

“Success breeds complacency. Complacency breeds failure. Only the paranoid survive.”

Andrew Grove, founder Intel Corporation

FACE OF A KILLER **by Robin Burcell**

Chapter One

Sydney Fitzpatrick eyed the bottle of scotch, watched the bartender pour the amber liquid into her glass, and wondered how much of it she'd have to drink to forget it had been twenty years since her father had been killed.

“Leave the bottle,” she told the bartender.

“Don't think so.”

“You're only going to have to come back.”

“Maybe,” he said, returning the whiskey to its place among the other bottles, all backlit, shining, each advertising its own brand of panacea.

All false advertising, she thought, finishing her second shot. She would've ordered a third—except her cell phone started vibrating an alert.

Only one sort of call comes in at one in the morning, never mind that Sydney recognized the number: her boss, Dave Dixon. “Fitzpatrick,” she announced into the phone. “And I'm supposed to have the day off.”

“*Day* being the operative word. It's dark out, which makes it night, which you didn't request off.”

“*And* I've been drinking.”

“Since when do you drink?”

“Since an hour ago,” she said, and let him wonder.

Apparently he didn't wonder long. “We need you down here. A Seven matter,” he

said, giving the Bureau program designator for initiating a kidnap investigation.

Her stomach knotted. She did not need this. Not tonight.

“Did you hear me, Fitzpatrick? Got a kidnap-rape.”

“You assigning me the case?”

“No. Just a sketch.”

Sydney eyed the bottle of whiskey that seemed to beckon, thinking that even on a good day it was hard enough to interview victims for drawings, hard to get past the mental exhaustion of being inside her victims’ heads, knowing the pain and terror they felt ...

Maybe she should tell Dixon no, but that would require an explanation, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to go into that. It wasn’t that Dixon didn’t know her history. They’d worked together in D.C., used to be friends, at least up until he was promoted and all friendships were checked at the door. The last thing Sydney wanted was for him to worry about her. “I’m just a few blocks away. I’ll be right there.”

She took some money out of her wallet, paid for her drinks, then walked to the door and opened it. What had been a light sprinkle when she’d left her car at home that October night to drink herself into oblivion, had now turned into a heavy downpour that hammered the sidewalk with a deafening blast. And lucky her, not a cab in sight.

With no umbrella, she’d be soaked, and she was tempted to see if the rain might slow. But then she thought of the waiting that her victim had already endured. In the grand scheme of things, getting wet was the least of her worries, and she stepped out into the driving rain. She hadn’t walked more than half a block when the odd feeling of being watched came over her. She stopped, turned, eyed the street up and down, saw nothing but a few parked cars, seemingly unoccupied. Across the street, a couple of women huddled beneath an overhang, smoking a cigarette. Other than that, the streets seemed deserted.

Hearing nothing but the rain, the water sluicing down the gutters into the storm drains, she pulled her coat tighter against the autumn chill. But the farther she walked, the stronger the feeling came that she was being followed. *It’s only your imagination*, she told herself. Even so, she quickened her pace, and pressed her right elbow into her hip, wanting to feel the reassuring presence of her holstered Glock—then remembered she’d left it in her desk drawer.

She normally carried the damned thing night and day, but she’d intended to spend the night drinking in a vain attempt to erase not only the anniversary of her father’s murder, but also the bitter fight she’d had with her mother over her plans for the upcoming day. It was the same fight they’d had last year and the two years before that. At thirty-three years old, a girl should be able to make up her own damned mind on how she spent her day. Her mother had nothing to do with this, she thought, as a movement caught her eye. Definitely someone back there. She doubled her pace, didn’t get far, when a man stepped out in front of her, blocked her path.

She jumped back, her pulse slamming in her veins. The man towered a good eight inches over her, his craggy face barely visible beneath his knit cap and a scarf wrapped around his neck and mouth. A sharp smell of body odor, unwashed clothes, wet, stale, and sour, assaulted her nose.

“Got some change?” he asked, opening his hand, palm up. His other was shoved in the pocket of an army coat, ragged, buttons dangling, held closed with another scarf tied around his waist.

Recognition hit her. Private Cooper was a regular on this block, chased off by the

cops on a continual basis, only to return the moment they left. Right now she was grateful for his presence. “Yeah,” she said, digging into her purse. She handed him a few bills, then looked back, saw a figure darting into the shadows. Someone was following her, no doubt. The federal building was only two blocks away, and she crossed to the other side of the street, where the building facades were more modern, better lit. If whoever it was thought she was going to be an easy mark, he’d have to come out and get her.

A few minutes later, she waved her access identification across the pad, punched in her code, and with one last look behind her, entered the door of the San Francisco FBI field office. A purse snatcher had been hitting women in the area for a couple of weeks now, and she wondered if that was who’d been tailing her. Not that she could offer any description, she thought, walking down the hall to her office.

Supervisory Special Agent Dave Dixon was talking on the phone when she reached her desk. He was a good supervisor, one who spoke his mind, whether it was politically correct or not. Like the time he told her that dumping her fiancé, also an FBI agent, was the smartest thing she’d done all year, and that transferring from Washington, D.C., to the San Francisco office was her next smartest move. The fiancé thing, Sydney was sure about; the move to the city, she wasn’t so sure. Too many memories.

Dixon was still talking, and Sydney shrugged out of her sopping overcoat, then stopped to listen to her voice mail while she waited for him. The first message happened to be from her thank-God-he’s-her-ex-fiancé, Scotty Ryan. “Hey, Syd. I know. I promised. But this isn’t about us this time. It’s important. Call me. No matter the hour.” She’d get right on that. Not. Erasing it, she listened to the next. “This is Officer Kim Glynnis, Hill City PD. I was, uh, hoping to come by and talk to you about a case. A possible sketch on a Jane Doe. I work midnights, so if I don’t answer, leave a message.” Hill City PD was a small department in the South Bay, and Sydney jotted down the number, just as Dixon walked out of his office.

“You look like a drowned rat,” he said, eyeing her.

“Yeah, well, I was shooting for the drunk-drowned-rat look, but I answered my cell phone. What’s going on?”

“We were notified by SFPD about a kidnapping. Said they took it as far as they could and wanted us to take it from here. According to preliminary reports, our victim, Tara Brown, was kidnapped out of Reno, raped numerous times on the Nevada side, driven to California and raped again. She’s pretty banged up. Stabbed, then dumped at Golden Gate Park. Smart kid, though. Pretended she was dead, and I’m thinking that’s what saved her. She’s out at General right now.”

Sydney went to her desk, unlocked it, and picked up her leather case with her credentials, better known as “creds” in Bureau-speak. Just her luck, Dixon glanced over, saw her gun in the drawer. He gave her a hard glare. “Why aren’t you armed?”

“I was out drinking.”

“God granted you the power to carry. Do it.”

“Actually it was J. Edgar Hoover.”

“Same thing. Put it on.” Dixon didn’t believe in unarmed agents. But he’d always been a Bureau man. She’d started off as a cop, and cops weren’t supposed to drink and wear firearms, though Sydney was probably the only cop who thought so. But that was one of her quirks; she followed rules. After her scare tonight, she was going to have to rethink the whole unarmed-while-drinking thing, she thought, as she strapped on her pistol, picked

up her gold shield, and tucked her creds securely inside her back pocket. She grabbed the briefcase next to her desk, the one that contained her traveling art studio used for forensic drawings and suspect sketches. San Francisco PD had their own police artist, but this case was no longer theirs. It belonged to the Bureau now, and Sydney was the resident artist.

“Ready,” she said. Everything in hand, she looked around to make sure she hadn’t forgotten anything.

Dixon eyed her, his brows raised.

“What?” she asked.

“Drowned rat?”

“Does it work for me? Or make me look fat?”

“You couldn’t ask me that *before* you put on your gun?”

“You are such a chicken.”

“Yeah, yeah. Heard it before from my wife, who, if anyone inquires, looks like a supermodel,” he said, pulling his car keys from his pocket. He eyed her, thoughtful. Since she tended to be reserved at work, he was no doubt noticing. “Just how much *have* you had to drink?”

“Not nearly enough. Give me two minutes. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Sydney took her things into the restroom; combed her soaked, shoulder-length brown hair into a ponytail; wiped the rain-smear mascara from beneath her eyes; decided she looked presentable. After popping a mint, she met Dixon in the parking garage. By the time they left, the rain had finally stopped, and she hoped it wouldn’t return for the night. The hospital’s parking lot was filled to capacity, and they had to drive around a couple of times in search of a parking space, since those reserved for law enforcement were full. Busy night. As usual.

“Over there.” Sydney pointed toward the glow of red brake lights at the far end of the lot, as someone began to back up.

Dixon pulled around, and when it was apparent some guy in a red Ford Tempo was already headed for the same spot, Dixon gunned it a bit harder, winning the space by a matter of seconds. “That’s why they spend the big bucks on driver training at the Academy,” he said, angling in.

“Dang. And I thought it was to teach you how not to spill your coffee on high-speed chases.” She stepped out of the car, then opened the back door to retrieve her briefcase.

“Asshole!”

Sydney glanced up, saw the red Ford Tempo, the driver shoving his hand out the open window, his middle finger pointed skyward. Jerk, she thought looking past him to the next row over, where a newer model white delivery utility truck cruised slowly. The driver wore a yellow ball cap, pulled low, and even though Sydney couldn’t see his eyes, she had the distinct feeling he was looking right at her.

Maybe it was just the totality of the day, but it was the same feeling she’d had when she’d left the bar, and thought someone was watching her then. She slammed the car door, telling herself that she *was* imagining things. It was a hospital parking lot. No one was watching her.

No one but Mr. Ford Tempo, who apparently wasn’t done with them. He put his car in reverse, backed up, flipped them off again, then gunned it out of there to the far side of the lot.

Dixon shook his head. “Can’t believe the manners on people these days.”

“Sort of like your manners stealing the guy’s parking space?” she said, hefting her briefcase, then pulling her jacket closed against the wind.

“Details,” Dixon said, and they walked up to the Emergency Room doors.

Their victim, a young girl, maybe eighteen, had been moved to a single-bed room. The strawberry-blond hair above her right temple was shaved; the staples that held her scalp shut glittered in the fluorescent light. Her face was a mosaic of black and purple splotches, her cheeks swollen. Tomorrow it would be worse.

Sydney set down her briefcase, while Dixon quietly approached the girl, who didn’t open her eyes. “Tara?” he whispered.

Tara took a deep breath, but didn’t respond, and Sydney knew she was trying to gather the strength to go on with this, to talk to the cops. It was the part Sydney hated, making them relive the events, but without it, without walking them back through the crime, some of the finer details and memories would be lost.

While Dixon got all the preliminary questions out of the way, Sydney leaned against the wall and shoved her hands in the pockets of her coat, concentrating on the smell of antiseptic wash, trying to forget what day it was tomorrow, trying but failing. All the while, Dixon spoke quietly, urging Tara to talk to them, to cooperate. His voice was soft, soothing, and Sydney glanced out the window into the parking lot below, letting her thoughts drift. She was a million miles away from the dim hospital room, when somewhere in her conscious mind, she realized she saw a man wearing a yellow ball cap walking in the shadows of the parking lot. Though he did nothing that shouted he was a threat, her gut told her something was up, perhaps because he wasn’t walking toward the ER, but away from it. Sydney scanned the parking lot, looking for accomplices. She saw none. What she did see was that damned white utility truck, parked illegally near a delivery door. Who the hell made deliveries at two in the morning? The next guess was a logical conclusion, because of that feeling of being watched, that he was making his way to their car. Maybe he hadn’t been watching her, just the vehicle, finding a mark that looked like they’d be inside for a while.

She glanced over at Dixon. He was still talking to the victim, trying to get some basic information.

“I hope you don’t mind,” she said, walking up to him, putting her hand on his shoulder and squeezing hard enough for him to know she was doing anything but what she was telling him. “I really need to get some fresh air.”

He looked up at her, his brows raised, but he nodded, and she gave a gentle smile to their victim, something she hoped would alleviate any fears. Tara Brown was supposed to be safe here. Last thing Sydney wanted to do was announce that she was going after a suspicious person in the parking lot, something she was sure would shatter any semblance of peace the girl had left.

She walked out, heard Dixon quietly say, “I’ll be right back,” and a moment later, he followed.

“What’s up?”

“Not sure if you noticed that guy in the white truck. Maybe it’s nothing, but my gut tells me he’s set his sights on your car.”

“That’s all we need,” he said, glancing back toward the room.

“I’ll grab someone before I go out. You stay with her, tell her I went for coffee or something.”

“Be careful. And make it quick.”

Sydney took the elevator down, walked through the emergency room, and stopped the first cops she saw. They were guarding a drunk who had apparently fallen and needed stitches. She flipped open her credentials, said, “One of you feel like chasing down someone with me in the parking lot?”

The two officers looked at each other, and the taller nodded. “I can go. What’d you have?”

“At the moment, nothing more than a feeling this guy doesn’t belong in the parking lot,” she said, as they both strode out the ER doors. The SFPD officer introduced himself as Bryan Harper, and they shook hands. “Sydney Fitzpatrick. Nice to meet you.” She quickly told him what she saw from her victim’s hospital room that overlooked the parking lot. “Maybe it’s nothing,” she said, as they walked down the ramp, “but it’s my boss’s car, and he’d like to keep the windows intact.”

“You get points for that?”

“I hope so,” she said, slowing him when they reached the aisle where Dixon’s car was parked. They could see the top of the guy’s head, or rather the top of his yellow ball cap just over the row of cars, and then he ducked down; perhaps had seen them come out. That itself told her it was more than nothing.

They moved out of plain sight, sidling along the row of parked vehicles. At one point, the suspect looked up, and she had to duck between two sedans. Harper motioned that he was going to parallel on the next aisle over. When he was in position, he pointed, and they started moving forward.

The suspect skirted to the opposite side of Dixon’s car, and they froze. He was facing them, but apparently they weren’t his focus, since he cupped both hands to look in the car window.

Harper edged against the retaining wall in front of the cars. Sydney moved closer from her row, could see the guy’s breath steam up the window of Dixon’s car. Suddenly he ducked, and she wondered if he was trying to jimmy the door open. She shouted, “FBI. Freeze!”

The suspect rose. Saw her. Harper jumped out. The man dove out of sight. Harper and Sydney edged to either side of the car. When they got there, he was gone.

“Damn,” she said, looking around. She caught a shadow out of the corner of her eye. Glanced over, saw the suspect running toward the aisle of cars Harper had just left. “There!”

They ran over. Came out in front of a dark-colored Toyota.

“Where the hell’d he go?” Harper said.

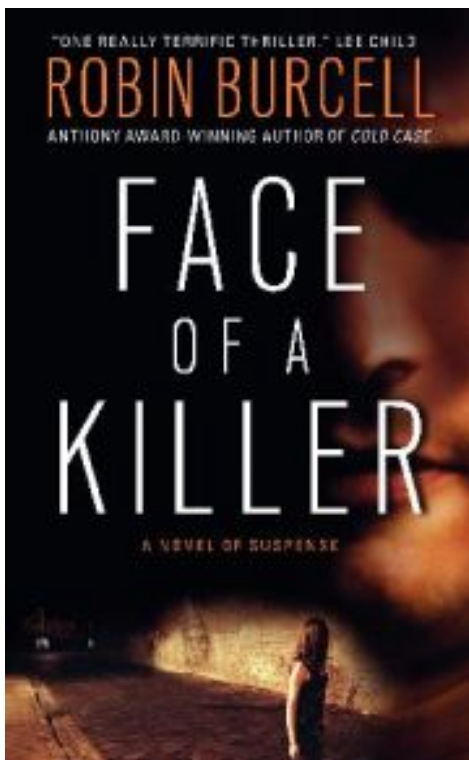
She lifted her finger to her lips. Listened. Nothing at first. Then the slightest of splashes from a puddle the next row over. She pointed. He seemed to be moving toward the center of the lot. Harper nodded. He took one side of the Toyota; she took the other. Again, they emerged to nothing.

She happened to look down. Saw a red and white peppermint candy, still wrapped, in the midst of the puddle. As much rain as had fallen, the thing couldn’t have been out there that long and not started disintegrating. “You think he tossed that?” she whispered. “Throw us off?”

Harper pulled out his radio. “Either way, time for reinforcements.” He called the PD, who simply radioed for a couple of officers to step out of the hospital. Convenient.

While Harper walked toward the building to brief them, Sydney eyed the candy, thinking that something was not quite right. A simple burglary, or something more? One of the officers walked over to Dixon's car, and shouted that it was untouched. She looked from the candy on the ground to where their car was parked against the retaining wall. If the suspect had thrown this, he wanted them to move off in the opposite direction... She swung around. Saw Harper walking toward her, saying something into his radio, something she couldn't hear because an engine started up.

"The truck!" she shouted. Before anyone could act, the vehicle sped from the delivery doors. Its headlights blinded her. Its wheels screeched across the wet pavement. And headed straight for them.



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