

The Face in the Window

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Lightning flashed.

Thunder cracked.

It might have been the end of the world.

And there, cast eerily in the window, pressed against it, was a face. The eyes were red; they seemed to glow, like demon eyes.

There was a split second when it seemed the storm had cast up the very devil to come for her.

Startled, Beth Henson let out a scream, backing away from the image, almost tripping over the coffee table behind her. The brilliant illumination created by the lightning faded to black, and along with it, the image of the face.

Beyond the window, darkness reigned again.

A lantern burned on the table, a muted glow against the shadowed darkness of night. The storm had long since blown out the electricity as it should have

removed other inhabitants from the area. The wind railed with the sharpness of a banshee's shriek, even though the hurricane had wound down to tropical-storm strength before descending upon the lower Florida Keys.

Instinctive terror reigned in Beth's heart for several long seconds, then compassion overrode it. Someone was out there, drenched and frightened in the storm. She had gone to the window to see if she could find any sign of Keith. He had left her when their last phone communication with the sheriff had warned them that Mrs. Peterson—one of the few full-time residents of the tiny key—had failed to evacuate. She wouldn't leave for a shelter, not when the shelters wouldn't allow her to bring Cocoa, her tiny Yorkie. Okay, so Cocoa could be a pain, but she and Keith could understand the elderly woman's love for her pup and companion, and Beth had convinced Keith they could listen to a bit of barking.

The appearance of the face in the window was followed by a banging on the door. Beth jumped again, startled. For a moment, she froze. *What if it was a serial killer?* Normally, she would never just open a door to anyone.

But the pounding continued, along with a cry for help. She sprang into action, chiding herself. Someone was out there who needed shelter from the storm. Some idiot tourist without the sense to evacuate when told to. And if that someone died because she was too frightened to give aid in an emergency...

And how ridiculous. Sure, the world had proven to be a rough place, with heinous and conniving criminals. But to assume a serial killer was running around in the midst of what might have been a killer storm was just ludicrous.

She hurried forward, hand firmly on the door as she opened it against the power of the wind. Again, compassion surged through her as the soaked and bedraggled man came staggering in, desperately gasping for breath. He was a thin man with dark, wet hair that clung to his face and the back of his neck. When he looked at Beth, his eyes were wide and terrified. He offered her a faltering smile. „God bless you! You really must be an angel!“ he cried.

Beth drew the quilted throw from the sofa and wrapped it around the man's shoulders, demanding, „What were you doing out there? How could you *not* have heard the evacuation orders issued for all tourists?“

He looked at her sheepishly. „Please, don't throw me back out,“ he told her. „I admit, I was on a bender in Key West.“ He staggered to his feet. „When I realized we were told to go, I started out, but my car was literally blown off the road. Then I saw light. Faint light—your place. God must look after fools. I mean... if you don't throw me out.“ He was tall and wiry, perhaps about thirty. She realized, when not totally bedraggled, he was surely a striking young fellow, with his brilliant blue eyes and dark hair.

„I'm not going to throw you out,“ she told him.

He offered her a hand suddenly. „I'm Mark Egan. A musician. Maybe you've heard of my group? We're called Ultra C. Our first CD just hit the stores, and we were playing the bars down in Key West. You haven't heard of me—or us?“ he said, disappointed.

„No, I'm afraid I haven't.“

„That's okay, I guess most of the world hasn't,“ he said.

„Maybe my husband will have heard of you. He's in Key West often and he really loves to listen to local groups.“

He offered her his engaging grin once again. „It doesn't matter—you're still wonderful. You're an angel—wow, gorgeous, too.“

„Thanks. I can give you something dry to put on. My husband is somewhat larger than you are, but I'm sure you can make do.“

„Your husband? Is he here?“

She felt a moment's unease. „Yes, of course. He's just... battening down a few things. He's around, close,“ she said.

„I hope he doesn't stay out too long. It's brutal. Hey, you guys don't keep a car here?“ he asked.

An innocent question? she wondered.

„Yes, we have a car,“ she said, determined not to explain further. „I'm Beth Henson,“ she said, and offered him a hand. They shook. His grip was more powerful than what she had expected.

„Hang on, I'll get you those clothes,“ she said.

She picked up one of the flashlights and headed for the bedroom. She couldn't help looking over her shoulder, afraid that he had followed her. He hadn't. She went to the closet and decided on an old pair of Keith's jeans and a T-shirt. Best she could do. She brought them back out and handed them to the dripping man. „Bathroom is the first door on the left, and here's a flashlight.“

„Thanks. Truly, you are an angel!“ he said, and walked down the hall.

* * * * *

Keith's friends liked to make fun of him for the Hummer. Hell, Beth liked to rib him about it, shaking her head with bemused tolerance as she did so. It was a gas guzzler. Not at all eco-friendly. It was a testosterone thing, a macho thing he felt he had to have. He mused he could now knock it all back in their faces—the Hummer was heavy enough to make it through the wind, tough enough to crawl through the flooding.

So there, guys. Testosterone? Maybe. But Beth had been the one who had been worried sick about Mrs. Peterson. She had been worried sick again when he had left to retrieve Mrs. Peterson and the dog. She'd wanted to come; he'd convinced her that if she was home, he wouldn't be worried about her in the storm as well.

He fiddled with the knob on the radio again, trying to get something to come in. At last, he did. He expected the news stations in the south of the state to be carrying nothing but storm coverage—even if the storm had lost momentum.

„...serial killer on the loose. Authorities suspect that he headed south just before evacuation notices went into effect...“

Static, damn! Then, „Parker managed to disappear, as if into thin air, according to Lieutenant Abner Gretskey, prison guard.

„Downed poles and electrical failures have made pursuit and apprehension difficult. John Parker was found guilty in the slaying of Patricia Reeves of Miramar last year. He is suspected of the murders of at least seven other women in the southeastern states.

„He is a man of approximately—“

Keith couldn't believe it when another earful of static slammed him instead of statistics on the man. Headed south?

Not this far south. Only a suicidal maniac would have attempted to drive down into the dark and treacherous keys when a storm of any magnitude was in gear. Still, it felt as if icy fingers slid down his throat to his heart.

Beth was alone at the house.

He was tempted to turn back instantly. But Mrs. Peterson's trailer was just ahead now. All he had to do was grab the old woman, hop back in the Hummer and turn around.

The first thing he noted was that her old Plymouth wasn't in the drive.

He hesitated, then reached in the glove compartment for the .38 Smith & Wesson he was licensed to carry. He exited the car, swearing against the savage pelting of the rain.

„Mrs. Peterson!“ he roared, approaching the trailer. Damn, the woman was lucky the thing hadn't blown over yet. He could hear the dog barking. Yappy little creature, but hell, it was everything in the world to the elderly widow.

„Mrs. Peterson!“ He pounded on the door. There was no response. He hesitated, then tried the knob. The door was open.

He walked in. Mrs. Peterson's purse was on the coffee table.

Cocoa could be heard but not seen. „Mrs. Peterson?“

The trailer was small. There was nowhere to hide in the living room or kitchen. He tried her sewing room, and then, not sure why, he hesitated at the door to her bedroom. He slipped the Smith & Wesson from his waistband, took a stance and threw open the door.

Nothing. No one. He breathed a sigh of relief, then spun around at a flurry of sound. Cocoa came flying out from beneath the bed.

The small dog managed to jump into his arms, terrified. As Keith clutched the animal, he heard a noise from the front, and headed back out.

A drenched man in what was surely supposed to be a waterproof jacket stood just inside the doorway. „Aunt Dot?“ he called.

The fellow was about thirty years old. Dark hair was plastered to his head. He stood about six feet even. He saw Keith standing with the gun and cried out, stunned and frightened.

„Who are you?“ Keith demanded.

„Joe. I'm Joe Peterson. Dot Peterson's nephew,“ he explained.

„How did you get here?“

„Walked.“ The fellow swallowed. „My car broke down. Um... where's my aunt?“ he inquired.

„You tell me,“ Keith demanded warily.

„I... I don't know. I was on my way down here... the car gave out. Man, I went through some deep flooding... walked the rest of the way here. Um, who are you and why are you aiming a gun at me?“ There was definite fear in his voice. „Wait, no, never mind. I don't want to know your name. Hey, if you're taking anything, go ahead. I'll just walk back out into the storm. I'll look for my aunt.“

„We'll look for her together,“ Keith said.

He indicated that Joe should walk back out. The fellow hesitated uneasily and then voiced an anxious question. „Aunt Dot-tie... she's really not here?“

Keith shook his head. „Move.“

Joe moved toward the door. „Back out into the storm?“ he demanded.

Keith nodded grimly. Outside, he put the dog in the car, stuck the gun in his waistband and opened the driver's side. „Get in,“ he shouted to Joe Peterson.

„Maybe I should wait here,“ Peterson shouted back.

„Maybe we should look for your aunt!“

They both got into the car. Cocoa scampered to the back seat, whimpering. Keith eased the Hummer out of the drive. „Search the sides of the road, see if she drove off somehow!“ Keith commanded.

„Search the side of the road?“ Peterson repeated. He looked at Keith so abruptly that water droplets flew from his face and hood. „I can't see a damn road! It's all gray.“

„Look for a darker gray blob in the middle of the gray then,“ Keith said.

The windshield wipers were working hard, doing little.

But then he saw it. Something just barely visible. Peering forward more closely, he saw the Plymouth. It had gone off the road heading south.

Keith stared at Peterson, drew out the gun and warned the man, „Sit still.“

„Right, yeah, right!“ Peterson said nervously, staring at the gun.

Keith stepped from the car. He slogged through the flooded road to the mucky embankment. He looked in the front and saw nothing. *Why would the old lady, who always held tight to her handbag, have left the purse on the table when she was taking off in her own car?*

Fighting against the wind, he opened the front doors and the back. No sign of a struggle, of a person, of... anything.

Then he noted the trunk. It was ajar. He lifted the lid.

And found Mrs. Peterson.

* * * * *

„So... you live out here, year-round?“

„No. This is just a vacation home.“

„Lonely place,“ he said.

Beth shrugged. „We live in Coconut Grove, but actually spend a lot of time down here. My husband is a diver.“

„A professional diver?“

Beth could have explained that Keith's work went much further than simple diving, that his contracts often had to do with the government or law enforcement, but she didn't want to explain—she wasn't sure why. Her uninvited guest had changed his clothing. He was warm and dry. She had given him a brandy, and he had been nothing but polite and entirely circumspect. The unease of having let someone into her house hadn't abated, although she didn't know why. This guy seemed to be as benign as a hibiscus bush.

„Um, yes. He's a professional diver,“ she agreed.

„Great,“ he said, grinning. He pointed a finger at her. „Didn't *you* get that original evacuation notice?“

„We got it, but this place was built in the mid-1800s. It's weathered many a storm. The evacuation wasn't mandatory for residents—only visitors.“ She was pleased to hear a sudden burst of static and she leaped to her feet. „The radio! I don't know why, my batteries are new, but I wasn't getting anything on it. And the

cell phones right now are a total joke.“ She offered him a rueful smile and went running through the hall for the kitchen, at the back of the house.

„...be on the lookout... extremely dangerous...”

She nearly skidded to a stop as she heard the words come from the radio on the dining table.

„...serial killer...”

Like a stick figure, she moved over to the table, staring at the radio. It had gone to static again. She picked it up and shook it, feeling dizzy, ill.

„...suspected to be running south, into the keys...”

„Turn it off!”

Beth looked up. Her guest had followed her from the living room to the kitchen. He stood in the doorway, hands tightly gripping the wood frame as he stared at her. His eyes were wild, red-rimmed...

Like they had appeared when she'd first seen his face in the window.

And there *was* a serial killer loose in the keys...

* * * * *

Mrs. Peterson was trussed up like a fresh kill, wrists and ankles bound, a gag around her mouth. There was no blood, and though her linen pants and shirt were muddied and soaked, there were no signs of violence on her. Keith checked for any sign of life. Her body was so cold.

But she was alive. He felt a faint pulse and snapped open the blade on the Swiss Army knife attached to his key chain. He cut the tight gag from her mouth and then the ropes binding her.

He didn't know if she had broken bones or internal injuries.

She could wind up with pneumonia or worse, but this wasn't the kind of situation that left him much choice. He hoisted her fragile body from the trunk and returned to the car, staggering against the wind. He shouted for Joe Peterson to help, but there was no response. He managed to wrench open the rear door of the vehicle on his own.

Cocoa yapped.

Keith swore.

„Dammit! Why didn't you *help?*“ he demanded of his passenger, depositing his human burden as best he could.

There was no answer, other than Cocoa's excited woofs.

His passenger had disappeared.

* * * * *

„You're right!“ Beth managed to say, forcing her frozen mind into action. „The storm is rough enough. Let's not listen to bad news!“

She turned the radio off.

„Hey, I have a Sterno pot, if you're hungry. I can whip up something.“

He shook his head, not moving, staring at her with his red-rimmed eyes. *You've been through worse than this!* she reminded herself.

Worse?

Yes! When she had met Keith, when there had been a skull in the sand, when she had become far too curious...

Toughen up! she chastised herself. *You've come through before!*

„I think I'll make myself something.“ *Stay calm. Appear confident.* How did one deal with a serial killer? She tried to remember all the sage things that had been said, recommendations from the psychiatrists who had spent endless hours talking with killers that had been incarcerated. *Talk. Yes. Just keep talking...*

Then she remembered her husband's own words of caution.

If you ever pull out a gun, intend to use it. If you find that you have to shoot, shoot to kill.

She didn't have a gun.

But then again, there was another question.

What if he wasn't the serial killer? Just because she had found herself alone with this man and heard that there was a killer on the loose, did that mean this man was the one?

Weapon! She needed some kind of weapon.

And would it be the same? *If you ever pull out a gun, intend to use it.* Would that work with, if you ever pull out a frying pan, intend to use it?

She reached into one of the shelves for a can of Sterno and matches, trying to pretend the man who now looked like a psycho and stood in the door frame—still just staring at her—wasn't doing so. She forced herself to hum as she lit the Sterno, and then reached for the frying pan. She held it as she rummaged through the cabinet.

Then she felt him coming nearer...

Her back was to him, he was making no sound. The air around her seemed to be the only hint of his stealth.

She pretended to keep staring at the objects in the cabinet.

She turned.

God!

He was next to her, before her, staring at her, starting to smile...

She swung the frying pan around with all of her might. She caught him on the side of his skull, and the pan seemed to re-verberate in her hands. He was still there, still standing, just staring at her.

And then...

He reached out.

She screamed as his hands fell upon her shoulders.

* * * * *

The flooding had grown worse. Still, Keith had no choice but to trust in his knowledge of the area and his instincts. He took the turn-off, then said a silent prayer of relief as the tires found the gravel and rock of his driveway.

The man calling himself Joe Peterson was missing. He had run from the car. Leaving his aunt. There was only one house in the area—his. And Beth was in it.

Something streaked out of the windblown brush and pines that lined the drive.

Someone ahead of him, making his way to the house.

* * * * *

Mark Egan's hands fell upon Beth's shoulders. His eyes met hers.

They held a dazed and questioning look.

He sank slowly to the floor in front of her, trying to catch hold of her to prevent his fall. She stepped back, then turned to flee.

His hand, his grip still incredibly strong, wound around her ankle. She fell, stunned. She still had her frying pan.

Never pull out a frying pan unless you intend to use it!

She raised it to strike again. She didn't need to. The vise of his fingers around her ankle eased. She scurried to the far side of the kitchen floor, staring at him. Was he dead? She inched ever so slightly closer on her knees, frying pan raised to strike.

He didn't move.

She remained still, desperately thinking. She loathed a movie wherein the victim had the attacker down—then just ran, eschewing the idea that a killer might rise again. She lifted the pan to strike again, then gritted her teeth in agony.

What if she was wrong? What if he was just a drugged-out musician?

She looked around the kitchen, desperate to find something. She saw what she needed. A bottom cabinet was just slightly ajar. She saw an extension cord. The good thing about spending her life around the water and boats was that she could tie one sturdy knot.

She scrambled for the extension cord and turned back to tie up her victim. To her astonishment, he had risen.

He was staring at her again.

His eyes were no longer dazed.

They were deadly.

* * * * *

The elements were still raging. The area in front of the house looked like a lake. Keith knew if he left the old lady in the car, he might well be signing her death certificate. He fought the temptation to leave her, to rush out in a panic, thinking only of his wife.

The dog was yapping.

„Cocoa, if you don't shut up...!“ Keith warned.

To his astonishment, the Yorkie sat still, staring at him gravely.

Keith opened the door, reached into the back, picked up his human burden. Cocoa barked once—just reminding Keith he was there. „Come on, then!“ he said, and Cocoa jumped up, landing on the old woman's stomach. Keith hurried toward the house. *Was the man in the trailer really just the old woman's nephew—who had run because of him? Or was he a killer? What if he were in the house, if he had come upon Beth...?*

Keith made his way to the front door.

* * * * *

Run. There was no other option.

The rear door was at the back of the kitchen. She ran; he was right behind her.

When she opened the door, the wind rushed in with a rage.

She had been ready. He hadn't. The door slammed shut in his face.

Beth ran out into the storm.

Keith burst into the house, Mrs. Peterson in his arms, Cocoa on top of her.

„Beth?“

To his astonishment, a man staggered out of the kitchen.

Wearing his clothes. The fellow stared at him like an escapee from the nearest mental institute.

He was unarmed.

Keith quickly strode to the sofa to deposit Mrs. Peterson.

Cocoa stayed on her stomach—growling.

Keith pulled his gun from his waistband.

„Whoa!“ the man said.

„Where’s my wife?“ Keith barked.

„She hit me with a frying pan and ran out!“ the man said. „Oh my God, I’ve been rescued by loonies!“ he wailed. „She hits me—now you’re going to *shoot* me?“

„Who the hell are you?“ Keith barked.

„Mark Egan.“ He sighed, rubbing his hand. „I’m a musician. What is the matter with you people?“

Holding his gun on the intruder, loath to take his eyes from him, Keith draped a throw, tossed on the back of the rocker, over Mrs. Peterson. „Get in there,“ he ordered, indicating the guest room. „Now!“

„I’m going!“ the man said, lifting a hand. He sidled against the wall, heading for the room. The lantern caused ominous shadows to invade the house.

„You know, you’re crazy,“ he said softly. „You’re both crazy!“

„If you’ve hurt her, I’m going to take you apart piece by piece.“

„She attacked me!“ the fellow protested.

„Get in there!“

It was then they both heard the scream, long and sharp, rising above the lashing sound of wind and rain.

* * * * *

The shed had seemed to offer the only escape from the violent elements, and she could arm herself there. Their shed held scuba equipment; she could grab a diving knife.

She couldn’t get the door to open at first because of the wind.

At last, it gave.

An ebony darkness greeted her.

She slipped inside, reaching in her pocket for the matches with which she had lit the Sterno. Her hands were shaking, wet and cold.

Her first attempt was futile. She was wet; she had to stop dripping on the matches.

At last, she got a match lit.

There, in the brief illumination of flame, was a face.

Eyes red-rimmed.

Flesh pasty white.

Hand gripping a diver’s knife.

„Don’t scream!“ she heard.

Too late.

She screamed.

Keith sped out of the house.

He was forced to pause, slightly disoriented. The wind and rain were loud, skewing sounds around him. Then he realized that the scream had to have come from the shed, and he raced in that direction, his gun drawn. He wrenched the door open.

There was darkness within.

„Beth!“

„Put the gun down!“ came a throaty, masculine reply.

Beth appeared. Soaked, hair plastered around her beautiful face. There was a man behind her. The fellow who had claimed to be Joe Peterson. He had a knife, and it was against Beth's throat as he emerged.

„Put the gun down!“ Peterson raged again.

„Let go of my wife,“ Keith commanded, forcing himself to be calm.

„You'll kill me. He's not sane at all, did you know that?“ the man demanded of Beth.

She stared hard at Keith, eyes wide on his. He frowned. She seemed to be trying to tell him she was all right. Insane, yes, it was all insane, there was a knife against her throat.

„We're all getting soaked out here. Let's go back to the house. Keith, did you know we had another visitor?“ she asked, as if there wasn't honed steel pressing her flesh.

„I've seen him.“

„Where's Mrs. Peterson?“ she asked.

„He tried to kill her—stuffed her into the trunk of her car,“ Keith said. „She's on our sofa now. And, uh, your guest is in the house. I imagine.“

„I did not try to kill Aunt Dot! You had to be the one!“ Peterson protested, the knife twitching in his hand.

„Let's get to the house,“ Beth said again. „Mr. Peterson, I'll walk ahead of you, and Keith will walk ahead of us.“

Keith frowned fiercely at her.

„Yeah, all right, go!“ Peterson said.

Keith started forward uneasily. There was one man in the house, and another behind him with a knife to Beth's throat.

There was no doubt one of them was a murderer.

He entered the house. The door had been left open. Rain had blown in.

He was followed by Beth.

And the man with the knife.

Mrs. Peterson remained as a lump on the sofa; nothing more than a dark blob in the shadows. Cocoa, however, was no longer with her. He had run to the far side of the room, and wasn't even yapping. He hugged the wall, near the guest-room door, whining pathetically as they entered.

„There was another fellow with us, too, a musician. Plays for a group called Ultra C,“ Beth said to Peterson. She swallowed carefully before looking at Keith again. „What happened to him?“

„He was, uh, in the house when I left.“

„Gone—I hope!“

They heard a sound of distress. It was Joe Peterson. He was staring at the lump on the sofa.

„Mr. Peterson,“ Keith said softly. „I’m not going to shoot you. But you are going to get that knife away from my wife’s throat this instant.“

Beth pushed Peterson’s arm, stepping away from him. Peterson barely reacted. He stared at the sofa. „God! Is she dead?“ he asked.

Cocoa whined. Beth stared at Keith, shaking but relieved.

„Cocoa,“ she said softly. „Well, I could have been wrong, but if this man had attacked Mrs. Peterson, the dog would be barking right now.“

„Aunt Dot!“ Peterson said numbly.

„She isn’t dead—wasn’t dead,“ Keith said. He looked at Beth.

„So it’s your musician.“

„You realized it, too... But—“

„He’s out there somewhere. And we’ll have that to deal with. But for the moment... we’ve got to try to keep Mrs. Peterson alive.“

„Keith, would you get me some brandy and the ammonia from the kitchen?“ Beth asked. „We’ll see if we can rouse her. Then we can try to make it to the hospital.“ She grimaced. „With the Hummer.“

Keith walked to the kitchen, then stopped, pausing to pick up the frying pan that lay on the floor. He froze in his tracks as he heard a startled scream rise above the pounding of the rain. He turned to race back to the living room, then came to a dead stop.

Their living room had been pitched into absolute darkness.

Terror struck deep into Beth’s heart. She had pulled back the blanket, anxious to be there first, to assure herself that the woman hadn’t died.

A hand snaked out for her from beneath the cover, dragging her down with a ferocity that was astounding. Fingers wound around her throat and she was tossed about as if she weighed nothing.

Egan. Mark Egan. Drugged-out musician. No. Psychotic killer.

She saw his deranged grin right before he doused the lantern, holding her in the vise of his one hand like a rag doll.

„What ya gonna do, big man?“ a throaty voice called out in the darkness, next to her ear. „Shoot me—you might kill her. Don’t come after me, or she’s dead.“

Beth tensed every muscle. She didn’t know if the man had a weapon or not, anything more than the hideous strength of his hands.

She could hear nothing other than the wind and rain. Stars began to burst into the darkness as his grip choked her. There was no sound of voice. No sound of movement.

Not even Cocoa let out a whine.

Then there was a muffled groan. *Not Keith, the sound had not come from Keith! It was Peterson who had groaned. So... where was Keith?*

„That’s right,“ Egan—or whoever he was—said. „You stay right where you are. The missus and I are going to take the car. Your car. We’ll go for a little ride. Will she be all right? Who knows? But try to stop me now, and you’ll probably kill her yourself.“

He began to drag her toward the door. He chuckled softly. „I don’t see too badly in the dark. I like the dark.“

They were nearly there; she could sense it. He threw open the door. Her heart was thundering so that she didn’t hear the *whoosh* of motion at first.

She gasped, the air knocked from her as the *whoosh* became an impetus of muscle and movement. Keith. He flew into them from the porch side, taking both her and Egan by storm and surprise. She twisted. Egan's grip had been loosened by the fall. She bit into his wrist. The man howled, then went rolling away as he and Keith became engaged in a fierce physical battle.

Cocoa began to bark excitedly. She felt the little dog run over her hand and begin to growl. Egan cried out in pain again. She could hear Cocoa wrenching and tearing at something—Egan.

In pain or not, Egan was still wrestling on the floor with vehemence. Rain washed in from the open doorway. The faintest light showed through, glittering on something...

The frying pan.

She picked it up, and in the darkness, desperately tried to ascertain her husband's form from that of the killer. She saw a head rise—

She nearly struck.

Keith!

The other head was on the ground. There was a hand around Keith's throat, fingers tightening...

Blindly, she slammed the frying pan down toward the floor. A scream was emitted...

She struck again. And again.

And then arms reached out for her.

„It's all right now. It's all right.“

* * * * *

The lantern was lit. Good old Cocoa was in the bedroom, standing guard over Mrs. Peterson who—despite having been dumped unceremoniously on the floor—was still alive and breathing. Her nephew, Joe Peterson, was tending to her.

Keith hadn't moved the form on the floor yet. Beth didn't know if he was dead or alive, but he wouldn't be blithely getting up this time.

She'd seen his face. Before Keith had covered it with the throw.

„Is it... him? The serial killer?“ she said.

„I think so,“ Keith murmured, slipping an arm tightly around her shoulders.

„But you knew it wasn't Peterson when I did.“

He turned to her, a pained and rueful smile just curving his lips. „Because anyone who spends any time in Key West knows that Ultra C is an all-girl band,“ he said softly.

„I told him you knew music,“ she said.

They both jumped, hearing the sudden loud blare of a horn.

A second later there was a pounding on the door.

Keith, still gripping his gun, strode to it, pulling it open. Andy Fairmont, from the Monroe County Sheriff's Office, was there.

„Jesus!“ Andy shouted. „There's a serial killer on the loose! Have you heard?“

Keith looked at Beth. She shrugged, and turned to Andy.

„Never pull out a frying pan unless you intend to use it,“ she said gravely.

„What?“

„You'd better come in, Andy,“ Keith said, and he set his arm around his wife's shoulders again, pulling her close.

