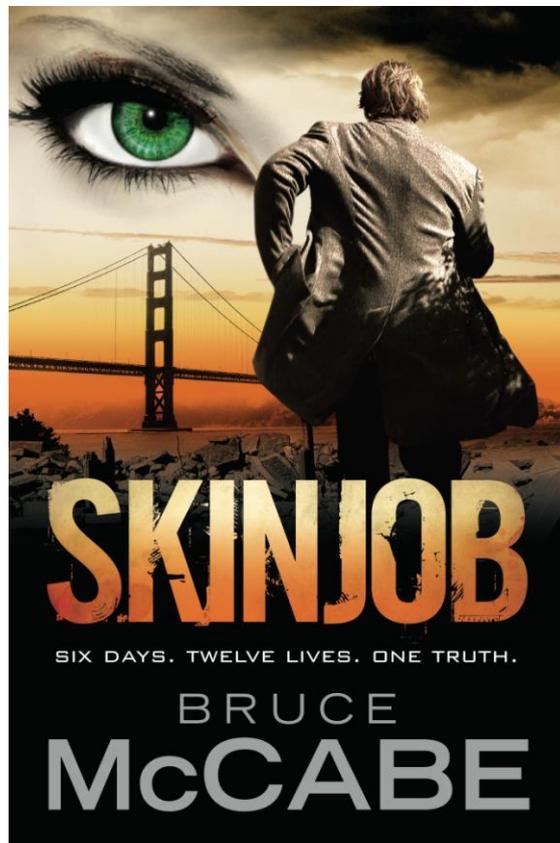


# SKINJOB

BRUCE McCABE



The Pentagon will issue handheld lie detectors this month to US Army soldiers in Afghanistan ... The Defense Department says the portable device isn't perfect, but is accurate enough to save American lives by screening local police officers, interpreters and allied forces for access to US military bases, and by helping narrow the list of suspects after a roadside bombing.

—msnbc.com, April 2008

With the growing availability of images that can describe the state of someone's brain, attorneys are increasingly asking judges to admit these scans in evidence, to demonstrate, say, that a defendant is not guilty by reason of insanity or that a witness is telling the truth.

—*Scientific American*, April 2011

SANTA CLARA, California—Applied Biometric Instruments Inc. is pleased to announce that the Police Nationale, France's principal national law enforcement agency, has adopted the Handheld Multimodal Detection Array (HAMDA) as its standard field polygraph device. The first 750 units will be delivered in March. US trials are underway.

—Press release, February 2019

## WEDNESDAY

The high-rise office workers in San Francisco's finance district sensed it as an eerie sway. It passed quickly beneath their feet, but a good many started towards the fire escapes anyway, in case it was the seismic prequel to something worse. A moment later the tourists walking the Embarcadero and children eating ice-creams on Pier 39 looked up as a muffled *ka-rump* broke the summer stillness. In the opposite direction the residents on Russian Hill watched walls shake and cutlery skitter across tables.

Retailers and shoppers within three hundred yards of the intersection of Jackson Street and Grant Avenue experienced sound and shock as one. The thud shattered their afternoon like a hammer, and they watched, wide-eyed, as windows dissolved into cascading waterfalls of glass. After the thunderclap, fragments of masonry peppered from the sky like hail.

At Maggie's on Grant, a cafe fifty yards from the intersection, the waitress placed a tray of coffee and danishes on a front table and a second later found herself thrown to the ground. Her first reaction was to get up, embarrassed, and brush herself off. Then she saw other astonished faces rising from behind upturned chairs and tables. She shook her head, trying to throw off the high-pitched monotone shrilling in her ears, and stared at where the front window had been. She stepped shakily into the street, feeling shards crack and splinter under her shoes. People lay scattered, hunkered, coughing. Dust billowed, depositing a fine, sooty film over every surface. Above, an angry black cloud boiled over a pristine blue sky.

Without lowering her eyes, the waitress fished in the pockets of her uniform and withdrew a cell phone. She did nothing for a few seconds, then looked down and dialed 911.

Sergeant Shahida Sanayei was halfway through her shift as surveillance duty officer at SFPD Central Station when she felt a vibration through her seat and heard yelling in the corridor. Then her communications panel lit up. As she donned her headset she noticed one of the patchwork of camera views on the Wall – the cinema-sized display dominating the room – was black. She selected the line from the dispatch center. “Viddy ops.”

“We’re getting reports of an explosion. Downtown. Near the corner of Jackson and Grant. What can you see?”

“Wait one.” Shari’s hands moved rapidly over the electronic map on her console. In seconds she selected sixteen cameras in and around the intersection. She stared at the Wall as they came online. Five, ten, fourteen. Plus two black squares. Two dead. The live ones were filled with dust and smoke that varied from a light brown haze to an ugly, impenetrable black.

“Okay, location is correct. It looks big. I’ve got two cameras out in a hundred and fifty yard section. Looks like you’re going to need fire units.”

“On their way.”

“I’m going to need a minute to adjust the angles and get you a good assessment. Can you hold?” Shari snapped her fingers at her team but specialists Angie Mertz and Lynn Symonds were seasoned operators and already making pan and zoom adjustments, working to construct a sensible picture as rapidly as possible.

“Roger that. I have to direct mobile units. Call me back as soon as you have something.”

“Sure thing.”

Shari watched as the collage came together, piece by piece. Her team started with the more distant cameras to frame the smoke plume and get a sense of the size of the affected area, then worked inwards, experimenting to get the best angles. They hit paydirt with camera 643, less than thirty yards from the scene and tilted crazily at the sky, but still functioning. When they rotated it, an image came into view straight from the London Blitz.

The other buildings along Grant Avenue suggested that the shattered structure had, until a few moments ago, stood four storeys tall. Now it was more like three and a half. The second floor had been punched out. Ragged holes belched flames and soot from where the windows had been. The upper storeys sagged in the middle. The street was a sea of bricks and glittering glass.

Shari called dispatch and described the scene in a few terse sentences. It hardly mattered: she could already see the first emergency vehicles arriving. In a few moments they would report from on site.

With the help of her two specialists, Shari switched to the task of securing evidence. They placed a priority data hold on all cameras in the area. That ensured the footage they were watching live, as well as all stored footage going back forty-eight hours, would be retained permanently for later analysis. Then the team methodically captured images of every living thing within five city blocks. They did not discriminate: men and women, young children and elderly pedestrians were all tagged.

Angie yelled.

Shari looked up. The building was no longer centered in view. She reached out to adjust 643 before realizing that it was not the camera moving – it was the *building*. The entire structure twisted and buckled in a sickening, slow-motion waltz. Walls and joints popped and puffs of brick dust fired outwards like a last broadside from a sinking galleon. Firemen ran.

The second floor crumpled, sending shock waves reverberating upwards. Then, in a horrible concertina, the first and third levels gave way and the entire stack, in a gathering rush of colliding masonry, pancaked downwards. Thick gray clouds boiled out and up, enveloping the camera.

They stared, speechless.

Shari's console flashed.

“Viddy ops.”

“Shari, it's me.”

The informality took Shari by surprise. Of course she knew the voice – she had been friends with Yolanda Payne for years – but now was not the time to be personal. “Go ahead, dispatch,” she said.

“It's Adam. It may be nothing, but I thought you should know. He ... his GPS is down. He was with Terry Strong on foot patrol. Their last known position was on Jackson, heading towards Gra—”

“Call him.”

“We did. He's not responding. Look, we don't know anything yet, he may have just switched off, but I thought ... Shari?”

Shari ran for the door.

She dashed down the corridor, past the front desk and into Vallejo Street. Officers ran everywhere. A squad car tore past. Another peeled

away from the curb and she leapt in front, arms outstretched. The bumper lurched and dipped, stopping an inch from her knees.

“Shari! Jesus, I almost ran you down.” The driver, Tony Villiers, one of the station veterans, was white with shock.

“I’m coming with you,” she yelled. She ran around to the passenger side, one arm stretched out across the windshield in case he changed his mind and left without her. She yanked open the door and dived in. “Go!”

They tore down Vallejo, siren wailing, and took a right into Stockton. All four tires screamed in protest. They skimmed the side of a FedEx truck as they blasted past – Shari just had time to see the startled look on the driver’s face and they were gone.

Waves of nausea flooded through her. Her last words to him had been angry, unkind. He had listened patiently, mumbling reassurances that he would always do the right thing by her, that he loved her. Then he had to go, and that was how they left it. And now, Shari thought, he could be under that mountain of concrete. *I never said sorry, Adam. Don’t you dare die before I say sorry.*

They hit the bumps crossing Broadway, and again at Pacific, and the suspension crunched, lifting her from the seat. The radio squawked a stream of updates. Multiple casualties. Spot fires. Request for K-9 units.

They skidded onto Jackson and accelerated down the hill before Villiers slammed the brakes.

The car squalled to a stop.

A haze of tire smoke drifted in front of them. Jackson Street was one-way, and the traffic had funneled down to a blocked intersection with nowhere to turn. Beyond the wall of backed-up vehicles, a black pall spread across the afternoon sky like ink. Shari knew every inch of these

streets, every camera, angle and distance. They weren't far. She got out and ran.

She arrived at the Grant Avenue intersection, legs and lungs burning. As she stood, hands on hips, gasping for breath, she saw a street from hell.

In the center of what had once been a neat row of buildings was a yawning gap. The building was gone, replaced by a rubble pile belching thick black smoke. Fire trucks directed long jets of water into sputtering orange hot spots.

A group of people, brown with water and grime, huddled near the corner receiving first aid. Shari scanned for a police uniform. Nothing. Then she noticed bodies, two of them, right in the middle of the street. One was a woman, her arms and legs oddly twisted. No one had even bothered to cover her. The other was shielded by a pair of kneeling paramedics.

Shari moved closer, arms slack by her sides.

One of the paramedics shook his head. "No use. Too many damn holes."

"Don't stop," said the other. "Sometimes they surprise you. Give me another bandage. No, unwrap it. My hands are slippery."

"Pressure here. Here!"

Shari could see now that the victim was – had been – a man. His right arm was missing to the elbow. If that had been his only injury he might have had a chance, but the entire right side of his body was black, the hair gone, and his face had ballooned into pillows of weeping flesh. Pink froth fluttered from a ragged hole in his chest, and through her daze Shari could see the bandages were useless against the flow.

The paramedic working the man's chest was completely covered in blood. The other, his uniform caked with dirt, looked at his colleague with a resigned expression that said, *Yes, sometimes they can surprise you, but not this one.*

Shari bent and forced herself to stare, but there was nothing to recognize in the swollen, blistered mess that had once been a face. She took in the blood-soaked rags wrapped around the neck and shoulders. Gray pin stripes on white. Not a uniform. *Not Adam.*

The first paramedic stopped pumping. He leaned back and wiped his face with the back of his arm, smearing blood and sweat across his cheek. His colleague stood, took a breath, and mumbled a few words of prayer. A tiny stylized crucifix dangled from his ear.

Shari's emotions began to crystallize, condense and take direction. There was no logic, just a rising, overwhelming resolve. *Adam is inside. Underneath.*

She moved towards the rubble. The siren of an arriving ambulance sounded muted. The officers making a barrier against the gathering crowd seemed disconnected and distant. She walked underneath the water jetting from the fire engines and was vaguely aware of curtains of mist soaking through her uniform.

Moving to the side of the rubble pile furthest from the flames, she began to climb. It was hard going. She slipped several times, banging her knees. Finally she resorted to a crab-like approach, spreading her weight across her hands and feet.

She peered into a hole and yelled, "Hello! Is anyone in there?" She crawled towards a beam caught across two slabs of concrete so the pieces formed a crazy, jagged arch, and shouted into the cavity, "Can anyone hear me?"

She began wriggling her head and shoulders into the gap.

“Get the hell out of it!”

Shari turned. A fireman waved frantically from the street, his face twitching between fury and wide-eyed horror. “What do you think you’re doing? Get out of there! You wanna get killed?” He wasn’t shouting, he was *screaming*. She stared back at the arch of broken concrete, the logical side of her brain fighting to break through. Suddenly, with stunning clarity, she realized how precariously balanced everything was. She reversed her course and began descending. As she neared the fireman, he reached for her.

It was then she saw the hand.

It was a woman’s hand, poking out from under a sheet of plaster. It lay still, relaxed. The skin was smooth and unblemished, with a vaguely pinkish hue. Each finger was tipped with a perfectly manicured nail.

The fireman, frustrated that Shari had stopped, followed her gaze. He paused, weighing the safety of the position, then climbed up to help. They lifted the plaster together. It was just a hand. No body. Shari was surprised to realize she felt nothing.

But there was something wrong. It took a moment before she knew what it was. In her rookie year she had served in a clean-up crew after an Amtrak train thundered over a sleeping drunk. The driver of the *Southwest Chief* didn’t slow, and Shari had found herself picking up pieces a half-mile from the impact. Each was a torn-up mess. Flaps of skin had clung to her gloves.

What she was looking at now had no ragged tissue, nor even a single spot of blood. She knelt for a closer look. The stump was pale green. In the middle, where there should have been bone, a knob of metal caught the sunlight.

“Skinjob,” said the fireman.

“What?”

“It’s a skinjob. Thank Christ. I thought we had another corpse.”

She looked at him blankly.

“It’s the dollhouse. Someone blew up the dollhouse,” he said, shaking his head. He was trying to grin, but it came out as a grimace. “We found a couple more parts down the bottom. Separating the real from the fake ones is going to make for a real dandy afternoon.”

Shari stared down at the hand. Revulsion pressed upwards from her stomach as words and images propelled her towards sickening comprehension. She began to vomit.

Thank you for reading Chapter 1!

To buy the book (paperback & e-book) go to:

[www.skinjob-the-book.com](http://www.skinjob-the-book.com)

For more information about the author go to:

[www.bruceMcCabe.com](http://www.bruceMcCabe.com)

