

**JAKE BLAKE**



**(Free Preview)**

**sunburned**



# **Sunburned**

A novel

By Jake Blake

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## Chapter 1

NEW YORK CITY - 110 Central Park South, the penthouse  
In the near future, July 9, 2014, 5:33 a.m.

A narrow beam of light cut through the darkness of the bedroom, resting on the closed eyelid of a sleeping man. The eyeball twitched twice, then opened to reveal a deep, blue iris.

Adam Morgan woke up at dawn with a strange feeling in his stomach. He turned to his left and saw the soft, fluffy brown hair of the woman sleeping next to him, her naked back exposed from beneath the silky white sheets of the king-sized bed. The sunlight was just beginning to fill the bedroom and a ray of light was dancing on the few blonde highlights of the woman's hair.

He started to sit up, but felt a spasm of pain from his stomach. Then the gag reflex.

Adam quickly rolled out of bed and ducked through the bathroom door, heading straight for the toilet. Kneeling on the cold, marble floor in front of the toilet, his whole body heaved for a moment, then purged.

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At that exact moment, another purge was happening worlds away that would change the lives of everyone on Earth. On the surface of the sun, approximately 150 million kilometers or 93 million miles away, an unusually large coil of magnetic energy erupted, sending a solar flare toward Earth at the speed of light and an enormous coronal mass ejection at speeds approaching 3,000 km/sec. In approximately 14 hours, Earth would experience a severe electro-magnetic storm, the likes of which the planet had not seen in more than 150 years.

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A cold sweat rushed over Adam's naked, muscular body. Admittedly, he felt a bit better.

He flushed the toilet and looked in the mirror above the marble-covered double sink.

Here before him was the reflection of a 41-year-old white male, handsome in a slightly boyish way, almost entirely bald but for the black stubble on his face, neck and the sides and back of his smooth, well-shaped head. He was of medium height and in pretty good physical shape, but he hadn't seen his personal trainer in a few weeks and wasn't feeling his best.

"Are you alright in there?" asked the woman from the bedroom.

Adam turned from the mirror and stepped into the master bedroom. Hanging on the main wall opposite the bed was a large oil painting of the dreamscape “Temptation of St. Anthony,” painted by Salvador Dali in 1946.

“Stomach ache,” he said. “I feel nauseous this morning.”

As he walked to the bed, Adam almost stepped on a large pile of diamonds sitting on the floor. He picked up one of the diamonds and the rest followed, attached together with a thin wire. He set the glittering diamonds and precious gems in a heap on top of the nightstand.

The woman was gazing up at him from the bed with sleepy, blue eyes. She was young, fair-skinned, extremely fit and quite attractive without makeup. Her lips were pouty and her eyebrows were a thick, dark brown. She smiled, revealing a wide mouth of big, straight teeth.

“Tee many martoonies?” she teased.

“I’ll be OK,” he said, watching as her leg slowly moved beneath the bedsheets. “I’m sorry I woke you. It’s still pretty early. You can go back to sleep if you’d like.”

Natasha closed her eyes and smiled, rolling back onto her left side. Adam shook his head slightly and could hardly believe he was married to such a beautiful person. He looked down at his ring finger and admired the simple-looking gold band that he and Natasha each wore.

*She’s just 25, he thought, and already on the A-list. I’m a very lucky man.*

He opened the shades to the bedroom window to reveal a sliding glass door and small balcony. As Adam stepped out into the warm, morning air, he thought about their wedding two months earlier. They had been married at a private villa in the Bahamas, surrounded by 200 of their closest friends, family members and business associates. The party had cost a small fortune, of course, but felt like a dream. Even if it was a dream, he wanted to go back.

He stepped into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Everything in the bathroom was either white marble or silver-plated, giving the room a cold, hard feel. As Adam stepped into the rectangular glass box of his shower and began to lather up, he briefly thought about remodeling the bathroom, but then he thought of all the red tape involved. He turned on his waterproof electric razor and shaved his face, neck and the rest of his head. Having washed and rinsed, he turned the shower knob to cold for a few seconds, then off.

Stepping out of the steamy glass box, he grabbed a white cotton bathrobe and strode out of the bathroom. Turning the corner, he walked down the spiral staircase to the lower level, picked up his smartphone resting on a coffee table and stepped outside onto the penthouse terrace. *Another beautiful summer morning*, he thought.

Adam looked northeast at his spectacular view of Central Park. Far below his perch on the 28th floor, he could barely see joggers and dog walkers scurrying about like ants. *A different life*, he thought. The shady green trees of the park swayed in the morning breeze, capped with a clear, blue sky. He punched a few buttons on his smartphone. It was 5:41 a.m., and according to the weather app, it was already a balmy 74 degrees Fahrenheit, or about 23 degrees Celsius. Meteorologists were predicting another record-breaking day. *This would be a good time to get out of the city*, he thought.

Just then, a brilliant flash of white light exploded across the morning sky, coming from the east. The atmosphere was instantly brighter, the colors even more vivid. *Who turned up the lights?* he wondered. *It feels more like 8 a.m.* He checked the time on his smartphone again, using his left hand to shield his eyes from the sun. His smartphone was turned off. *Something's not right*, he thought, as he turned on the small, electronic device.

All at once, car alarms across the city began to honk and blare.

Adam felt another stomach spasm and ran for the bathroom.

## Chapter 2

NEW YORK CITY - Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, 6 a.m.

TIME TO SOLAR IMPACT: 13 hours, 32 minutes

A shrieking alarm pierced the morning stillness. A rough and calloused hand reached from a nearby bed and slapped the snooze button. The alarm clock was silent again. A few seconds later, another different alarm shrieked from outside the apartment.

“Goddam car alarms,” the man grumbled, pulling the red cotton sheets off his sweaty body and sitting at the edge of his bed. The car alarm continued.

Frank Rosario got up and walked to the window of his second-floor apartment. Across the street, a blue hybrid electric car was completely flipping out, flashing its lights and baying its horn like a doomsday alarm. The tone sounded a bit like an ambulance, then changed to a steady, two-toned ringing. It changed once again into a loud blating, fire-truck noise, before returning to the first tone pattern and repeating the cycle. The sequence of warnings coming from the unoccupied car repeated six or seven times, despite the clear absence of thieves, other nearby vehicles or pedestrians of any kind. Eventually the alarm switched itself off. *Doomsday has been canceled*, he thought. *Another false alarm.*

The wind-up alarm clock on the dresser began shrieking again.

“OK, I get it,” Frank said, turning off the alarm.

Frank squeezed into his tiny bathroom and turned on the hot water for the sink. His reflection revealed a 33-year-old, slightly handsome, dark-skinned face, with tired brown eyes and a brush of gray hair on the sides. He splashed hot water on his face, lathered up some shaving cream from a can and painted on a white shaving-cream beard. He took his disposable razor and made a few quick passes — first with the grain, then perpendicular to — shaving his face and neck quickly and without thinking.

After a minute, the hot water from the sink had steamed up the mirror, obscuring his reflection. He finished shaving from memory, still on auto-pilot. Frank turned off the sink and turned on the shower. Past experience told him the building’s hot water supply diminished after about 7 a.m. and was non-existent after 9 a.m. when the beauty parlor downstairs opened. Hot

water wasn't as important in the middle of the summer, but his carefully followed daily routines tended to make his days more predictable.

Stepping out of the shower a few minutes later, he turned on the radio and toweled off.

"Gonna be a hot one today, folks," the radio announcer said in a cheery voice. "If you're working indoors, I hope you've got air conditioning today, 'cause it's supposed to hit 110 degrees in the city. If you're out at the beach, be sure to wear plenty of sunblock."

Frank looked out the window at the beach. The morning sun seemed extra bright, bathing the boats in the marina in a harsh, twittering light. Leaning forward and craning his neck to the right, Frank saw his office, a 41-foot sailing yacht named "Reciprocity," bobbing gently in the bay. *Can't beat the commute*, he thought, as he rubbed sunblock on his neck and shoulders.

### Chapter 3

NEW YORK CITY - 110 Central Park South, 6:30 a.m.

Adam was sitting outside on the large terrace flipping through *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and *The Financial Times* newspapers when Natasha came outside with breakfast. She was wearing a tight-fitting, two-piece exercise outfit and carried an espresso cup and saucer in one hand and a small bowl of fresh berries and plain yogurt in the other.

“I brought you some coffee,” she said, sitting in the chair next to Adam at the glass-top table and setting the espresso directly in front of him. “Are you feeling any better?”

Adam looked up from his newspapers and admired his young wife. She seemed to look adorable in just about anything, he thought. This morning she was wearing a pink cotton zip-up sweat shirt and matching pink cotton sweat pants with a draw-string waist. The pants had something written on the legs in large, silver letters he couldn’t quite make out, and her pedicured feet were bare on the stone tile floor. He was still wearing his bathrobe.

“Thank you for asking. I wish I felt as good as you look,” he said with a slight smile, reaching for the espresso. “I saw a strange flash in the sky this morning, and then my phone went off. Your brother had better not be up to any of his old tricks,” he said with a wink.

“I’ll ask him,” Natasha said, flashing him one of her million-dollar smiles before spooning a small bite of raspberries and yogurt into her mouth.

Natasha’s brother Aleksandr had nearly ruined their wedding with a practical joke, but the crisis was easily averted due to his quick thinking. *He would have to know about the flash*, Adam thought, looking up at the sky. *Smart Aleks*.

“Do you have a shoot today?” he asked.

“Yes, from 8:30 to noon,” she said. “I’m going downstairs to work out for a bit first.”

She finished eating her breakfast, set down her bowl and spoon and reached for a copy of the latest *Vogue* sitting on the table. Natasha was on the magazine’s cover wearing a white dress with black polka dots. The photo was a close-up of her face and torso, and a large caption next to it read “FRESH SUMMER STYLE,” and a smaller headline read “Natasha’s Beauty Secrets.”

As she began flipping through the magazine, Natasha recalled that she had been paid about \$200 to model for that cover shot and was allowed to keep the dress. Five years ago, when

she was just breaking into the New York fashion scene, \$200 was a good salary for a few hour's work, but it wasn't really enough to live on anymore. *That's why models are skinny*, she thought.

"Are you working all day?" she asked, pausing to read the brief article about herself.

"I should probably make an appearance," Adam said, closing one of the newspapers and picking up another. The front-page headlines screamed "Chinese IPOs Ignite Solar Thirst," "Dems Seek NASA Boost," and "OPEC Says Output Stretched."

"What's the rest of your week look like?" he asked, finishing his espresso.

"After today, zip until the twenty-first," she said with a giggle. She was scrutinizing another photo of herself in an advertisement wearing nothing but a live snake and clutching a faux-snakeskin purse. For a moment, she thought of that particular photo session with the trained boa constrictor named Roberto. *Or was it the trainer who was named Roberto?*

"I'll keep that in mind," he said, getting up and leaning in to give Natasha a quick kiss on the cheek. She turned her head at the last moment and kissed him on the lips. He smiled as he picked up his smartphone from the table. "I'm going to get ready. If I don't see you before I leave, have a great day," he said, before turning and going back inside.

After getting dressed, Adam continued to press buttons on his smartphone as he headed to his suite's private elevator. He saw he had a full day of meetings and other events scheduled.

"Good morning, sir," the elevator attendant said as the doors opened.

"Morning," Adam replied automatically as he stepped into the elevator and scanned the morning news on his smartphone, paying no attention to the commercials playing on the elevator's TV screen.

Chinese IPOs Ignite Solar Thirst by Scott Hang, WSJ  
BEIJING - Chinese authorities have announced the completion of a \$15 billion solar array near the city of Zhangjiakou, 200 km northwest of Beijing. The new array is the largest in the world and promises to light a new ...

Adam skipped to another story.

Judge Postpones Barney Fraud Hearing - New York Post  
NEW YORK - The New York District Attorney's Office postponed the hearing for accused hedge fund fraudster David Barney, one of Wall Street's elite money managers. Barney, who was released on a \$1 million bond this

morning, is accused of using inside information to illegally trade and manipulate the markets with his powerful ...

Adam looked up and noticed the elevator wasn't moving.

"Everything O.K.?" he asked. The elevator's small TV screen was switched off.

"I think the power went out," the elevator attendant said, adding "I'm terribly sorry, sir." Just as he was apologizing, the power kicked on and the elevator resumed its descent with a slight jolt. Adam returned his attention to the headlines on his smartphone.

"Good morning, Mr. Morgan," the doorman said, holding the door open as Adam stepped out of the building and onto the street. A pungent smell of horse manure filled his nostrils as he looked up from his smartphone for the first time since stepping out of the elevator.

A row of horse-pulled carriages lined the opposite side of the street along the southern edge of Central Park, a living relic from Manhattan's earlier days that continued to charm tourists. Adam put on his sunglasses.

"Taxi, please, Hector," Adam said, looking back down at his smartphone. A yellow cab pulled up almost immediately and Hector held open the back door.

"Here you are, sir," Hector said. "Have an excellent day."

"Chrysler Building, please," Adam said to the driver, not looking up from his smartphone.

The driver was wearing a wireless, bluetooth-enabled earpiece that functioned as a phone and was having a long conversation with someone on the other end in a language Adam didn't understand. The dark-skinned, dark-haired driver typed "chrysler building" into the navigator's search feature and it instantly plotted a route. The cab driver was listening to Middle-Eastern music on the radio. Adam considered asking him to turn it off, but the song had a good beat.

Adam opened a web search engine app on his smartphone and typed in the following:

bright light in sky

The search engine revealed 10,770,000 results. Most were old news stories about meteor showers or rants by UFO conspiracy enthusiasts, but there was one story from the website [www.noaa.gov](http://www.noaa.gov), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, that caught his eye.

Bright light sightings in the sky could be explained by a number of factors, including meteor showers,

lightening storms, space weather or the result of a nuclear blast. Unidentified light sources have been often attributed to extraterrestrial intelligence, but no ...

Adam quickly ruled out the possibility of a nuclear blast and started a new search, typing in “space weather” in the search function.

He read a few articles about solar flares, geomagnetic storms and something called the Carrington Event of 1859, but eventually he noticed the cab was not moving. He looked up and saw a traffic jam of taxis.

Adam switched from the web search app on his smartphone to a traffic app. The GPS feature located his exact position on a two-dimensional map of Fifth Avenue and the surrounding streets and depicted the route as red, indicating heavy traffic. Two blocks east on Park Avenue, the traffic was listed as green. Lexington was a straight shot, but the real-time traffic app listed the avenue as orange, indicating moderate traffic.

“Driver, can you take Park Avenue instead?” Adam asked.

“Yes, sir,” the driver said, checking the GPS and taking the next left.

A few minutes later, the cab came to a stop in front of Grand Central Terminal at 42nd Street and Lexington Ave. Adam swiped his credit card on the panel behind the passenger seat and stepped out onto the street a few minutes after 7 a.m.

“Spare change?” asked a ragged, homeless man sitting in a wheelchair on the sidewalk. Adam shrugged as he walked past. *I don't have any change*, he thought. “How about some food?” the elderly man asked as Adam entered the iconic Art Deco building.

Inside, Adam flashed his picture ID to the security guard and waved his smartphone over the mechanical turnstile, which slid open to allow him passage. He strode across the magnificent lobby with its red Moroccan walls and exotic wood detailing, yellow Siena marble floors and enormous ceiling mural titled “Transport and Human Endeavor.” The mural, painted by Edward Trumbull and installed in 1930 when the building was completed, was intended to be a celebration of energy and technological progress.

Adam stepped inside the small but elegantly inlaid express elevator that serviced floors 57 to 67, turned around to face the door and pressed the button for floor 65. Another five people squeezed into the elevator after him, pushing him up against the back wall. As they filed in,

everyone instinctively turned around to face the door. No one spoke as the elevator began its smooth ascent, and Adam's head bobbed down to look at his smartphone. 7:15 a.m. He felt his stomach drop as the elevator quickly rocketed skyward. A few moments later, the pressure began to build inside his ears. He knew from experience that his ears would pop if he swallowed, but rebalancing his internal pressure mid-ride meant he would have to relieve the pressure again when the elevator reached the top. *Don't swallow*, he thought. He checked the progress on the elevator's display above the door. Floor 40. Forty-one, 42, 43.

The elevator suddenly jolted to a halt with a heavy clunk. Another wave of nausea swept over him again as his stomach heaved once more. He quickly covered his mouth and briefly retched, then swallowed a bit of bitter stomach bile. His ears popped.

## Chapter 4

EARTH's ATMOSPHERE - 11:15:00 Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) a.k.a. Universal Time, Coordinated (UTC) a.k.a. Zulu time a.k.a. Space Time  
On board the International Space Station, altitude: 250 kilometers above the Earth  
TIME TO SOLAR IMPACT: 12 hours, 17 minutes

Aleksandr Manakova raised his left arm, looked at his black and silver, B-42 Fortis Cosmonaut Chronograph and noticed that the hour and minute hands were aligned, pointed at his own hand. Three fifteen.

He looked out a nearby window and saw a dark, featureless Earth, surrounded by an infinite expanse of empty space and stars that stretched on forever. *We must be somewhere over the Pacific Ocean right now*, he thought, making notes in his journal using the Cyrillic alphabet.

Time is relative, and no more so than on the International Space Station. The watch was a gift from his father, also a cosmonaut, and was so accurate, it was one of the only timepieces approved by the Russian Federal Space Agency. It was always set to Moscow time and helped him keep a relatively normal schedule. Three fifteen was Aleks' time to use the treadmill.

The three astronauts on board the space station kept similar schedules based on their home countries, but they all referred to Universal Time, Coordinated (UTC) when communicating with one another, also known as Greenwich Mean Time or Space Time.

Having a fixed notion of time was crucial, as the space station orbited the Earth every 90 minutes. Watching 16 sunrises and 16 sunsets every day could play with the mind, but not as much as the zero gravity. If the astronauts and cosmonauts didn't exercise for at least two hours a day, their muscles could atrophy from lack of use.

Aleks finished writing in his journal and stuck the book and pencil to the wall of his sleeping quarters with a velcro attachment. He unzipped his one-piece blue flight suit and slipped on a pair of blue sweatpants and a blue sweatshirt bearing the name Pockocmoc, pronounced Roscosmos. The sweatshirt had a large logo of a tilted red triangular shape surrounded by a gray swoosh and looked similar to the Star Trek logo from American television.

As Aleks floated through the maze of rooms and chambers, he observed that the International Space Station resembled a five-bedroom college dormitory inhabited by mechanical engineering and computer design students. Without gravity, any direction could be "up," but

most of the pods were decorated to include a floor, walls and a ceiling, with the floor area typically closest to the Earth.

Nearly all the modules on the space station were similarly designed as rounded cylinders on the outside with rectangular interiors. In addition to the storage areas behind the flat walls, nearly every interior surface was covered with storage bins, laptop computers, wires and other equipment, and there were little experiments taking place almost everywhere.

Aleks moved from the Zvezda Service Module through the Zarya Control Module and the Unity Node to the Tranquility, where the exercise machine was located. As he floated past his comrades, he often did a corkscrew spin through the air and said something like “dasvidania.”

When he got to the Tranquility, he put on a velcro belt and strapped himself into the American-made COLBERT treadmill. In order to jog in zero gravity, he had to be pulled down to the running surface. There was a little tension and resistance, but not too much. The point was to keep moving his muscles. *Use it or lose it*, he thought as he began jogging.

He looked up at the Tranquility’s cupola observatory at the world spinning below.

Aleks switched on the laptop computer attached to the side of the exercise machine and logged on. After reading a couple of work-related e-mails, he received a chat request.

“NATASHA would like to chat,” the message read, showing the image of a kitten.

Aleks pressed the “initiate chat” button and the screen filled up with a live video of a stunning young woman in pink sweats jogging on a treadmill. A smaller window showed a live video of himself, taken from the tiny camera at the top of his laptop.

“Hey, big brother,” Natasha said in Russian. “What’s the weather like up there?”

“Cold and dark,” he replied in Russian, adjusting the monitor to better frame his 33-year-old Caucasian face in the video of himself. “Like Russian winter, but much quicker. Here, it will be spring in minutes, not months.” Natasha smiled.

“My Adam says he saw a white light this morning above the park,” she said, continuing their conversation in their mother tongue. “Have you seen anything unusual?”

“Nothing is unusual in my life, precisely because it is all unusual. A white light could be many things: an airplane, a cloud, a dove ...”

“He said his phone went off right after the flash,” Natasha interrupted.

Aleks studied his sister for a moment. A furrow slowly formed in his brow.

“I will check on this and let you know,” he said.

“I am working from eight to noon, but you can message me,” she said.

“Thanks. Enjoy your run and knock them dead today, sister,” he said. “Goodbye,” he added, as the video image of Natasha smiled and waved back across the airwaves. He pressed “end chat” and closed the window. He pulled up a web browser and began looking at satellite images of the sun, delayed by about 15 seconds. There was a large, dark spot on the surface.

And another. *Unusual, indeed.*

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