might get scared and run off and then she would be alone with a madman. Screaming didn't sound like such a good idea.

Luckily, before she had time to panic, a patrol car pulled to the curb. Two policemen jumped out and came running toward her. One had his gun out and stopped short to keep the suspect covered while his partner frisked him. As the police approached, Bruno trotted over to Sharon's side and sat down waiting to be petted.

The policeman straightened up and turned toward his partner. "He's clean." Then he turned back to the burglar. "Okay, mister on you feet." As his partner cuffed the man's hands behind his back, the first officer walked over to Sharon. "Better give me the gun lady, before someone gets hurt." She had been so fascinated by the scene unfolding in front of her that she had forgotten she had the gun in her hand. When the policeman reminded her, she dropped it like a hot potato.

The police officer jumped back. "Whoa, Lady! Careful. That thing could have gone off when it hit the ground." He reached down, picked up the gun and opened the chamber. "Well on second thought, I guess it couldn't have. It's not loaded. Good thing you didn't have to use it. I suggest that in the future, you call the police and leave the dirty work to us."

The emotions she'd just experienced, fear of the storm, loneliness, absolute terror of the cat burglar, all came to a head. "You . . . I . . . I couldn't call. The phone is dead. And . . . Don't you lecture me about police work. The cops have been trying to catch this guy for three months. If it wasn't for Bruno here," she reached down and patted the big dog's head, "God only knows what that, that, madman might have done. He could have killed me before the police showed up."

The police officer raised his hands. “Okay lady. I was just trying to tell you, if you’re going to handle a gun, you better know how to use it.”

“Yeah, well. . . Bruno got him. That’s all that matters.”

The cop shrugged and turned back to his partner.

Sharon bent down and put her arms around Bruno’s massive, furry neck. “Oh Bruno. Thank you. You saved my life. I’m going to buy you the biggest box of doggie treats you have ever seen.”

She felt the rumble start deep in Bruno’s chest and his body tense. She looked up and saw the police officer begin pulling the black ski mask from the burglar’s head. She watched, fascinated, as the man’s face was revealed. His chin looked familiar. And the lower jaw. It had to be someone from the neighborhood. Someone she’d seen before.

Then the officer jerked the mask completely off and her knees buckled.

“Gregg?!!”

The end

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